

Philippine government eases lockdown amid continued COVID surge

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Beginning April 12, the Philippine government lowered the lockdown over Metro Manila, the national capital region, and the four adjacent provinces of Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna and Rizal, to the second highest level. The order rejected the advice of medical experts to extend the stricter protocol imposed on March 29 amid a COVID-19 surge.

With infections at over 900,000 and rising at ten to twelve thousand a day, the highest rate since the pandemic began more than a year ago, the decision to lift restrictions is a death sentence to thousands of Filipino people. The fatality rate for COVID-19 cases in Metro Manila rose over the past month from 1.82 percent to 5.36 percent.

In the 11 days preceding the decision, confirmed new cases in the quarantined capital and provinces rose to 53,714. This is a severe under-count. Contact tracing was already at an abysmally low three contacts traced for every infected person since March, and only four out of 17 cities in the National Capital Region were in compliance with government's contact tracing protocols. Now tracing has all but collapsed inside the lockdown area as President Rodrigo Duterte's administration scrambled to hire 5,000 contact tracers for the capital.

Moreover, the positivity rate averaged 20 percent nationwide, indicating a dangerous increase in community transmission and the spread of the virus. The testing rate is one of the lowest in the world, just ahead of Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan, where the virus is out of control. While the government is targeting 50,000 a day, and largely not meeting its target, the positivity rate indicates that the required testing should be at least 200,000 a day to be able to trace the spread of the virus.

The COVID-19 surge in the national capital and the

provinces has flooded the COVID-19 allocated capacity of hospitals, both public and private, and the isolation centres. According to *Rappler*, as of April 12, of the 14 hospitals it checked across Metro Manila and Cavite, 310 COVID-19 infected patients were waiting for beds and were being treated in the emergency departments. Some have been reported to have died waiting for a vacant ICU or isolation bed.

A story published by *ABS-CBN* in late March is doubtless representative of the state of the crisis. The account detailed how a COVID-infected father died in the early hours of the morning outside a hospital emergency room "after hours of frantic search for any hospital that would accept COVID-19 patients."

In a tweet, Angelo Barrera stated: "My brother was wailing and crying outside with my mother in shock and unresponsive next to him. My dad died in the cold."

As *ABS-CBN* recounted, Barrera's father tested positive for COVID-19 on March 16 and was isolated at home and had a doctor monitoring his vitals and prescribing medicine via text message. He began struggling for breath by the weekend.

"We started shipping him to nearby hospitals and calling in advance," Barrera said. "This was the worst part. Every single hospital, every one of them, was full. Be it admission, ER, even the wait list for the ER, every single one was full. You name it, from Asian Hospital to St. Luke's. At 2 a.m. we gave up on hospitals and opted for home care."

But then Barrera's father stopped breathing and they rushed him to a primary care hospital, which was also in full capacity.

"At 5:20 a.m., he flatlined. They used the defibrillator and everything. He was next to the door of the ER, a few minutes away from being able to enter the

(intensive care unit)."

The doctor on duty, Anna Victorino, interviewed by *ABS-CBN*, confirmed that they could not admit the patient in the ICU because they were understaffed.

In her own tweet, Victorino urged the public to hold the government accountable:

Medical care workers have been severely impacted as well. Doctors and nurses are forced by under-staffing to work 12- or even 24-hour shifts. The *Philippine Star* reported on COVID-19 wards where a nurse tended to 12 patients and a nursing aide had 35 patients under her care. From April 4 to April 10, *ABS-CBN* reported 399 new COVID-19 cases among health workers, including 170 nurses and 53 doctors. A nursing assistant is also reported to have died. Since the pandemic began, 16,510 healthcare workers have been infected, with over 86 dead, including 33 doctors and 21 nurses.

The new lockdown, like previous lockdowns, imposes all the restrictions and hardships on the poor, including curfews and checkpoints, while lifting all meaningful restrictions on business operations, including, significantly, public and privately-owned mass transportation to facilitate herding workers back into factories and offices. Far from aiming to prevent transmission of the virus, the militarized lockdowns terrorize, detain and even kill the working poor.

According to *Rappler*, 28-year-old Darren Peñaredondo of Cavite died of a heart condition after being forced by police to do 300 squats as punishment for violating the curfew to buy drinking water. In Laguna, 26-year-old Ernanie Jimenez was allegedly beaten to death by the barangay, or local government, guards. In addition, according to the police, 6,603 persons were warned, fined, and arrested for violating lockdown restrictions.

These horrendous conditions are stoking immense social anger. The *Manila Standard* reported on April 11 that residents in a Taguig city barangay, excluded from the limited government financial handouts, confronted and threw stones at government officials and their police escorts. On April 9, the overworked and underpaid health care workers and members of the Alliance of Health Workers staged an online protest and demanded the immediate release of their hazard pay and the hiring of more regular health care workers to handle the COVID-19 patients.

The government's vaccination program has stalled as

vaccine nationalism and geopolitical tensions between China and the US intensify. India's decision to stop exports of its locally-produced vaccines has hampered supplies worldwide, including to the Philippines, while rising anti-Chinese sentiments, stoked up by local political factions allied with US imperialism, have led to widespread rejection of Sinovax, the Chinese-produced vaccine.

To date, according to *Rappler*, over 3 million dosages have been delivered to the country, of which 2.5 million are Sinovac, but just half the available dosages have been delivered and only 162,000 people, mostly health workers, military and police, have been fully vaccinated, just 0.23 percent of the 70 million needed to achieve herd immunity.



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