

Omicron variant drives COVID surge to record levels in the Philippines

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The Philippines is in the grip of a record-setting spread of COVID-19, driven by the Omicron variant. The administration of President Rodrigo Duterte has responded with half-measures and threats of repression. In total, 52,293 people have died of COVID in the Philippines since the beginning of the pandemic.

The country had 33,169 new confirmed cases on January 10, setting a record tally for the third straight day, with a startling 46 percent positivity rate. The National Capital Region (NCR) had a positivity rate of 52 percent. The World Health Organization (WHO) threshold for the controlled transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is 5 percent positivity. The Philippines was below this figure in December.

Health Secretary Francisco Duque stated at a press briefing Monday night that the country was at a “critical risk” of COVID-19 transmission, reporting a 690 percent increase in the seven-day average of daily cases.

Duque declared that Omicron had become the dominant variant in the Philippines. As of January 3, 60 percent of all sequenced samples of COVID-19 were of the Omicron variant.

The Omicron fueled surge began less than two weeks ago. Hospitals are already inadequately staffed, a combination of an influx of cases and the large number of infected and quarantined medical personnel. The Philippine General Hospital, the largest state-run medical facility, is nearly at full capacity.

A number of major nationwide banks have announced that they are shortening their business hours, ostensibly to curb the spread of the pandemic but almost certainly as a result of understaffing. CNN suspended broadcast on Monday as it was no longer able to staff its broadcast center.

Presidential spokesperson Karlo Nograles announced that the NCR would remain at Alert Level 3 and would not advance to Level 4. Alert Level 3 allows for continued outdoor dining at 50 percent capacity and indoor dining at 30 percent provided the patrons are fully vaccinated. Alert Level 4 would shut down malls and other non-essential indoor centers and restrict those under the age of 18 and over 65 to their homes.

Dr. Rontgene Solante, a leading infectious disease expert in the Philippines based at San Lazaro Hospital, called on the government to impose Alert Level 4 restrictions on the NCR.

Nograles, however, announced that while all other pre-established testing metrics called for an increased Alert Level, the total hospital bed utilization did not yet require a shift to Level 4. Bed utilization, however, is a lagging indicator. By the time that this metric is met, the crisis will have advanced to a catastrophe.

Increased demand has already brought the healthcare infrastructure of Metro Manila to the verge of collapse. The Department of Health authorized hospitals to shorten the quarantine protocols for fully vaccinated healthcare workers who contracted or were exposed to COVID-19. Hospitals “in extreme circumstances of manpower shortage” were authorized to reduce healthcare workers’ isolation period to five days. It is highly likely that any healthcare worker forced back to work at the end of five days will still be infectious and will possibly still be suffering from symptoms.

The paramount concern of the Duterte administration, like capitalist governments around the globe, is not public health but keeping the economy open. Raising the Alert Level from 2 to 3 already imposes a significant cut to business income. The Development Budget Coordination Committee (DBCC) estimated that P3 billion (\$US58 million) per week were lost due

to the increased restrictions.

Shifting to Alert Level 4 would see far more serious cuts to profit. Rather than return to stricter protocols, shutting down unnecessary business activity, the Duterte administration is creating the conditions for mass death.

The crisis conditions of the pandemic are compounded in the southern regions of the Visayas and Mindanao by the extensive damage wreaked by Typhoon Rai, known locally as Odette, in December. Large regions, impacting hundreds of thousands of people, remain without power or running water. Thousands are suffering from malnutrition and diarrhea, and dozens have died of dehydration. The refugee centers, inadequately prepared, have become superspreader locations for the pandemic.

The Duterte administration has carried out a number of half-measures against the spread of the pandemic. Nearly all schools remain closed to face-to-face instruction. The government has attempted to set up a vaccine mandate, requiring proof of vaccination be displayed before entering business establishments or public buildings.

The vaccine mandate, however, is hobbled by the fact that vaccines have not been available for the majority of the population until very recently, largely a result of the international inequality of vaccine access for countries of belated capitalist development such as the Philippines. Only 52.4 million Filipinos are now vaccinated, or 68 percent of the target population. Over 80 percent have now received their first shot. Only 3 million have received a booster shot.

Duterte's stock solution to any social problem is repression. The unvaccinated were to remain at home, he declared, except for "essential purposes." He added that he was authorizing local officials to arrest any unvaccinated person found out of their home. However, on his list of "essential purposes" was reporting to work. His authorization of the arrest of the unvaccinated is a green-light for arbitrary detention.

Duterte's hold on political power is now short lived. He has lost a majority of elite support for the upcoming election, which is scheduled for May. There is widespread speculation that he is contemplating using executive powers in response to COVID to delay the election and remain in office. Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana issued an ominous statement that at present

"there is no compelling reason to declare martial law," as if floating the idea for future use.



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