

# COVID-19: Its Impact on the Philippines - FINAL

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## **Introduction: The Global and Regional Contexts of COVID-19**

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### **Introduction: The Global and Regional Contexts of COVID-19**

The world has experienced a prolonged period of uncertainty and unrest caused by the SARS-COV2 responsible for the Corona-virus or COVID-19 pandemic. To date it has already affected the lives of peoples in almost 200 countries (and still counting) globally. The human cost is rapidly being matched by huge economic costs.

There is still considerable uncertainty around the fatality rates of COVID-19 and definitely it varies depending on the quality of local health care and the availability of test kits to determine the number of people positively suffering with the virus. In fact, when one considers the rapidly changing numbers of the mortality and transmissibility, the figures quickly get scary.

A bombshell study from a team of infectious disease experts at Imperial College of London last week (March 19) predicted that without intervention, the disease could lead to 510,000 deaths in Britain and 2.2 millions in the U.S. Both countries according to the study's hypothesis will have 80% of their population that would be affected by the disease.

Further, disease experts estimate that each COVID-19 sufferer infects between 2-3 others (twice as high as the seasonal flu). Earlier, experts would also say that the number of those affected doubled in every 6.4 days. But it is strongly believed that the number of the sufferer increases exponentially as what has been manifested in different countries. In fact, COVID-19 could have been circulating for many weeks before it was detected because people simply thought they had a common cold and did not go to hospitals. But in most countries the virus could have been infecting people but could not be confirmed because of the absence or limited supply of the testing kits and machine which could validate or confirm the cases of people suffering from the symptoms of the COVID-19. The number of silent COVID-19 carriers could not be estimated.

Currently, what is certain is that, COVID-19 - a respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus or SARS-COV2 which outbreak started in China's Wuhan City in Hubei province in the last quarter of 2019 has profoundly shaken the basic fundamentals in our society. What started as health crisis has morphed into a full-blown economic crisis which has affected the world much more than the 2008 financial crisis. It has destroyed consumption activities and paralyzes the economy. The economic experts have been one in seeing and saying that a recession unfolds in their very eyes. The economy which is mostly dominated by consumerism is grounding effectively to a halt causing grave repercussions especially for retailers, services and financial institutions. Such development has made the politicians and policymakers scrambling to offset and mitigate the damages in their respective countries.

The grounding of the productive activities resulted to the contraction of the demand for oil. It is expected to contract by 90,000 barrels per day and in return triggered the all out price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia. This has led to the crushing of oil price in the global market by about a third (24%-30%). This is believed to be the worst situation for the Petroleum dependent economies since the Gulf War in 1991. Logically, this condition would be considered a big boon to consumers but COVID-19 is increasingly keeping them at home.

Currently, the COVID-19 has reached and affected the most and advanced as well as the poorest countries but the most glaring difference is in the manner of their respective governments to manage the containment and the isolation of the disease. The case of massive unemployment does not discriminate the above countries. The obvious difference again has been manifested in the way countries cushion and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the working and toiling masses. The governments of both the strongest and the weakest nations have been facing the problem of how to reach a proper balance of controlling the movements of the peoples and to continue with the functioning of the economy or the balance between the virtual and actual economic activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the best and the worst manners of how on one hand autocratic and rightist governments have taken advantage of the situation to tighten and suppress the democratic activities of their people, and, on the other hand, some governments have seen the decisive role of their peoples in controlling the spread of the COVID-19. This can only be done with ensuring the participation of the people and can only be done by being open, transparent and always

in consultation with them.

In the current phenomenon, there is a great difference of how social media play to mitigate or to aggravate the development of COVID-19 vis-à-vis 2003-3 SARS and the MERS 2012. It can be used by those autocratic and dictatorial states to control the projection of its effects in the positive management of COVID-19 in their nations. But it can also be used to expose and tell the truth of some countries mismanagement of the pandemic in their respective countries.

Through social media, the world has come to know that most of the countries, including the most advanced are not prepared to face a phenomenon like COVID-19. It has also showed that the more the leaders of these countries are not convinced with the seriousness of COVID-19, the most number of cases of their people are affected. The earlier these leaders have taken actions, the most effective these nations and the people to have contained the deadly virus.

US and China have just concluded their trade agreement and in the process to end the conflict between them when the COVID-19 hit China in the last quarter of last year. The first phase of this two-year agreement was for China, to buy \$200 billions worth of goods from the US. But as the catastrophic impact of COVID-19 has unfolded in both countries, they will surely not able to implement the first phase of abovementioned trade agreement.

As early as the month of November 2019, the Novel Corona Virus-2 had already hit the capital city Wuhan of the Hubei province in the central part of China with a population of around 60million people. But, it took the Chinese leadership more than 7 weeks to act and contain the spread of the virus. In fact, when several doctors including Dr. Li Wenlaing tried to warn their close friends and relatives, about the deadly virus they were reprimanded by their government and threaten to be imprisoned if they would not retract their warning. Dr. Li Wenlaing and another director of the Wuhan Hospital died as a result of the virus infection but they became the rallying point for people in the Wuhan, Hubei area to criticize the handling of the epidemic of the Chinese government. Earlier the Chinese government even tried to keep and hide the information about their deaths.

In a very unprecedented move, the seven members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China had came out and admitted their weakness in underestimating the impact of virus from Wuhan around the second week of January 2020. With such admission, they quarantined and closed Wuhan and the province of Hubei in January 20, 2020. Around this time, the number of cases of COVID-19 in China had skyrocketed and deaths had reached several hundreds. During this period, millions of Chinese workers (more than 5millions) were still travelling around China to celebrate the Lunar New Year holidays. Hundreds of thousands were still travelling around the world as tourists. The first cases in the US, South Korea, Italy and the Philippines were brought in by Chinese tourists just before the locked down (January 23, 2020).

At this period, huge waves of business closures have not only disrupted China's consumers' spending and manufacturing but also the world's supply chains.

It should be noted that in 2002, when SARS hit China, its shares of manufacturing output was only 9%. At present, China's share of global manufacturing output has ballooned to 28% or nearly 1/3 of global goods had originated from China.

China has become very important that when its manufacturing engines cease, the world ceases along with it.

The drop in production last February this year is just a tip of the iceberg (according to some experts) because most of the factories still maintained inventories of the China-made parts. But by this month

(March), these inventories are now depleted and cannot immediately be replenished. Without alternatives, companies and factories will have to shut down causing sales and profits to plummet and causing millions of workers to unemployment.

In Asia, the export sector will be badly affected since its reliant on China-made components.

Agricultural sector in the region will also be affected because they export their agricultural products like tropical fruits and other products to China's market.

Currently, everybody could see blood bath in tourism and the transportation industries especially the airline sector. Global market is in meltdown and \$14 trillion worth of shareholders value and companies based in China are looking elsewhere for transfer.

Another very important reality is that COVID-19's disruption has magnified the region's pitfall of growing dependence on China's investment on major infra projects. These major infrastructure projects are part of China's Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI). But everybody knows that BRI is not only for economic reasons but its initiatives are a leverage to enhance Chinese political influence in the region and around the world.

Big infrastructure projects such as railways linking China to Laos across Mekong, artificial island in Sri Lanka, bridge in Bangladesh, hydro-powers in Nepal and Indonesia are currently under construction. There are also \$5.5billion worth of high speed rail lines in Indonesia and another \$10.4billions worth of high speed rail in Malaysia. There are on-going construction projects in Sri Lanka and corporate expansion plan in Pakistan. But since December, all these infra projects have been affected and delayed by COVID-19.

In the case of the Philippines and Cambodia it's a worst situation because both are economically and politically very dependent on China. Eighty (80%) percent of Cambodia's economy is dependent on China. The "Build, Build, Build" mega flagship projects of the Duterte's government are mainly dependent on China's funding support.

The heavy dependency of these countries in the region on China will be paid in a very heavy price. The government of the abovementioned countries had been very hesitant to close their borders with China during the pandemic period because of the repercussions of such moves on China. Chinese planes and ships had continued to fly their Asian routes. Myanmar, Bangladesh and Laos have continued to open their borders with China even if other countries had already closed all routes from China. The Philippine government had temporarily banned flights from China, Macau and Hongkong on February 2, 2020 but within the same week it had suddenly included Taiwan in the ban even if Taiwan had shown less COVID cases compared to Singapore. It was a clear political consideration for the Philippines in the "one China" policy rather than responding to health crisis.

Cambodia has shown moves that would surely not antagonize China. Prime Minister Hun Sen had received the cruise ship (Westerndam) and personally welcomed all the passengers in its capital (Phnom Penh) without wearing masks (he actually ordered all his welcoming staff not to wear masks) because Hun Sen believed that it would be disrespectful. They had a big party for the guests and allowed them to visit the tourist areas in Cambodia. And to complete his political genuflection to China's Xi Jinping, he personally visited him in China's capital at the time when COVID-19 was at its peak in China (last week of February 2020). The people in Cambodia have been put in hazardous situation because of these moves. The fear and anxiety that they are going to pay heavy price because of their leaders' political show off are real.

Currently in the abovementioned countries, less number of COVID-19-related cases or deaths are

being manifested as reported. Many have wondered if this is a case of hiding the real condition or because of the absence of test kits and laboratories to confirm the COVID-19 cases in these countries.

Last month, Chinese authorities were trying to quell outrage at home and condemnation abroad. Now, it is trying to win points globally. In fact, China is trying to rewrite the COVID-19 narrative deflecting criticism of its initial attempts to cover-up the outbreak and posing as the savior of the other countries who either delayed their response or were less prepared than China. It is trying to paint itself as a good Samaritan while deflecting criticism over its initial missteps in handling the COVID-19 by giving out millions of face masks, extending low interest loans and sending out teams of medical experts. It has even showered struggling European nations with aid as part of a diplomatic charm offensive. In fact, China is trying to integrate its Belt and Road Initiatives and its Health Silk Road. But it has to start correcting the previous error.

The Communist Party of China has posthumously exonerated a doctor (Dr. Li Wenliang) who was officially reprimanded for warning about the coronavirus outbreak and later died of the disease. This is a very rare admission of error by the ruling Communist Party that generally described a different situation from that usual “no challenge” to its authorities. The Party had offered its solemn apology to the late Dr. Li Wenliang and eight other doctors for its error. They also disciplined 2 police officers who implemented the order of the local party branch. Earlier the Party bosses of the City of Wuhan and the Province of Hubei were sacked from their political positions because of the widespread outcry of the peoples.

Currently, as the US economy is shutting down, China has announced to the world that it is reopening. Surely the wind has changed direction. The epicenter of COVID-19 has changed its course from China to Italy and now to the US. And it seems that the famous Italian saying “Andra Tutto Bene”(Everything will be alright) will still be a long way to go.

## **I. Brief Chronology of Events in the Philippines**

The Philippines and China have gone a long way into developing closer relationship since 2016. President Rodrigo Roa Duterte (PRRD) has openly declared the country’s pivot to China (obviously away from the US) inspite of the fact that China has continued to occupy and expand its occupation on islands historically claimed by the country in the West Philippine Sea or the former South China Sea. In fact, PRRD has continued to politically genuflect to China despite the Philippines victory in its territorial claim in the International Court of Justice in 2016. In return China has promised to support major infrastructure projects in the country under PRRD’s flagship’s program “Build, Build, Build”. In fact, it is not only in these infrastructures that China is closely involved. It has invested in almost all strategic industries like communication, power and energy. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers have been flooding to work in these industries and in the Philippine Overseas Gaming Operations (POGOs). In fact for the Chinese, Philippine visas have been issued to them upon arrival. But still many of them have been working in the country especially in the POGOs without visa or have expired visa.

The Philippine-China relations have been manifested on the local levels like forging city to city pacts or sisterhood. A case in point here is the Davao City – Wuhan City trade and cultural pacts. With this kind of relationship, direct daily flights had been going on between the two cities just before the Philippines’ locked down but more than 10 days after China’s locked down.

Since December 2019, news about the outbreak of Novel Coronavirus had been all over the news. The Philippine media had been covering and broadcasting the seriousness of the impact brought

about by the new epidemic from China.

During the last weeks of December 2019 and practically the whole month of January 2020, there was no initiatives from the Philippine government aside from its reaction to the first virus-infected cases which came out in the last part of January. In fact, there was no immediate reaction by the Duterte government and its health agency when China had locked down the areas where the Novel Coronavirus had originated like the City of Wuhan and the province of Hubei in January 23, 2020. In the whole month of January 2020, the country did not do anything to brace itself for the possible impact of the Novel Coronavirus in the country inspite of the fact that it does not have the capacity even to identify and confirm if a person has been affected by the virus. During this period, only the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) could have preliminary testing capacity but the confirmation would be from Victoria Infectious Disease Reference Laboratory in Melbourne, Australia.

In addition, the health care system of the country is very weak. For a country of almost 109million, it has only 89,000 hospital beds and only 1,000 intensive care units (ICUs). The Philippines has a total number of 129,000 doctors, 80,000 are members of the Philippine Medical Association (PMA) of whom only 50% are active. In terms of 2020 budget allocation, the budget of the DOH is P166.5billion which includes PhilHealth (Philippine Health Insurance) and P7 billion budget lodged under the miscellaneous and Personnel Benefits Fund. It is number 6 in PRRD's government priority and less prioritized if one compares it to the Department of Defense and the Department of Interior and Local Government with total combine amount of P427billion and the Department of Public Works and Highways with the budget of P534.3 billion.

With such dire situation, we cannot survive a greater magnitude of infections. Experts project that if the government does not do anything in the next five weeks, the infections can affect 75,000 people.

## **1. First Case in the Philippines**

This was the country's situation when the first case had arrived in the country from Wuhan on January 21, 2020. A Chinese couple came in the country from Wuhan to the central City of Cebu and travelled to another island City of Dumaguete before they went to Manila. By this time they were already sick and their travel had involved around 440 passengers. After they arrived in Manila on January 27, 2020, they went to the hospital and tested positive after confirmatory test from Australia.

China has locked down Wuhan and Hubei on January 23, 2020. These people left the City of Wuhan just before the locked down. Aside from the couple, another Chinese woman tourist arrived in the central part of the country on the day of China's locked down. She also carried with her the virus from Wuhan. She became patient number 3 in the country.

On February 1, 2020, the man who was confirmed with the virus later died in a Philippine hospital while the woman, who was the first virus carrier in the country had been cured and later went back to China. The death of the Chinese man in the Philippines was the first death caused by the novel coronavirus outside of China.

On the same day (February 1) World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Global Health Emergency.

## **2. Steps taken by the Philippine Government in Fighting the Invisible Enemy**

The following day (February 2), PRRD declared temporary ban on all people coming from China, Macau and Hongkong. This delayed in the declaration of the ban was very decisive in terms of

stopping the flow of Chinese tourists to the country. In the last part of January for instance, Xiamen Airlines was able to land in Davao City from Wuhan with 79 Chinese tourists. And around this time, World Dream Cruise ship landed in Manila Port bringing with it, 1,400 Chinese tourists. Where did these tourists go, nobody was able to monitor.

On the first week of February, both Houses of Congress (Senate and House of Representatives) were busy investigating and tracing the 440 Filipino passengers who flew with the Chinese couple. And then nothing is heard on this investigation.

On February 4, 2020, The National Institute of Health at the University of the Philippines, Manila, had announced that it was able to develop testing kits for COVID-19 (the name used to refer to the Novel Corona virus earlier). These kits if sold is 6 times cheaper than the foreign testing kits - it costs P1,300 a piece while a foreign product costs P8,000. This UP Institute has been aware of the urgency to produce our own and much cheaper testing kits. The DOH and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advised the UP Institute to delay the production until the process of validation is completed. As of this writing, it has not gotten the go signal for mass production. It has been almost two months this day and positive cases and deaths caused by COVID-19 are rapidly increasing but the preparation to manage the epidemic by properly capacitating and protecting the frontliners seem to be very slow.

On February 9, 2020, the travel ban against China, Macau and Hongkong was extended by PRRD to Taiwan. The latter had strongly protested because it was clear that it is more political (one China policy) rather than health consideration. Taiwan retaliated by cancelling the Visa on arrival privileged given to Filipino tourists. In fact, at this period, Singapore had more COVID-19 cases than Taiwan. A week after the ban on Taiwan was imposed, PRRD had to take back or reverse this clearly political move. There were protests from Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) coming from those working in Taiwan. There are around 400,000 OFWs working in Taiwan, Macau and Hongkong.

On February 26, 2020, and almost 3 weeks after the UP Institute's announcement, the RITM purchased 19,000 testing kits from a source abroad. But the testing was still very slow and the results would take around a week before the result was known because it was still process mainly in Australia. No go signal yet on the commercial production of much cheaper testing kits from UP.

On March 7, 2020, there was the case of husband and wife who were positively confirmed with the virus with no history of travel abroad and they were to be the first local transmission. The Department of Health(DOH) declared Code Red Sub-Level 1 and imposed a public health emergency. This imposition authorized DOH to mobilize resources for the procurement of safety gear and the imposition of preventive quarantine measures.

On March 9, 2020, PRRD had issued Proclamation No. 922 placing the country under a State of Public Health Emergency obviously upon the recommendation of the DOH. The government had considered COVID-19 constitute an emergency that threaten national security which requires a whole-of-government-response.

Two days after the declaration of Code Red Sub-Level 1 and during a Senate hearing, DOH admitted that the total number of testing kits in the country at this time was just 2,000. If PRRD's government was really convinced that there was public health emergency and that COVID-19 threatens national security the the concrete situation on the ground does not reflect such appraisal.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 a pandemic since it had inflicted more than 150,000 people including 6,000 deaths all over the world. The Philippines during this period had so far confirmed cases of 140 people including 12 deaths.

The following day (March 12, 2020), PRRD declared Code Red Sub-Level 2. He had imposed partial lock down in Metro Manila and suspended all classes in the metropolis until April 12, 2020. PRRD did not directly call it lock down, he used the term "Community Quarantine" from March 15-April 14.

PRRD's government had closely timed its moves on the actions taken by WHO except that he did not do much on WHO's Chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus advice (during conversation with journalists) that the best way to combat COVID-19 is by Test, test, test every suspected case. The WHO Chief further said that "You cannot fight a fire while blindfolded".

Obviously, the Philippines approach in combating COVID-19 has been very reactive and more in population control rather than giving stress to go testing in order to locate and isolate the virus from spreading further. In fact, around this period, the seemingly small number of COVID cases including the number of deaths was due to unavailability of testing and validating the cases. Some would call this situation as underreporting of cases because it did not really reflect the actual health condition of the people. DOH has to use a decision tool to identify suspected cases like the following: Persons Under Monitoring or PUM to refer to persons who showed some symptoms of COVID- 19 case. The PUM is supposed to be monitored in their communities. Another term is Patient Under Investigation or PUI where a person shows signs of having a flu-like virus like coughing, cold and breathing problems. But as data show, there are persons suffering with the COVID-19 but are asymptomatic. In fact, the reported positive cases and deaths due to COVID epidemic during this period was more the picture in Metro Manila and not a national one. Furthermore, the data was just based on the people/patients who were hospitalized and definitely did not include those with the symptoms but prefer to stay at home.

On March 16, 2020, the entire island of Luzon (including Metro Manila) was placed under an "Enhanced Community Quarantine". Social distancing was strictly imposed. The COVID-19 cases in the Philippines during this time were 142 including 12 deaths.

Placing more than 60 million, including the more than 12 million in National Capital Region or almost 60% of the 109million Philippine population under Enhanced Community Quarantine for a month would be a nightmare. Restricting domestic travel in and out of the areas and have government offices to function through a skeletal force to contain the virus would come out at the cost to an economy that draws around  $\frac{3}{4}$  of its output from the island of Luzon and the Metro Manila areas. Millions of people who belong to the informal sector or those who survive on the daily basis are residing in these areas.

The following day (March 17, 2020), PRRD signed Proclamation No. 929, declaring the Philippine under the State of Calamity for a tentative period of 6 months due to COVID-19. This proclamation enjoins all government agencies and local government units (LGUs) to render full assistance and cooperation and mobilize the necessary resources to undertake critical, urgent and appropriate response and measures in a timely manner to curtail and eliminate the threat of COVID-19.

The Proclamation was issued after the Code Alert System for COVID-19 was raised to Code Red Sub-Level Two(2) in accordance with the recommendation of the DOH and the Inter-Agency Task Force for Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF).

The Proclamation was also acted upon based on the earlier law - R.A. No. 10121 or the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010. The National Disaster and Risk Reduction and Management Council has recommended the declaration of a State of Calamity throughout the Philippines.

The declaration had afforded the National Government as well as the LGU's, ample latitude to utilize



appropriate funds, including the Quick Response Fund, in their disaster preparedness and response efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 and to continue to provide basic services to the affected population. The Presidential Proclamation immediately makes available P16 billions of the Calamity Fund under the 2020 National Budget.

The Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) in the whole island of Luzon would mobilize the big portion of the Armed Force of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police (AFP/PNP) over and above the full mobilization of the LGUs with their local peace and order units. In Metro Manila alone, there are a total of 56 border checkpoints and almost every province and municipality down to the barangay (village) levels have put up their own border control oftentimes without proper coordination to say the least but without proper training and orientation to say the worst. Each of these units and almost in all levels are making their own version and understanding of border control but these local units seemed to be more powerful than what the National offices of the IATF had ordered. A case in point here is that a standing order from PRRD & IATF to allow traffic carrying strategic items like food and medical supplies to pass through the various levels of border control, but it was not simply followed. A picture of a mob rule is a best description of such situation. A population of almost 60 million cannot have access to basic needs like food. People have been more afraid that they might die of starvation and not because of the COVID-19.

The Economic team of PRRD based on Proclamation 929 rolls out P27.1 billion relief package to counter the impact of COVID-19. This is supposed to support initiatives to better equip health workers and provide relief and recovery measures to individuals and sectors reeling from adverse impact of the pandemic.

The P27.1 billion will be allocated as follows:

1. P14 billion to help the Tourism Infrastructure and Enterprise Zone Authority (TIEZA). It will be intended to help the Department of Tourism to roll out various programs and projects to support tourism sector.
2. P3.1 billion – help stop COVID-19 including the acquisition of test kits. This include plan to borrow \$1 billion from multilateral agency.
3. P1.2 billion – provide unemployment benefits for displaced workers.
4. P3 billion for Technical Educational Service for Development Administration (TESDA) to provide technical training.
5. P2.8 billion – allocated for the Department of Agriculture and its Survival and Recovery Program or SURE.
6. P1 billion for the Department of Trade and Industry for Pondo sa Pagbabago at Pag-Asenso (P3) or Funds for Change and Development. This includes the micro-financing special loan package for small businesses or corporations.

It is clear that only a fraction for the needs of the poor families and for health equipment and protection of health frontliners are being appropriated. The big part is to save big industries.

Meanwhile, people have been dying without even knowing the test results whether they were positive or negative of the COVID-19.

On March 25, 2020, PRRD signed the Republic Act (R.A.) 11469 or The Bayanihan to Heal as One Act which gave him additional powers to handle the outbreak of COVID-19 for 3 months (March 25-

June 24, 2020). This was after both Houses of Congress (no session because they are on vacation) had an emergency sessions to act and give the President additional powers.

This Republic Act gives PRRD the additional authority to re-allocate, realign and reprogram a budget for almost P275 billion or \$5.37 billion from the P438 billion or \$ 8.55 billion of the P4.1 trillion National Budget for 2020 in response to the pandemic. PRRD has also been given powers to take over temporarily corporation and institutions when the public interest so require.

There will be immediate relief package for the 18 million families who live below the poverty line. An amount between P5,000 to P8,000 will be released to them every month in 2 months. This amount of P275 billion is over and above from previous massive amounts allocated and released in two proclamations (Proclamation 922 and 929), and the billions donated by big corporations and individuals in both cash and in kind.

### **3. Current Status of the COVID-19 Situation in the country**

As of this writing, the most affected sectors of the society, especially the toiling masses have not yet received this promised aid package. The different agencies in the government have not yet agreed on the manner and mechanism of the distribution of the so-called emergency help. This is in spite of the creation of the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Emerging Infectious Disease (IATF-EID) since it was activated after Proclamation 922. The Task Force was created based on Resolution No. 10 series of 2014 based on Executive Order No. 168 series of 2014, precisely to manage any disaster and emergency in the country and give appropriate and timely advice the President. It is composed of Department of health (DOH), Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), Department of Justice (DOJ), Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), Department of Tourism (DOT), Department of Transportation (DOTr), Department of Communication and Technology (DICT). Eight government agencies and seem to speak in 8 different voices. As events would show there is no national and coherent program to really confront and manage the COVID-19 pandemic on the country. There are missing weeks un-acted after China (PRRD's best ally) declared the pandemic of the Novel Corona virus on January 7, 2020. No concrete action after January 30, 2020 when WHO had considered the COVID-19 as Public Health Emergency of International concern without new vaccine to treat this new COVID-19. Is social distancing or population control enough to face this pandemic?

Further, the frontliners have been asking for more protection like face masks, personal protective equipment, testing kits and laboratories where the tests can be diagnosed like what the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) has been doing. To date, almost 15 doctors had already died fighting on the frontlines despite of a very limited protection. This number does not include other frontliners like nurses, midwives, etc. These constitute more that 15% of the total deaths caused by COVID-19 in the country during this period.

Donations from both domestic and abroad have started to arrive but where are those big amounts from the government go? As of this writing, there are P16 billions made available after the declaration of the National Calamity, P27.1 billions after the Proclamation No. 929 and P275 billions after the signing of Republic Act 11469?

## **II. STEPS TAKEN by the Philippine Government versus COVID-19**

Since the official declaration of Chinese Health officials that there is the existence of a deadly and very contagious novel corona virus in their country on the 1<sup>st</sup> week of January this year, nobody from the Philippine Health officials had seriously given attention on this development. Considering that

Chinese tourists have come and go in the country by the millions. As of December 2019, Chinese tourists comprised 22.1% or 1.74 million of the total tourists arrival in the country (8.26 million in 2019), second only to the Korean tourists which comprised 23.7% or 1.98 million. Chinese workers, in the Chinese funded strategic industries and the Philippine Overseas Gaming Operation (POGOs) have also resided in the country by hundreds of thousands. Not a few of them came home to China during the Lunar New Year holidays. It is no brainer to think that they could constitute potential virus carriers.

Not even the deadly impact of Serious Acute Respiratory Syndrome or SARS in 2002-3 which also originated from central part of China and caused the death of 774 people out of 8,099 cases (9.6% mortality rate) and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome or MERS in 2012-13 with around 800 deaths out of more than 2,000 cases or 36% mortality rate, did serve as a wake-up call to the responsible agencies in the Philippine government to act and prepare the country for the impact of the novel corona virus.

The World Health Organization or WHO had taken almost three (3) weeks (January 30, 2020) to consider the novel corona virus or the COVID-19 as Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Why did it take this long for an international body with the United Nations network and whose primordial mandate is to have in depth study and initiate an ALERT if it observes danger of a contagious virus/disease so that in a globalized setting, countries can prepare and brace themselves in the earliest possible period to save lives. Unless lessons were not learned from the 2002 SARS and 2012 MERS then nobody could understand the long delayed action of WHO. The declaration of the latter of COVID-19 as pandemic on March 11, 2020 would be almost four(4) months since the epidemic had started in China. Lives could have been save.

The period between the middle of January and the middle of February 2020 was the most decisive period in the containment and management of the novel corona virus. This period, as the peaking of the curve of the virus impact in China and it was during this period that millions of Chinese tourists were travelling throughout the world because of the Lunar New Year holidays. Not a few of them became anonymous carriers of the virus. Countries like the US, Italy, Spain, Iran and the Philippines got their first transmissions and cases around this period.

The failure of China to contain through early locked down of movements from Wuhan and Hubei for instance, exported the virus unintentionally to other countries. Italy and Iran for instance got their first cases on the third week of January when Chinese tourists arrived in the abovementioned countries. US first COVID case came from Iran, from an American citizen who visited Iran. In the case of the Philippines, the ban for travel (in and out) of China, Macau and Hongkong came in on February 2, a day after WHO declared Global Health Emergency, making it as an International Concern.

The steps taken by Congress were the investigation after the first cases on the first week of February when Patient Number 2 died and the tracing of 440 passengers who travelled with Patients number 1 & 2. Patient NO. 1 was able to recover and came home to China without being subjected to thorough examination in the manner of transmission. The next step from PRRD was this, travel ban imposed on travelers from China, Hongkong and Macau on February 2.

The step was after almost one month and long before the local transmission as confirmed on March 7, 2020. The DOH declared a Red Alert Sub-Level 1 and imposed a Public Health Emergency. Included in this imposition is the authorization of DOH to mobilize resources and procurement of needed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and the needed medical materials to combat COVID-19. Measures to quarantine people was included in this emergency measure.

These requirements needed for effective management of COVID-19 had not been followed because on March 9, 2020, the country was shock to hear from DOH in a Senate hearing that the total number of testing kits available at that time was just 2,000 amidst its declaration of Public Emergency based on the development of COVID-19.

From that period, the steps taken by PRRD's government was to control the peoples' movements in Metro Manila through the imposition of Community Quarantine. Several days later the quarantine was extended to the whole of Luzon island calling it Enhanced Community Quarantine. This kind of moves was just consistent of the government which had not done its works seriously for more than two months. It has not done its job to set up more testing centers because setting these machineries is not just the buying of the materials needed to set them up but to train and equip people to operate and manage them which will take more time. At this period, it would take a week to get the confirmatory results from Australia for the RITM which was the only center in the country to preliminary took the tests.

Definitely these people's control were not the result of concrete and scientific moves by the government to know and determine the mechanism and machineries we would need to face the enemy. Imposition of community quarantine should be a result of scientific moves rather than the other way around. Nobody could understand the statement of Cabinet Secretary and the Spokesperson of the Inter-Agency Task Force against COVID-19 when he always mentions that Science is in-charge in the steps they are making against COVID-19.

These reactive and defensive moves of PRRD's government would impact very much as the people would suffer from the quarantine restrictions and the food chain of the affected areas. This is simply hitting anyone (shotgun method) in sight. While it is true that the virus cannot be seen but it can definitely be controlled by identifying and isolating those tested positive and those showing signs of the symptoms and denying the virus to inflict others who will become their carriers. Fighting this unseen enemy is like waging a war where the first thing that generals will do is to study and identify their enemies. These moves can be done with excellent intelligence machinery. Locating where the enemies are staying can be easy when the generals know the characteristics of their enemies. Fifty percent of winning the war is already achieved when you know your enemy and where they are staying. In this manner, you save a lot of your limited resources and you minimize the collateral damage. Without this, one can still fight the enemy but blindly and so, you use a shotgun or carpet bombing where with one bullet/bombs you might hit your target but also those who are not supposed to be your enemy. The still effective option is what is called the surgical bombing - or selected bombing on those areas identified by the intelligence machinery. In this kind of war, time is of essence. It can help you what appropriate action and machines you are supposed to mobilize. One cannot surely win a war by always being defensive and reactive. And definitely this kind of war is not only the war fought by the generals. It should mobilize the whole nation or whole of nation approach. This kind of war is so complicated and strategic to leave it to the generals or even the retired ones.

#### **a. Learning from others**

In fighting a war against COVID-19, the experience of Vietnam in the early stage of their war against COVID-19 is worth studying and learning. It used the symbols that Vietnamese people can easily identified with and will surely support. Through the leadership of Premier Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Vietnam has launched its peoples' war against COVID-19 in the Tet New Year (end of January) ala a Tet offensive model during their war against the most powerful nation in the world - the US. At the time, this declaration of war, the outbreak of the coronavirus was still confined to China. In the meeting of Vietnam's ruling Party, Premier Phuc insisted that it would not be long before the coronavirus reached the country. The country's leadership has agreed that fighting the epidemic

caused by coronavirus means fighting the enemy and they have to prepare for the war now. The Vietnamese government is aware that in order to win the war, it needs a lot of government funding and a stout Public health system. Both are lacking in the government's arsenal. So, they have to wage the war maximizing the minimum resources in their arsenal. Based on their intelligence gathering, they select the area to start the war – Ho Chi Minh City – 8 millions population with less than 900 intensive care beds. With such massive limitation, it institutes rigorous quarantine policies, carried out tracing of all people who came in contact with the virus.

The twin measures of limited quarantine and selective and rigorous contact tracing have helped a lot in limiting the COVID-19 cases in the country. They strictly implement a measure where anyone arriving in Vietnam from high risk areas would be quarantined for 14 days. All schools have been closed as early as the beginning of January 2020. That government has also implemented widespread system of public surveillance which was helped along by a well-supplied and generally respected Vietnamese military. This close surveillance largely keeps anyone from slipping through the net or evading regulations. It is nipping in the bud of the virus.

Premier Phuc has applied the kind of war against coronavirus in this message “Every business, every citizen, every residential area must be a fortress to prevent the epidemic”. This hits a nerve with many Vietnamese, who are proud of their ability to stand together in a crisis and endure hardships. Vietnam has called upon its people and mobilize them through focusing in preventing, isolating and defeating the COVID-19. As of this writing, Vietnamese peoples' struggle against COVID-19 is still unfolding but we can learn from this early stage and the later stages especially that they are preparing for the second wave of attack by the virus.

The Vietnamese experience tells us many things about fighting and winning battles to be victorious in war. Right timing, stern discipline and focusing are points of essence here because otherwise you might be fighting two or several fronts at the same time.

## **b. People suffer as government falters**

The Philippine government has started its significant moves/steps after almost two months when confirmed COVID-19 cases had been exposed. This delayed has impacted very much in terms of preparation. It should be remembered that more than a month since the first COVID-19 case, DOH had to shamelessly admit that it had only a total of 2,000 test kits and that the final confirmatory step would still be coming from Melbourne, Australia.

In the first part of March 2020, the government had made moves that looked like panicking after the so-called local transmission. It had immediately raised the Red Alert Code-Level 1 and imposed a public health emergency. Several days after, the government had imposed another Red Alert this time it was Code Level 2 and imposed a partial locked down in Metro Manila – area with more than 12 million population. A week after, the area of quarantine was expanded to the whole of Luzon – the biggest island of the country and has more than 60 million of population. Both the Metro Manila and Luzon have been contributing  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the country's economy. The implementation of the Enhanced Community Quarantine would take effect immediately.

Understandably, the peoples in the abovementioned areas panicked. They rushed to the market and bought anything they could lay their hands on and the limit was the availability of money they had with them. Peoples who were staying outside the quarantined area had rushed to the airports, ports and bus stations to catch the last trip out.

There was immediate but massive deployment of military and police forces because they eventually would play a leading role during the locked down period. It makes one to think of its oddness that

while the coronavirus epidemic is a public health emergency more than a security threat PRRD would depend on his military to enforce the rules and guidelines.

Again, it makes one to ponder that when a government intends to restrict (partially or totally) the mobility and supply chains of millions of people, obviously it needs careful and meticulous planning to ensure effective enforcement and appropriate implementation. People need full preparation so that they can plan accordingly and equip themselves especially since their daily subsistence could be imperiled for several weeks or for months. They should not be made to suffer because of the government's inefficiency neglect and slow response.

When PRRD had announced the locked down and enforce it immediately without bothering to inform and relatively prepare at least the local government units especially in the affected areas, it manifested an obvious sign of something else. If it is not panic then what is?

To fight the COVID-19, the government banned the main transportations so how could people move to prepare themselves and brace for the impact of the pandemic. As of this writing, workers have been walking back to their homes outside Metro Manila. They are mostly the construction workers who were not able to catch up the last buses out because the quarantine order was imposed immediately. For weeks now, they are still walking back to the places of their origin - reminding one to recall of the historical Death March of the guerilla together with captured American soldiers during the Second World War.

The quarantine includes the curbing of people's freedom to earn a living. This step severely affected the daily wage workers, the "No Work, No Pay" will mean no food for their families. The aid package promise to them is still being finalized by different government agencies and many of them have not received them yet.

Both situations portray a defeated people. Definitely, not a good start to vigorously combat the unseen enemy for the construction workers and their kind.

Meanwhile, people would receive food rationing. But considering the inefficiency of public services in this kind of crisis, how many days will the people have to wait for the most needed food? Currently, the food aid distribution has been done by the local government units (LGUs) from the municipal/city to barangay levels. The burden was placed on the local government to feed the people while the national agencies of the government are still trying to plan the manner and mechanism to distribute the aid package. Considering that many of the leaders of these LGUs have been practicing patronage politics, they only give the food package to their voters or their followers.

Furthermore, PRRD has been vocal that more than 50% of the village heads/chairperson are involved in drugs of which he (PRRD) used this reason to postpone the barangay elections several times.

If this is the situation with the LGUs, how can the people depend their next meals on this kind of people?

And as if to put more salt to injury, food and basic items needed by the people in both Metro Manila and Luzon were included in the ban as various local government agencies would have different understanding about the quarantine imposition. Medical items including personal protective equipment, ventilators and test kits are blocked and stocked in the Manila port because the Custom officials have to process their documents yet. Foods like rice and vegetables needed by people in Metro Manila (almost 100% dependent on its food supplies from outside the National Capital Region) have been blocked in different border controls. Trucks carrying them could successfully pass on several border controls only to be stopped in another border control. This control continues

to happen even after several announcements and warnings from the government through the IATF and the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the National Police have been issued.

The mob rule types of control forced the farmers to giveaway or throw away their agricultural products because they could not sell them in Metro Manila. Obviously, one sees in this situation that PRRD's government is writing the rules as it goes along. The fact that the outbreak has started last December 2019 and it (PRRD) has more than three(3) months more than enough time to prepare the protocols needed by LGUs and the civil society to function and still effectively fight the COVID-19 even while on quarantine, almost nothing happened. Anyway, competent government would have planned forward or a little bit in advance.

### **c. A Glimmer of hope or a Fading light?**

The signing of PRRD of R.A. 11469 has given hope to those who are expecting that the earlier government action of PANIC can be corrected. In fact, the name of the law says a lot. Bayanihan – To heal as ONE will immediately makes one to expect something proactive and strategic. But initial implementation steps show that, people (as the word bayanihan – bayan) are still left out in the fight against the virus. Largely, they (people) are just recipients of the aid package. The mobilization aspect is for the people to stay at home and their movements should be limited. Social distancing is more on the surface and its coming from the outside command rather than peoples' action because they are convinced that these actions are their contribution to fight the unseen enemy. But then again, the people are told again and again that moves like social distancing are to save their lives because there is still no vaccine manufactured to eliminate the virus. But how can they be strong and energize to fight the virus if they do not have something to eat. How can they enthusiastically fight the unseen enemy with empty stomach?

Quarantine and social distancing can be the peoples' part in the battle but the government has their part too. It has to provide enough medical hardware and personal protective equipment to equip and secure the part of the people who serve in the other front of combating the virus. The works of medical frontliners are to ensure that the testing of the virus affected people to isolate and treat them (common medicines) so as not to infect others. The relationship between the people and the medical frontliners should be nourished otherwise fake news can be more effective in contaminating this relationship than the COVID-19. The worst situation is that people look at the medical frontliners as part of the virus as carriers and should be turned away and should be eliminated altogether. This kind of situation makes one think that since the people cannot see the virus then it is easy to fight the visible objects like the medical frontliners. This is an obvious result of the serious problem of understanding the virus, a gap that should not be there if the government has fulfilled its very basic function of educating its taxpayers about the virus that we all should fight.

Fighting the COVID-19 as ONE is indeed can only be done in a Bayanihan manner. People should be actively participating in this fight even if they are in the state of quarantine and practicing social distancing. They can be called upon to contribute their human and financial resources to fill in the gaps of medical, technical, financial and psychological needs. They can definitely do these things even if they are home-based. But then the government can build and strengthen this Bayanihan spirit through education and concrete actions. Basic needs of the people should be assured without sacrificing their basic human rights. Coercion should never be part of an option. Unity is basic requirement for Bayanihan to go one step higher. Bayanihan should never be used to divide people based on their beliefs, political affiliations, race and gender. The government should lead these efforts because during these decisive stages of fighting the virus – peoples' unity and participation is already part of healing to combat divisiveness and discrimination. Healing starts with being aware of our wounds or virus which at present affects us all.

### **III. CURRENT STATUS of the COVID-19 Situation in the Country**

Unlike the Housing, Real Estate, Financing and banking meltdown of 2008, COVID-19 is a contagion which has affected public health that has hit badly and swiftly the global economy. To date, this twin global pandemonium has already caused a tsunami of suffering for billions of peoples – but especially the poorest of the poor. It has halted the agricultural production activities which have already caused a food crisis. This development will be worst felt by countries especially those from emerging economies with liberalized and privatized food industry. This neo-liberal arrangement has made these countries dependent on importing agricultural products to survive. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has closed the door of the food exporting countries in order to secure first the food needs of their own people.

The liberalization of Agricultural Industry has directly eliminated the capacity of the peasants and agricultural workers to produce their own food. Rice Tariffication for instance made the Philippines farmers unable to produce and compete with cheap imported rice.

The farmers and the toiling masses have continued to be buttered and are merely surviving from this neo-liberal offensive when they are hit by the COVID-19.

#### **a. COVID-19 EFFICIENTLY Magnified Pre-Existing Conditions**

The pandemic caused by this virus has closely magnified the pre-existing conditions affecting the most pauperized and peripherized sections of peoples. And while it is true that this kind of virus does not chose its victims, those who do not have regular food and the malnourished and those who cannot afford to access health care services have greater possibility to become COVID-19 victims. In many countries, the lifelines thrown to help the most needy by governments have become out of reach due to the pre-existing conditions.

But this time can be a rare opportunity for many ordinary poor people to make extraordinary struggles to reclaim their dignity with compassion like in keeping each others' safe by practicing forced distancing whenever and whatever the situations they find themselves in. These struggles include among others building and strengthening of solidarity by contributing and promoting global conversation which promotes understanding and sharing experiences in managing COVID-19 in order to help stop the contagion from spreading further. Such collective action and collaboration can indeed help contribute in changing peoples' lives and values away from COVID-19.

Furthermore, COVID-19 can be an opportune moment for good and genuine characteristics of leaders to shine through.

In the period of almost five months (including the unofficial period) since the official announcement of the existence of the COVID-19, many of the world's leaders were caught with their "pants down" so to speak. Big factor of this kind of unpreparedness or the not so serious attention by the leaders about the novel coronavirus was the clear attempt of China (where the SARS-2002-3 and COVID-19 originated) to hide or downgrade the basic facts about the virus. A case in point here is that China through the China National Health Commission (CNHC) the official agency of China which releases the situation and development of COVID-19 had claimed in January 15, 2020 that the official number of cases caused by the virus as 15,205 while the University of Hongkong had publicized that during the same period the total cases in China was 75,815. The data of the latter was published in its LANCET Medical Journal.

Another reason for the reticent attitude of several leaders of countries has been the geopolitical situation during the period. China has been investing serious efforts and almost unlimited funds to



put people in the leadership position in the different levels of multilateral institutions to further their global interests both economically and politically. China has also painstakingly built its Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) that it has gained big and strong influence on politics and economies of various countries in the world including Ethiopia – the country of the current World Health Organization (WHO) Secretary General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. Lately, it has shown its (China) global muscle by strongly lobbying and electing the new head of Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO).

Not a few global leaders have shown characteristics of running and changing characteristics from denial and being arrogant at the same time showing the “been there attitude”. Such characteristics and attitude oftentimes underestimate the gravity of the situation on their people and later becoming panicky and resort to strong arm tactics and more repression. From these conditions, such leaders have become wishful thinkers and becoming further away from what science is telling them about the condition of their people and their countries. And the worst thing that these leaders would do when people have different position with them, they began to blame everybody except themselves.

Good and genuine leaders work selfishly and extraordinarily under stress while facing the developments unleashed by a disastrous condition. This is the positive attitude one needs in facing the unknown virus and the uncertainty it has brought about. They may become unrecognizable and even anonymous with their face masks and protective equipment in fighting the unseen enemy but their commitment, compassion and humanity have continued to shine through.

#### b. PRRD's Governance and COVID-19

The abovementioned characteristics are very important to profoundly understand the Philippine situation and how it has responded and managed the pandemic in the country. Just like in any country, the country's leadership has a pivotal role to play in the mitigation and suppression of epidemic to reverse the growth and maintain such level indefinitely. But the decisive role of the people to finally contain the contagion cannot be relegated to the back seat. Peoples' trust is crucial to any strategy adopted by the government. The more transparency and quickly but accurate information is shared with them the more the people will put their trust with their government. People will act swiftly and rationally for the good of their community in particular and the country in general.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> series of this paper, it has been stated that President Rodrigo Roa Duterte's (PRRD) government has hesitated and faltered with their early moves. The very weak health system and infrastructures and the massive lack of medical protective equipment and capacity of human resources to face a disaster much more a pandemic have not really made PRRD's government, especially the Department of Health (DOH) to seriously pay attention and make massive and timely preparation to correct all these inadequacies.

The characteristics of PRRD and his manner of governance have a lot to do with such passive attitude to say the least. In the early stage, the President had played down the threat of the contagion saying that Filipinos have natural antibodies that would shield them from infections. This statement had been parroted by his spokesperson. The other branches of the government did not say a word. Then the President called the COVID-19 threat an idiot and ordered his doctors to work double time to find the cure.

In the second week of March before he ordered the lockdown of Metro Manila, the President had mentioned that in the event of the pandemic he would not hesitate to use the military and the police for order and obedience. Then, when signs of COVID-19 are becoming unstoppable and deadly, he

had declared series of proclamations namely: Proclamation No. 922 placing the country under the State of Public Health Emergency, Proclamation No. 929 declaring the Philippines under the State of Calamity. Surely these are signs of buckling down and panicking so that the President has asked the Congress for emergency power thru the signing of Republic Act 11469 giving the President additional powers to handle the outbreak of COVID-19 for 3 months (March 25-June 24, 2020). During these times, PRRD already lockdown the biggest island of the country (Luzon), using the military and police to ensure obedience and order. And then, he made an order for the military and the police to shoot anybody who would violate the rules and policies of lockdown.

Placing more than 60 million in community quarantine has indeed limited the peoples' movement and giving strict instructions for social and physical distancing can physically stop the spread of the virus. The bigger problem, however, is how to feed and pacify the "quarantined" millions who had lost not only their jobs and livelihood but also their basic human rights. And the worst thing here is that you lockdown millions of people but the government has not done much for ensuring that the virus and the carriers have indeed been neutralized. The utter lack or absence of testing kits and machines and personal protection equipment of the medical workers have caused the snail pace response to identify, trace and isolate the COVID-19 patients or carriers. The much delayed actions of the PRRD government can even be the case of locking down the barn door after the horses are long gone.

#### c. MAXIMUM PROTECTION with MINIMUM DISRUPTION

With the absence of the vaccine at the moment, responsible steps of any government should be to implement the mitigative actions with the maximum protection and calibrated minimal disruption as a guiding principle in mind.

In the absence of such guiding principle not a few would think that PRRD's moves are just strengthening its authoritarian grip because of the serious implication of not doing much to brace the country and the people for the impending disaster inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The principle of maximum protection and minimum disruption should not be seen as contradictory with each other. One had just to factor in the socio-economic political underlying and pre-existing conditions because only from these perspectives realistic and effective steps can be made to seriously combat the stinging effects of the COVID-19.

The locking down of the island of Luzon including Metro Manila is actually controlling the movement of more than 60 million people. This kind of physical control coupled with aggressive social distancing and hygiene instruction of properly washing one's hands should be taken as part of implementing the massive testing of people based on its prioritized sections scheme. The result of the testing should be the basis for tracing and isolating those proven positive with COVID-19.

The abovementioned points can have positive results if the social distancing will be done together with a thorough social investigation and social preparation. Having several millions of people staying in the urban poor areas when people are living very closely with each other (3-4 households in a small space) because of the density of population in a small area and surely with very poor sanitation as well. Many if not most of these people do not have health insurance because the country has been practicing the employee-based health system. If one does not have a regular work, they are not usually covered by health insurance (Philippine Health Insurance - paid by peoples' tax and contribution). More than 20% of the country's population is living under poverty's line (earning below 2/USD a day). This massive social inequality can be seen in these peoples living in the slums areas. One can just imagine what will happen if COVID-19 visits these areas.

In addition, basic social services in these areas are almost non-existence. The big challenge therefore aside from social or physical distancing is how to properly wash their hands when many of them do not have regular water servicing.

Another almost impossible mission is how to feed the millions of quarantined people. A month after the implementation of Enhanced Community Quarantine for Metro Manila and almost a month for the island of Luzon not a few people have not yet received the promised food aid. PRRD's government through the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) through its Social Amelioration Program (SAP) with hundreds of billions of pesos already released but have not reached yet many of its target beneficiaries. There are several factors for this much delayed food aid. The DSWD, the department tasked by PRRD to implement the most needed package has to first coordinate with the Local Government Units (LGUs), which comprised almost 1,500 cities and municipalities with around 150,000 barangays or villages. These LGUs have been considered as the part of government accordingly 'knows best' in identifying the poorest of the poor constituents. But this is after PRRD had stingingly told the LGUs that he could not trust them with money. The more than P200 billion allotted for the Social Amelioration Program is intended for 18 million families/households identified as the poor - this is almost 90 million people (each family with five members). From this 18 million families, 3.7 million or 18.5 million individuals are considered the poorest of the poor who are currently receiving monthly social subsidies from the government through the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program or 4Ps Program. But there must be serious review of these figures since DSWD has been using the 2015 census made by the National Statistics Authority or NSA. The Department claimed that they have adjusted the figure every year based on estimated projected growth rate of the country's population. But still the figures of the LGUs and the DSWD are not coinciding. A case in point here is the City of Manila. The Manila LGU has identified 500,000 families as their figure for the poor including the poorest of the poor while the DSWD has only identified 350,000 families and the same with Taguig, the city of the Speaker of the House (Allan Peter Cayetano). The LGU in the City of Taguig has more 200,000 families while DSWD has only more than 100,000 families. The massive difference in figures has resulted to widespread confusion because the DSWD had distributed forms based on their figures. The LGUs are helplessly facing their peoples and these discrepancies and confusions delayed the distribution in many areas. In most cases, people blame their local governments or favoring only their supporters because the available forms have only reached this section of the population. Other LGUs would just stop the form distribution because they could not afford the division among the peoples in facing the COVID-19 contagion. The Social Amelioration form would be filled-up so as they can claim urgently the needed food aid. Almost a month of locking down millions of people and without food would surely create an excellent breeding ground not only for COVID-19 but chaos and instability as well.

Another point is that with the figures for the 18 million households (poor and the poorest of the poor) are national in scope, other areas in Mindanao and Visayas will surely have huge figures of discrepancies.

The sections of the Philippines' population, which are having regular employment and regular income have also been hit very hard. Others are calling this middle class - the "new poor" because they have all lost their jobs and small businesses. Their number is estimated to be around 7-8 million households or around 40 million. They too have asked the PRRD government for subsidies which will be around several billions pesos. In principle, the government has considered the plight of the "new poor" and the exact amount is being appropriated.

Another factor for the delayed aid in both Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the DSWD is that, responsible people in both agencies are hesitant to release the needed monetary aid because they have to be careful of the guidelines set by the Commission on Audit (COA). The guidelines and policies of COA were made in the situation when there was no crisis. The PRRD

government should have considered this situation. The crisis should not only be the burden of the people but government agencies as well. New guidelines should be crafted which could answer for the new normal and not the old normal situation. The imposition of Emergency is not only to ensure the control of the peoples' movement but also the policies of government agencies should adopt to an emergency situation.

Obviously, as the developments are unfolding the pre-existing conditions of different government agencies are also magnified. For one, the utter lack of unified and updated baseline data for implementing different programs, are alarming. This means that in the pre-COVID-19 period, the data which the basic programs of the government (like 4Ps) were unreliable and outdated. The country have faced various disasters in the past with these outdated baseline data, how can one measure whether emergency aid packages have indeed reached the targeted victims or constituents. For another, each government agency wants to dip their hands on the billions budgeted and allocated for the intended victims. Again, the DSWD and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) have their own implementing scheme of the emergency package and both have shown a much delayed action. One thing is common to these agencies that are to always want to fast track for the approval of their proposed budget from peoples' money but they are not as in a hurry to implementing them. Another common among the agencies will their uniform explanation of the delay. This is, they have to comply with the Commission on Audit policies.

The continued delay of the releases of the emergency aid packages and the confusion it has created, can obviously create chaos and direct peoples actions.

The abovementioned points should be addressed soonest otherwise the people will not simply obey with the rules of the community quarantine. It will be a choice between dying of hunger or by COVID-19.

There are other important considerations in order for the lockdown to relatively succeed.

#### d. BUILDING UP ISLANDS of Stability

The aim of the Enhanced Community Quarantine is to either mitigate or suppress the spread of the pandemic. Staying at home for everyone is a must. For those living in cramped and heavily populated homes, there must be actions taken so as to temporarily house them during the quarantine period.

Aside from providing enough provisions for food, this staying at home steps should be an opportunity for testing people for COVID-19, identifying the patients and carriers so that those who will be isolated can be out into limited areas. It can be calibrated into setting up the localized lockdown.

During the month of March (2020), the testing were done to people who went to the hospitals because they felt that they have the symptoms of the virus. Not a few of them were from the legislative and executive branches of government. That is why some of them tested positive. With limited test kits at that time, they have prioritized and allocated for themselves the testing because of the limited supplies of the kits. Meanwhile, those who could not be tested (this figures can be in millions) have continued to be anonymous carriers of the COVID-19.

As mentioned earlier, the total number of confirmed cases for COVID-19 patients are mainly based on the record reported from those who were hospitalized and mostly coming from Metro Manila. But as supplies of testing kits, personal protective equipment(PPEs) and with additional testing centers, the number of confirmed cases began to increase and the geographical coverage of testing began to expand outside Metro Manila.

The sudden increase of number of reported cases and its mortality has drastically increased as manifested during the 1<sup>st</sup> week of April. The number of test kits, PPEs, face masks and testing centers have begun to arrive in the last week of March both from donations and government purchases. These numbers do not manifest the real picture of the COVID-19 infected people. Many have been infected but chose to remain at homes.

These development on reported cases has been shown in the following: The Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) was imposed in the middle of March and the number of cases in March 15 up to March 19, the average number of the increased of daily cases was around 38. The number of confirmed cases on March 30, 2020 has jumped to 2,278 from 142 cases on March 15, 2020. On April 2, 2020, the confirmed cases of 2,278 from which 1,395 from Metro Manila and 1,238 outside of Metro Manila. On April 5, 2020, with the total number tested of 22,958 around 15,000 came out negative and those tested positive were 3,246 and almost 50% of these cases came from outside Metro Manila. From April 6 to 10, the average daily increased of those confirmed positive were 134 compared to just 34 daily increased of positive cases when the ECQ was imposed. This is an increase of more than 400 percent. In terms of the average number of death cases from March 15 to 19 was 16 deaths and from April 6 to 10, the average number of daily death cases was 15. This seemingly flattening of the curve in terms of the daily mortality rate right after the ECQ was imposed vis-à-vis the first week of April's mortality rate which does not show the average increase was mainly due to the absence of the vaccine and only due to the current status of the health care system of the country.

The abovementioned figures do not include the number of cases from outside the country - or from overseas Filipino workers or OFWs.

Initial reports say that more than 500 OFWs have been infected and several dozen deaths caused by the COVID-19.

It should also be mentioned that almost 10% of the total number of deaths in the country is from the health care workers - a clear manifestation of how ill-equipped the frontliners and first responders as they are directly confronting COVID-19 especially during the early stage of the pandemic.

#### e. ECQ Extension without Unified and COHERENT ACTIONS SEEM to be Light YEARS AWAY

On April 6, 2020, one week before the ECQ had to end (April 14), the PRRD's government had announced the extension of the lockdown up to the end of April (April 30). The basis of the extension was not based on the assessment of the first cycle (period of virus incubation-14 days). Some lessons could have been learned and could be concrete basis for the upscaling of the next level. It was mentioned thru the spokesperson of the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Emerging Infectious Disease or IATF that they have consulted the people of the extension and 90% of them had agreed. It turned out that 90% referred to was the business sector belonging to the big enterprises. The small and medium enterprises had reacted negatively to the extension. The government has allocated big subsidies to the big enterprises - including wage allocation for their workers while the medium and small enterprises with more than half a million workers do not have clear subsidies. And worst, the people who comprised the vast majority of the population has never been consulted, just like when it was first imposed on the middle of March 2020.

With the extension of the ECQ, the PRRD's government has instituted some changes. One of the visible changes is the appointment of the Chief implementor of the Task Force fight against COVID-19. This is in the person of Secretary Carlito Galvez of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP). With the entry of Secretary Galvez, PRRD has a complete set of his Marawi Generals to lead the fight against COVID-19. Gen. Galvez was the Western Mindanao

Commander when the Marawi siege occurred. The Western Mindanao Command directly supervised the operation on the ground which at that time was commanded by General Rolando Joselito Bautista, who is the current Secretary of DSWD, one of the pillars in the IATF implementing department together with the DILG and its Secretary Eduardo Año, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines during the Marawi siege against the extremist Maute and Abu Sayyaf groups.

Definitely the three generals were not able to kill the virus which started the Marawi siege, more than 17,000 Maranao IDPs are still in their temporary shelters. They are now suffering doubly because of the COVID-19. We just hope that serious lessons and challenges can be learned from both wars, where peoples' participation had been relegated to the back seats. In both cases, peoples are seemingly referred to as mere numbers and statistics. They are not counted to be important and decisive part of building and protecting their own communities. We just pray that what we see in Marawi today will not be the future picture of our fight against COVID-19 on the whole country.

Further, all of us know that the ECQ and the massive use of Personal protective Equipment, face masks, washing of hands and use of ventilators are just efforts to stop or interrupt the chain of infections. Ventilators for instance are not the cure of the disease, they are just instruments to provide oxygen to our lungs and prevent their collapse and make the victims continue to fight the virus.

They are not the cure. It has been said that it will be 18 months away before the scientists can successfully have the vaccine against the virus.

Furthermore, it is a strong belief of many scientists that since the virus started as a zoonosis (disease from animals) and spread to humans, there is therefore no natural immunity for human beings. Immunity has first to be acquired so that it can be effective in fighting a virus like the COVID-19 from inside.

According to the IATF, there will be calibrated mass testing for the potential and active COVID-19 patients on 14 April 2020, a month after the ECQ was imposed. The IATF mentioned that the aim is to have 2000 tests everyday until it can reach 2,000 per day.

The testing centers are more than a dozen now but still many are in Metro Manila with one or two in both the Visayas and Mindanao.

The big increase of number COVID-19 cases in the 1<sup>st</sup> week of April was due to the massive testing done during those periods. But it was geographically limited to Metro Manila and Luzon areas. When regular and increase testing will be implemented in the Visayas and Mindanao areas, it is expected that there will be massive increased in positive as well as mortality rates. One can just hope that the ratio of recovery will also increase.

Meanwhile with the 2<sup>nd</sup> extension of ECQ in Metro Manila and Luzon, different provinces and cities in both Visayas and Mindanao have also declared their version of the ECQ.

For almost a month of ECQ, one thing has become clear. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police(PNP) have been very passionate and energetic in implementing the ECQ and act with dispatch for those who violated the ECQ policies and rules. But one cannot see the same passion and enthusiasm for the agencies of the government who are not delivering the basic needs like food of the quarantined people. For several weeks with very limited or non-delivery of this basic needs, the people are losing their patience and have become restless.

Islands of stability should be established now. This means to institute immediately the calibrated mass testing target with calibrated lifting of the ECQ and build localized quarantine.

In terms of pandemic caused by COVID-19 – when healthy people are put in quarantine, the target day for lifting it up, seems a light years away. And as what PRRD had said earlier, if the poor are hungry there will be surely chaos. It should never be a choice between Health and Economy because its both. The country and the people need a healthy economy nothing less.

It is reassuring to state what the United Nation (UN) General Assembly has approved on April 3, 2020, a resolution calling for international cooperation and multilateralism in the fight against COVID-19. This is its first statement since the outbreak and it stresses the need for full respect for Human Rights and that there is no place for any form of discrimination, racism and xenophobia in response to the pandemic.

#### **IV. Impact of COVID-19 on People's Lives**

As the Philippines enters its 6<sup>th</sup> week of a social lockdown and shuttered economy manifestations of political fatigue and cultural toxicity have unfolded among PRRD's administration and the people. The idea that a second extension of a lockdown has created different tendencies within the government officials. The Inter-Agency Task Force for the Emerging Infectious Disease (IATFEID or IATF) has shown varied but serious concerns on the economic implication with another extension. The agency is composed of 8 departments which are principally tasked to confront and manage the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. There is no corresponding mechanisms on the Regional, Provincial and municipal levels. At the end of this month for instance, the country will be losing an estimated amount of 1 trillion pesos (March 15-April 15= P630 billion and April 16-30 = P325 billion) and almost zero growth for the beginning of the second quarter of this year. Such concerns have been coming from the economic team of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte (PRRD).

Another group of PRRD's men and women within the IATF has been showing their support for another extension of the lockdown to tighten the authoritarian grip of PRRD because of serious manifestations of social unrests.

The people have begun to doubt PRRD's promise of financial aid and food packages because as the second extension is about to begin, the financial help through social amelioration program has not even reached 50% of the 1<sup>st</sup> tranche of the two tranches. This is amidst the billions of pesos made available by Congress and several billions worth of donations (both financial and materials). These poor people are convinced that while they should close their ranks to fight against the destructive effects of COVID-19, they should also watch and be vigilant of attempts to close the democratic space which should be opened and respected at all times.

A third tendency within the PRRD's administration is how to come out with proper balance with the lockdown to physically contain the contagion without putting the country's economy on ice. On this basis the lockdown can be modified in some areas and can be very hard in other communities.

The almost two months of enhanced social lockdown without corresponding enhancement of the distribution of the Social Amelioration Program have resulted in toxic cultural practices in the country like physically hurting the medical frontliners in so many ways because they want to save their own skin. The worst (or one of the worst) is treating the country's new heroes (in pre-COVID-19 period) – The Overseas Filipino Workers or OFWs – as villains and in many cases they become unwelcome in their own communities because they might be COVID-19 carriers. In the old normal, everybody in the country could simply refer to these attitudes as ingrate or un-filipino.

But the most revealing of the intensifying differences among the IATF and the PRRD's administration is what resigned National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) Director General Ernesto Pernia – a senior member of the PRRD's economic team had said in an interview using the analogy of an orchestra, that if the IATF is an orchestra it has not been well conducted – that is why he resigned. He was not clear though if he was the one making the out of tune note.

### **● PERFECT STORM OF VIRUS AFFECTING THE COUNTRY'S POOR AND THE VULNERABLE SECTOR: LIFESAVERS THROWN TO THE ELITE**

Several days from now, the first extension for the lockdown in Metro Manila and the whole island of Luzon ends and the second extension in whatever form or duration will be declared by PRRD. The President has been consulting different experts and the Inter-Agency Task Force regarding the substance and mechanisms of the extension. Basically this is consulting or talking to itself because all the members of the Inter-Agency are PRRD's appointees. As in the past, the people whose lives they are going to decide are not or never consulted.

And if one wants to read the mind of PRRD and his administration, the reason/s he gave 3 years ago for extending Martial Law in Mindanao for 3 times is worth reviewing. And this was because the terrorists and fundamentalists were still present and therefore there had been clear and present danger so he extended the Martial Law in the whole island of Mindanao.

Since last week, PRRD has been mentioning that the lockdown will remain as long as there is no available vaccine to cure COVID-19. And to date, it will be at least 18 months before a safe and medically proven vaccine can be on the market. Then this statement was followed during his weekly report (April 20) that he is offering P10 million for anyone who could produce this vaccine. In fact, PRRD said that if he is happy he will make it up to P50 million but the worst is that he was mentioning this seemingly unlimited amount in his pocket while he was saying about the drying up of funds to fight COVID-19. Nobody (to date) has produced the vaccine in the country but even in the global level

Meanwhile, the people have been considered as mere statistics and numbers in terms of COVID-19 cases and casualties. They have not been consulted and considered in terms of their socio-economic and psychological status and well-beings.

In fact, the President's announcement of the lockdown extension (calibrated or modified) will not give serious consideration of what has happened in the 1<sup>st</sup> extension of the lockdown (April 15-April 30). Different government agencies in charge of providing and distributing aids and food packages like the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Department of Interior and Local Government(DILG) and Department of Labor and Employment(DOLE) have been remiss in their implementation of the amelioration and relief aid for the millions especially the workers, farmers and the informal sectors. In the fourth weekly report (April 20) of the President to the Congress and to the nation, only 8.8% of the 2 million farmers (households) received their financial aid package.

With regards to the workers, the number directly affected by the pandemic (no work no pay) are more than 8 million and this includes the 2 million workers from the 79,000 small and medium enterprises which have closed shop.

Forty two(42) days after the lockdown only 345,000 of them were able to receive the first tranche of the cash aid or 17.25%. These packages were given through beautiful acronyms like Cash Amelioration Program (CAMP) and Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers or TUPAD (Livelihood Aid for the Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers). With the first tranche not completed yet, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), the PRRD's department in



charge of implementing these programs just declared that there are no more funds available.

For the CAMP, PRRD's administration was able to release P1.7 billion for 345,685 and P1.4 billion for 250,440 TUPAD program. There is also an aid package for the Small Business Wage Subsidy Program (SBWSP) which includes 79,000 small and medium enterprises with around 1.6 to 2 million workers. As of this writing, they have not received anything yet. And just like with the farmers, DOLE has passed the task to continue the distribution to agencies like Social Security System (SSS) and the Department of Finance (DOF). This will be another long bureaucratic process and financial aid will be done through the Automatic Teller Machine (ATM) which the majority of the workers do not have. According to the data of DOLE as of April 28, 2020, there are 2.3 million workers who were displaced higher than their March 2020 estimate of 116,000 to 1.8 million displaced workers. Geographically, 6 out of 10 workers are from Metro Manila, Cebu and Davao. Further, 6 out of 10 displaced workers have come from the small businesses. Only 3-4% of these workers have their aid package processed. Another delay of the social amelioration program (SAP) for these workers might be a question of life and death already.

With regards to the Emergency Social Amelioration Program (SAP) for the 18 million poor households nationwide, this program is divided into two; 1) Ang Pantawid Pampamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) and 2) Social Amelioration Program (SAP). The target households for the 4Ps are 4.3 million households and the total number who were able to receive the aid package is 3.7 million households or 85.7% households. But for the second group (the non 4Ps), the total target households for this package is 13,491,535 households or 13.5 million households and only 3,933,621 households were able to receive or just 29.2% families as of this writing.

In terms of the transportation industry like the drivers, out of millions of the drivers in the country, only 40,480 drivers were given P323 millions worth of cash aid and only in the National Capital Region. Leaders of the biggest Associations of Drivers in the Philippines claimed that not a single member of their association were able to receive the amelioration package.

The reason for this much delayed aid package is again, they have to compare their data with other departments and the different departments will validate their notes with the local government units. And this is for 42 days already. The head of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) for the delay is the difficulty of the social and physical distance protocols set by IATF of the constituencies like far-flung areas or the island municipalities and barangays. So, one can just imagine for the non-existing delivery of the basic services even in the pre-COVID-19 period of the government if the above mentioned reason is given for the current non delivery of aid package of the 1<sup>st</sup> tranche of the SAP. But even if this reason is given for the sake of argument, the case in Metro Manila has proven it wrong. The City of Makati has just released 1.3% of the cash aid and the case in Manila is just 5.6%. And the worst is that, there is no central database for the different government agencies, so that they can have the reference point. But even this last reason, some sectors have tried to muddle the issue like, there is a need to have the National Identification System first. They are suggesting that the government should prioritize this first before the Social Amelioration Program. The Law on the National ID System was passed last year but currently the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) is still processing the implementation of its first phase.

As the COVID19 has continued to shackle and stifle all aspects of the people's lives, the fangs of hunger have been making its clear presence especially among the poor. But one thing has been magnified that is- there can be serious and profound cover-up in the highest echelon of PRRD's government. For more than 3 years now, there is no clear database for its social programs. The billions approved annually by Congress and downloaded to the different departments have been thickly padded. The base year of 2015 \_ and or the basis of the total number of the poorest of the poor is simply imagined figures. Again, if we take the case of Iligan City from Mindanao. The city's

population in 2015 was 342,618 or 68,523.6 HHs, currently the Mayor of the city claimed that there are more or less 128,000 HHs. The difference in four years is 59,476 HHs or an annual increase of 11,895.2 HHs. An annual increase of 59,476 individuals in a city like Iligan is simply statistically impossible. This means that there is a daily birth of 165. Mortality cases have not been factored in here. So this might be the figure that DSWD has based its annual budget. The COVID 19 has made people behind this gigantic paddling of "names" of peoples and cannot simply hide them from the eyes of the hungry people. The billions worth of social amelioration program is too big an amount to hide even if they include all the dead people in a year. The Filipino term for this is "Talagang bubukol."

What has been highlighted now for the 2<sup>nd</sup> extension of the lockdown is the reason that many people have not been strictly following the protocols of the lockdown. People have been going out of their houses not observing the stay-at-home policies and the social distancing. The mainstream media has been projecting this line of thinking. Many could not simply or refuse to link the non-delivery of financial and food packages of the government for the poor and hungry people. They (the people) have to go out because their families have suffered hunger for several weeks already. They considered death of hunger as the more immediate and visible problem than the death brought about by the unseen COVID-19. The drivers for instance in Metro Manila have to go out to beg for a few amounts so as to bring some food for their families.

Not a few private individuals and institutions have tried to fill up gaps left open by the government by giving dole outs and food packages. But they (individuals and institutions) could not replace the role of the government backed by Congress approved billions or even trillions of pesos from the taxpayers' money.

It is a perfect storm for millions of the poor in the country. They have to face the health and humanitarian catastrophes brought about by COVID-19 and the inefficiency of the highest degree of the government services highlighted by the pandemic. The people have been seriously affected by tsunami of sufferings and anxieties like in no other time. They are the ones being suppressed by the civil and military apparatus of the Philippine government. Too bad, the people could not hold these irresponsible people who have failed to timely and regularly give them the aid package while they are forced to stay-at-home. And worst, they are the ones used to justify the de facto military rule in the country. It would be like the best defense of an Administration who has not prepared the country and its peoples for the unstoppable arrival of a pandemic including the socio and economic impacts. And yet they are also used as a convenient escape for not delivering its basic constitutional duty to ensure the health and welfare of the people with full respect of their human rights.

As the second extension of the enhanced community quarantine has been announced only 30% of the first tranche of the aid package (both of financial and food aid fund) has been downloaded from the department level which claimed releasing around 97% of the package to the LGUs since the first week of April. Anyone could not help but ask the question like, "Where is the money now?"

When one sees the current situation where millions of people are locked down for almost two months with very strict policies and regulations (with overt instruction from the President to shoot dead the violators) and considering that most of those locked down were poor (with no-work-no-pay and no food daily existence), not complying with the timely distribution of social amelioration program (SAP) and food packages basically due to government's neglect is a crystal clear picture of a perfect storm hitting the country and the poorest of the poor.

But the picture can also portray that the COVID19 pandemic strongly impacting the world in all its aspects has conveniently provided the authoritarian/rightist governments in the world to govern their respective countries and control the social unrest triggered by the health disaster which has

morphed into economic catastrophe. Such governments have crafted laws and rules using the pandemic COVID 19 but seem to create conditions that the poor could really and hardly follow and therefore would prefer to violate the rules on social distancing and stay at home policies to solve the hunger problem of their families. In the name of their safety against the virus they are suppressed and controlled. The people's reaction to such suppression will be the basis for stronger authoritarian grip and less democratic governance.

Reasons can be cited for this CRIMINAL NEGLECT from the side of the government are the absence of basic and centralized data, blatant corruption and patronage politics. And in the forty days since the lockdown, PRRD's administration has arrested 130,000 for violation of COVID-19 protocols and measures linked to the pandemic.

Thousands more were apprehended for curfew violations. In fact, the country ranked number 4 in the world after Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa for COVID19 related human rights violations according to the United Nations Council for Human Rights. But nobody was arrested or held accountable for the CRIMINAL NEGLECT for not releasing or delaying social amelioration program (SAP). Again if PRRD wants to extend the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), they should first implement the first tranche of SAP and enhance also its implementation and punish those SAP violators. If a government like that of PRRD's is curtailing basic rights and ruling by decree because of its health concerns and people's welfare brought about by COVID19 pandemic then why no corresponding concern for peoples' health and welfare because of lack of food and hunger and basic rights to earn their living. The obvious contradictory concerns by the government have led many to think that such moves are securing and perpetuating certain interests but surely it is not the peoples'.

It can help one to profoundly understand the PRRD's outlook in the context of the Marawi Siege in 2017 because the key players in this kind of war are the same key players in the war against COVID-19. After so much neglect on what the intelligence data were saying (later on the AFP leadership-headed by now DILG Secretary Eduardo Año would admit that they got the wrong interpretation of the data) and did not take proactive actions. From January to April 2017, the terrorists led by Abusayyaf and Maute groups had launched battles from the municipalities of Butig & Piagapo before May 22, 2017 Siege of Marawi but nothing had been done. PRRD had even mentioned based on the intelligence data that the AFP knew about the stockpiling of arms in the city. But why did he not order the AFP to get these firearms? Nobody knew. When the battle of Marawi erupted, Martial Law was immediately declared in the whole island of Mindanao while PRRD was in Moscow. The Martial Law would be extended 3 or more times by Congress and agreed upon by the Supreme Court. More than 400,000 Meranaws were displaced and until now many of them cannot still go back to their burned and devastated houses and lives. There was a clear neglect of why the Marawi Siege did happen. The fundamentalists and the terrorists made the attack but it could have been avoided or at least minimized the destruction and loss of lives. Nobody is held accountable for this criminal neglect.

As stated in the third series of this paper, the principal players of the battle of Marawi are now the key players in fighting COVID19 pandemic. Billions of pesos have been pouring in to rehabilitate the city and its people (the big part was released during the Martial Law period) but up to now, no substantial change has been done and majority of the population of Marawi have not yet returned to their city. Every time the Meranaws would insist on rebuilding their shattered life and destroyed houses, they were told that there are still unexploded bombs in the most affected area.

Again it is helpful to remind everybody that the reason given by PRRD to launch war in Marawi is to save the people against the terrorists namely Abu Sayyaf and the Maute Group at that time. Now people in Marawi are silently witnessing the revival of the new and young leadership of the

fundamentalist group/s in the city. What will happen in the next few months in Marawi, nobody could tell. What is obvious though is that it's the population of the city who have been displaced and destroyed and not the terrorists (new breed) and the fundamentalist ideas.

Currently, it has been the knowledge of everybody that the security sector of PRRD is building a military camp in the center of the city based on the claim that this is a military reservation. What has happened with all the billions of pesos both donated and allocated nobody could tell except that before the end of 2019, almost half a billion had to be returned to the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) because it could not be absorbed by PRRD's management team in the rehabilitation and rebuilding of Marawi. A very bad picture that money intended to help rebuild Marawi and people's lives was returned while thousands of those displaced do not have permanent homes.

Now, the reason given by PRRD of imposing the Community Quarantine is the presence of COVID 19. Everybody knows that the virus brought about by the Novel SARs2 will be here to stay longer if no vaccine is discovered to destroy it. PRRD had mentioned last week that he would just lift up the community quarantine (in whatever forms) if a vaccine would be discovered. This will take the middle of next year. Meanwhile, the people of Marawi have a triple burden on their shoulders.

The majority of the members of the Senate and led by the Senate President had asked the current Secretary of Department of Health (DOH) to resign, an obvious step of frustrations from the Senate for the snail-pace response by the DOH's leadership. For three months (since January 2020), the senators did not see any serious steps from the leading PRRD's department against COVID19 to prepare the country of the pandemic. Aware that there is no vaccine at hand, the leadership of DOH Secretary Francisco Duque III did not ensure the frontliners would be protected when confronting the contagious virus. The senators could not understand why they were not in a hurry in setting up more testing centers to identify the virus carriers and isolate them. In fact, locking down of areas and communities should be based on the results of the massive and aggressive testing. But what had surprised not only the senators but many people, was the sudden change of DOH's scientific reasons of the Department of the unreliability of the medical equipment: personal protective equipment (PPE) and face masks coming from China. The spokesperson of DOH cleared China the day after the announcement due to the Chinese Embassy's intervention and made shameless cover up that those medical paraphernalia are from another source abroad. Further, several countries had complained about the same thing on the same date the DOH raised the complaint. In fact, The Netherlands, which ordered around 1.2 million PPEs, facemasks and others, had to return to China the first 600,000 or 50% of which had already arrived in their country for being unreliable and the Netherlands government could not risk their frontliners using these defective equipment in treating the COVID-19 patients.

After the clearing of China by the DOH, nothing has been heard on this issue. If there are connections between this medical issue it is the extraordinary high number of cases in the country's frontliners affected by the virus but nobody could tell. The country in fact, though the DOH has continued to receive the medical supplies from China- many have been donated.

The move of the Senators to Secretary F. Duque's resignation did not materialize because PRRD simply said that he still trusts the DOH Secretary.

Meanwhile, on the eve of the second extension (last days of April), there was a silent but conspicuous change in PRRD's fight against COVID19. This is the re-appointment and taking over of Harry Roque as the spokesperson of the IATF and in concurrent capacity as PRRD's spokesperson. In effect, Roque has replaced cabinet Secretary Carlo Alexie Nograles as IATF spokesperson and Presidential Legal Counsel Salvador Panelo who acted as PRRD's Spokesperson.

Currently Harry Roque is both the spokesperson of PRRD and the IATF. Actually in substance, there is no difference between the two positions. IATF is composed of 8 departments where the heads are all PRRD's appointees but with Roque's return (he was once PRRD's spokesperson but resigned before election - when he had tried to run as a senator against the advice of PRRD), is saying something. PRRD's administration needs somebody like Roque with his background as a Human Rights lawyer to speak on behalf of the President in his fight against the illegal drugs and the COVID-19. Both campaigns have defined PRRD's administration with regards to issues affecting the people at the expense of Human Rights and democracy. It has been known by many who know Harry Roque that he would speak in behalf of his principal even if it contradicts his basic principles especially on Human Rights and International Law.

Currently, the number of people arrested for violating the protocols set by PRRD in the campaign against COVID 19 far exceeded the total number of people tested for the virus in the country. But nobody has been arrested for the criminal neglect of withholding the social amelioration program (SAP) and the food aid for the hungry people who suffered the loss, not only their livelihood, but basic human rights as well.

Meanwhile, the IATF through their initiative of PRRD's economic team has approved an amount of P613 billion or more than \$6billion as economic stimulus for the big business sector. Another P35 billion for the small and medium business aid package has also been approved.

Indeed, with COVID19 becoming a great equalizer where a playing field has been leveled up, those who are now the new favored elite can have a bigger advantage at the expense of not only the old oligarch but most especially the toiling masses in the country. With another extension of the lockdown in the country and where it is still far from the cusp of limiting much more defeating the COVID19, the current situation has intensified the country's crisis.

In addition, the RA 11464 or the law which says that Bayanihan is needed for the nation to HEAL AS ONE is becoming unreachable unless the country and the people should first ACT AS ONE. Having enhanced quarantine can only be bearable if the social amelioration fund and aid package can be proportionately enhanced as well. The effort should be done together with aggressive testing so as to locate and identify the COVID-19 carriers so that they can be isolated and cured.

Success can never be a coincidence; its formula can be a combination of efforts by medical professionals including all the frontliners, government, private sectors and the society at large. This is a sure step of seriously strengthening the armor of our defenses against the COVID-19. This is also putting flesh to the belief that human capacity to overcome whatever challenges when working together is simply limitless.

While the 2<sup>nd</sup> extension is about to start, we should brace ourselves with the next extension and the best way to prepare for such endeavors is to expose and prosecute those who committed the criminal neglect of not implementing the COVID-19 Social Amelioration Program.

## **V. Some Analyses and Conclusions**

In an unprecedented uncertainty with the country's \$331 billion economy put in frozen animation by a pandemic, what more would it mean for another lockdown in whatever form? When do policy-makers of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte's (PRRD) administration see the interrelatedness of the locking down of millions of people to serious and aggressive efforts of mass or targeted testing, much more than the timely and regular social amelioration and food subsidies are inseparable from forced social control?

When does PRRD's government see the funds coming from loans, donations and realignment of allocated annual budget are not limitless and therefore there can hardly be another social amelioration fund without adding another burden on people and on their next generation through more taxes and loans? When can the policy-makers see that the economic aid package for the big enterprises should not be considered as dole out to save their profits but should be a stimulus to help restart the country's economy in the new normal and should be in the context of ensuring that workers can start working with dignity and a corresponding living wage.

When will we ever learn that trust is inseparable from truth and that today more than ever people need to know the truth through information and that in the COVID19 pandemic- timely and truthful information can indeed save lives? That stifling and muffling the country's biggest television and broadcasting company like ABS-CBN and putting it off the air is a clear manifestation of a dictatorship even without formally declaring one. Putting this network off the air is also cutting off the people from the biggest source of their information. While people stay inside their homes, they should stay informed. Obviously, PRRD administration cannot handle the truth and this kind of people fear the truth

The traitorous action of the National Telecommunication Commission (NTC) as pressured by PRRD's Solicitor General against the giant network was timed during the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the second extension of lockdown and while the latter was in the middle of its playing a very major role in the country's struggle against the COVID19 pandemic. The message was delivered loud and clear— that is the current administration will not be kind to anybody who dares to cross the line of PRRD.

COVID19 pandemic and the government's action or non-action have not only continued to kill people but has eroded the economy and is fast tiring the system. It has simply outlasted all the economic stimulus and the social amelioration programs. The cutting off the air of the major source of information is basically depriving the people to know what is happening and to have informed decisions and avoid a social condition susceptible to fake and dictated information.

More than 50 days after the lockdown and the country is still nowhere near "out of the woods" situation, the country is obviously just managing around the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Poor Health System Aggravates the COVID-19 Triggered Crisis: Fighting Fire with one Arm Tied Behind our Backs**

The SARS-COV2 could ravage the country given the low testing rates with very weak testing infrastructure, a barely functional health system, vast densely packed population and a government which has waited too long for action against the pandemic and locking down millions of Filipinos for a longer period is not a very good option.

At the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> extension of Enhanced Community Quarantine (May 1-15), the Philippines had recorded the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest number of COVID-19 cases among the South East Asian countries and 38<sup>th</sup> in the world. As of April 30, 2020, there were 8,488 cases with 1,043 recovered and 568 deaths, and as of May 12, there were 11,350 positive cases.

The health infrastructure and capacity of the country is still very low with daily testing capacity between 2,895 -6,420 in spite of repeated announcements of the Department of Health (DOH) that at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> extension of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), the daily test would be around 8,000. Again, a few days before the end of the second ECQ (or whatever from it will take), the DOH has been announcing to have a daily testing capacity of 30,000 at the end of May 2020. The testing, which should have the character of mass testing on April 14 as announced, have been done on the first week of May in 19 testing laboratories and 151,872 test kits available, at least 1

laboratory from Mindanao, 2 from the Visayas and 16 laboratories in Metro Manila.

The Mindanao laboratory caters to 6 regions and 22 provinces. The two laboratories in the Visayas cater to 3 regions and 16 provinces and the 16 laboratories in Metro Manila cater to 8 regions and 38 provinces.

With the abovementioned set-up, the laboratory results are significantly delayed especially in the Visayas and Mindanao areas. There are cases where patients die before their test results are communicated to the concerned families. This slow and oftentimes delayed processes have caused added difficulties in containing the spread of the virus which affect immediate action for contact tracing. Further, the local transmission becomes widespread and prevalent albeit silently.

As of May 6, 2020, the total number of individuals tested nationwide based on the 7<sup>th</sup> report to the Congress by President Rodrigo Roa Duterte (PRRD) was 131,089. It is only 1% of the 13.8 million projected number for the 2020 population in the National Capital Region (NCR). Quezon City, part of NCR and the epicenter of COVID-19 in the country has targeted a total of 30,000 testing to represent 1% of their 3 million population. The geographical distribution of the cases are the following: 70% from Metro Manila, 23% from Central Visayas and 8% from other parts of the country.

At the beginning of the second extension of the Enhanced Community Quarantine, the bed capacity in the country for COVID-19 patients is 11,807. Twenty-two percent(22.1%) are allocated for ward beds in which 1,002 are occupied and 1,611 are still available, 67.2% are isolated beds in which 3,301 are occupied and 4,638 are still available, 10.6% is reserved for the Intensive Care Units (ICUs) in which 475 are occupied and 780 are still available. There are 1,775 mechanical vents which 361 are currently used and 1,414 are still available.

At the moment, only severe cases are catered in the hospitals but Influenza like Illness (ILI) and Severe Acute Respiratory Infections (SARI) are also managed and treated as COVID-19 cases. While mild, asymptomatic probable and suspected cases are in the community isolation or have been advised to go on home quarantine. Further, there are cases, usually in the communities who have mostly asymptomatic and who do not go to the hospitals for testing and become silent but dangerous carriers of the virus.

The positive cases of COVID-19 are data coming only from the hospitals and not saying on the cases especially from the communities and the densely populated areas. It is therefore of paramount importance that aggressive targeted community testing should be implemented in the communities especially in populated areas in order to get more or less realistic picture of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

Currently, the PRRD's administration through the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) has classified areas as high risk, which will be put on Enhanced Community Quarantine, low and moderate risks or combinations of different forms to unfreeze the economy of the country in selected areas.

This kind of classifying areas are mainly based on the data provided by the Department of Health (DOH) and inputs on the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) - both are members of the IATF.

However, the University of the Philippines COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team has raised an alarm on error in patients' data. The team pointed out discrepancies of data on specific dates before PRRD decided for the second extension of the community quarantine like the following: the interchange of sex classification of the patients-45 cases, there are 75 cases where age of patients do not match but

more especially are the 516 cases where the geographical locations of patients are simply imaginary. The worst is the announcement that a person died of COVID19 yet the next day, he is alive again. Further, there is a continuing mismatch on the data between the DOH and the local government units (LGUs). A very serious case in point here is the situation of the province of Laguna (part of Luzon island) and near the National Capital Region (NCR). Laguna's Data on May 3, 2020 on death cases was 29 while the DOH's record on the same date has only 7 deaths. Based on this mismatched data, Laguna has been categorized under the Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ) where there will be economic activities on essential products but people's movement will still be strictly regulated. This kind of category will be imposed on Laguna and its people on another and 3<sup>rd</sup> extension of the locked down communities this coming May 15-31, 2020.

This situation has highlighted the basic fact that there is no central database of the department (DOH) which is spearheading the country's campaign against COVID19 pandemic. It has a direct bearing in the contact tracing efforts of the carriers of the virus which should have been the basis of categorizing the areas.

Meanwhile, it is very important to note that the Chinese government had sent its 15 member team of medical experts last month where they had visited different medical facilities and interviewed the countries medical professionals managing the COVID19 pandemic. They had interesting suggestions before they ended their visit like; there is a dire need of personal protective equipment, face masks, ventilators and second, they had mentioned that the COVID19 facilities in the country were generally okay but it still badly needs additional units.

The same Chinese medical experts advised the country's medical practitioners that face masks like N95 can only be used up to 4 to 5 hours, an obvious result of their observation that face mask like N95 have been used for several hours and even days by the country's frontliners. However they got the highest respect for the country's medical frontliners' commitment and dedication.

And after their very much publicized visit, Chinese PPEs and other medical equipment both donations and paid orders by the Philippine government through DOH have begun to arrive. With regards to the safety quality of these medical supplies only PRRD's DOH can tell but everybody just hopes that these Chinese experts did not suggest to the country's medical practitioners their method of fitting the figures of cases to their political agenda just like they did in Wuhan.

Currently, the number of cases of the country's healthcare workers affected by COVID19 rose to more than 3,000 which can be broken down in the following: 2357 nurses, 1069 doctors whom 29 had died, 107 nursing assistants, 70 medical technologists, 34 radiology technicians, 21 midwives and other medical workers. Excluded from these numbers are the thousands of community-based frontliners like the Barangay Health Emergency Response Team or BHERT. These people are tasked to monitor probable and suspected cases doing home isolation and those with mild symptoms and even the asymptomatic patients. In fact the latter are the most exposed among the medical front liners but they are the least protected in terms of PPEs.

Excluded also from this data are the hundreds of thousands Health Care Professionals who have worked as front liners in various hospitals around the world. Not a few of them have died working with their patients notwithstanding the stigma and the discrimination that many of them had been subjected into their own communities and their working places.

In the US alone, there are 150,000 nurses working in different states and more than a dozen of them offered their lives in the call of duty to face the pandemic. In the United Kingdom, there are 19,000 nurses working in different hospitals and like in the US and other countries they all gave their all in their sworn duty.



The psychological impact for these health care professional frontliners of being used to be the caregivers and now they become themselves patients which they could hardly have imagined earlier because they simply faced the pandemic head on despite the very limited supplies of personnel protection equipment and very inadequate health infrastructures. Now, they became part of those who are reckoning with their own mortality as they continue to face the pandemic with so much uncertainty.

With the current situation and where almost all the hospitals in the country are in their breaking points with a significant number of them having continued to be affected by COVID-19, the country's infrastructure has been further weakened as a result, some hospitals have to turn down and refuse accepting patients because of limited space and inadequate health capacity. The country's premier testing laboratory like the Research Institute of Tropical Medicine (RITM) was seriously affected when forty three (43) of its medical staff were tested positive of COVID-19 and were put on quarantine for more than two weeks. Earlier on, the Institute's Deputy Director, Dr. Salvacion Rodriguez Gatchalian had died because of the COVID-19. Such a situation has scaled down its testing capacity from 3,000/day to 300/day.

While the medical frontliners are obviously overworked and underpaid, there is a need for them to face COVID-19 with a positive attitude, inspire the patients, give them morale booster but at the same time they have to face and understand the stigma with their being medical frontliners in their own communities.

### **CONTROL in the Open Society. Forcing People to Stay Home...Where Many of THEM Consider the STREETS as their Homes**

When PRRD made his 7<sup>th</sup> weekly report to Congress since the lockdown, it was obvious that he or his team did not do their homework. Everybody has been eagerly waiting about the announcement of full or partial lifting or any combination of both but hearing none, they become exasperated. They felt flabbergasted to hear from him about how he played footsie with the Communist Party of the Philippines New People's Army (CPP-NPA) when he was still the mayor of Davao City, southern part of the Philippines. But it was ironic for him to mention his relationship with the NPAs while he was delivering his stern warning to other local government unit (LGUs) officials of doing the same with NPAs. Then he began to offer out of his "own" pocket a reward of P2 Million for those who would inform him of the location of an NPA commander.

The next day, it was the spokesperson who made the announcement of the new categorization of different areas. The long awaited announcement has created more confusion than clarity. The 16 city mayors and 1 municipality of Metro Manila was divided on whether to continue with enhanced community quarantine or with the general community quarantine. But everybody has been expecting that the categorization of their areas could be based on science which means the results of the COVID19 testing. The local government officials are well aware of the extreme anxieties and the growing unrest among their people who are locked down and severely punished for any violations by the police and military apparatus of the state. The social amelioration packages have been very slow that after several extensions of social control and many deadlines many of the poor people have yet to receive any food packages. Further, the COVID19 testing are done in several areas in some cities but not yet done in broader communities and one cannot really tell where the exact areas to quarantine.

The situation is seen nationwide including the newly administrative region of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. At an earlier stage, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) had provided the list of beneficiaries for non-4Ps in BARMM as 300,000 households but later the same department released only 27,000 DSWD cards which means the

budget of the social amelioration program would be based on this latter number. The BARMM has to make do with whatever amount they have in the region to distribute food packages to the 300,000 households. As of this writing, only 58% of the households beneficiaries have received the funds and food aids from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) led region.

But the worst case is that BARMM has not been included in some of the national government considerations in terms of budget and allocation during the pandemic period. According to Minister Naguib Sinarimbo- the current minister of Interior and Local Government- during his latest meeting with the Mindanao Humanitarian Team, the BARMM was not included in the Department of Agriculture's (DA) pandemic support package for the farmers. In addition, BARMM is also not included in the Department of Labor and Employment's (DOLE) cash amelioration program (CAMP) for the regular workers and the Tulong Pantawid Program (TUPAD) for the informal sector.

It can be a good learning process for the MILF in its political initiation inside the dominant and traditional politics under the PRRD'S administration. Besides, it seems that the national government is not yet ready for the MILF's participation in the affairs of the national government.

Meanwhile, thousands of poor people have been lining up, often violating social distancing rules, for several days under the heat of the sun and even under the pouring of rain just to get their social amelioration funds.

In several cases, one could hear and see people literally dying not because of COVID-19 but because of heat strokes and fatigue of lining up for days and nights. And as if to add more salt to people's social injury, PRRD had announced to add another 5 million households who can benefit from the social amelioration program. This is in addition to the 18 million households mentioned in Republic Act 11649 to receive the SAP. Logically many should be happy with this kind of announcement but because of what they are experiencing with this seemingly unending process they treat it as another hollow promise and not to expect much from it to be realized.

Furthermore, PRRD through his spokesperson has announced that only those areas (province, city and municipality) which are categorized as belonging to Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) would receive the social amelioration funds. The reason is that the areas are in a high risk category— which means there are several cases of COVID19 positive and this number is increasing. But many have serious questions regarding the scientific bases of this reason with no real time results which means the results of the tests performed would take at least a week or more than 10 days in many cases to know the results — the categorization is simply based on projection or worse from imagination. In this case, science is seen as an instrument to serve politics and interest of the powers that be rather than used it in genuine efforts against the pandemic.

Further, many of the LGUs would want their province, city or municipality to be categorized to the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) because they do not have the capacity to continue with the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) while their people are still locked down. Besides, the law (RA11469) states that the SAP should be distributed to the 18 million households and in two tranches within 2 months' (April & May) period.

Furthermore, other LGU officials would want a hybrid categorization of their areas- that is- maintain the social control or lockdown because they know that they have limited capacity of testing but at the same they see the need to open up and restart the economic activities so that people can work and have income. This kind of hybrid arrangement is called Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ). The other categorization is called the General Community Quarantine (GCQ) or areas where there are low risks of COVID19 infections and where people can restart the basic economic activities while observing the social distancing. In all the categorizations, the domestic

travel (as well as international) are generally not allowed except for the movement of the basic and essential goods and services, social gathering, or even religious gatherings and activities to allow them to celebrate religious masses as long as they continue to strictly observe the social distancing protocols. Everybody has followed these protocols that when a senior member of the country's Supreme Court had retired after more than forty years of government service they had to do the sending away through social media or the enhanced electronic technology.

But of course, it is different when the head of the Philippine National Police (PNP) in the National Capital Region (NCR) would celebrate his birthday. All the social distancing (even wearing of face masks) were set aside when this 2-star general had celebrated his birthday with the corresponding musical band last 8<sup>th</sup> of May 2020. It should be recalled that this same General had personally arrested ten (10) people in Marikina who according to him, had violated the social distancing protocols when they had distributed food relief to the poor people in the communities who did not receive the food packages from the government. This was even and in spite of the fact that the Mayor of the city of Marikina had approved the relief operation. These people were sent right away to jail.

Meanwhile, all the retired generals who have occupied strategic positions in PRRD's government and active generals as well have immediately come to the rescue of the birthday celebrant. Giving all explanations and justifications which nobody could simply believe. This obvious and shameless double standard appreciation of the protocols to safeguard people from COVID19 has reinforced the reign of terror by the PRRD's administration. And worst it would be the PNP Internal Affairs which was tasked by PRRD'S Executive Secretary to investigate the violation.

The PNP Director General had already cleared NCR PNP Chief Head Major General Debold Sinas. Many become apprehensive whether something can happen in this investigation when the police investigates one of their own.

Meanwhile, as the document has been highlighting, the COVID19 does not respect territorial boundaries but seems to suggest that we should face it together in the framework of the pre-existing conditions like the reality of widespread presence of the informal sector and people who are living very closely packed together.

Given this concrete reality, there is a need to look with a frank and transparent lens to minimize the risk of an uncontrollable outbreak of COVID19. In addition, the prevalent and widespread social inequality very much speaks to health infrastructure and very slow distribution of SAP locking down millions of people would not be effective— unless it will have a nature of hamlet type of population control.

Obviously, many would think that it is this last type of social control that is being applied by the PRRD's administration. It has to mobilize 67,000 PNP personnel (more: than half of its total strength), 13,000 officers and members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFPs) and hundreds of thousands of civilian force multipliers to effect the hamlet type population control.

For lockdown to be effective, there are several factors that should be considered paramount among them are the peoples' support and they can only give this support if they participate in the whole process of decision making.

First factor or consideration is to immediately stop the COVID19 transmission, and given that it will be sometimes before the appropriate vaccine will be available, the transmission can only stop if everyone stays at home. People can stay at home if they have enough social and food support from the government.

Second, the healthcare system (given the poor quality state) needs the time and space to recover for beds to be freed up and medical staff and frontliners to be able to have enough space to take time off. Concerned government agencies should make sure that the medical system and infrastructure will not be overwhelmed. Mass and targeted testing should be done in selected communities in an organized and sustainable manner.

And thirdly, to get all systems in place, all isolation facilities quarantine capacity and protocols in contact tracing should be objectively implemented.

Based on the University of the Philippines (UP) Pandemic Response Team's projection of Metro Manila (MM) —the current epicenter of COVID-19 in the country, the epidemic will peak between April to June 2020. In the same projection, the UP scientists estimate that the virus could infect around 600,000 to 1.4 million individuals in the country with 80% from Metro Manila (based on the mathematical simulations). Further, in its report, the UP's team has emphasized the need for community collaboration to fight the deadly virus which has currently infected more than 4 million across the globe.

The UP team's estimate number includes possible asymptomatic individuals and unreported cases. The big number of cases in Metro Manila is mainly due to the high population size and density of the population in the region.

The projections were also based on the assumption on the reproduction rate between 1.5 to 4 numbers of people that will be directly infected by a COVID-19 positive person in a susceptible population. As of this writing, the total positive cases in the country is nearly 12,000.

In addition, if one takes the South Korea experience, it says that the only way to know the severity spectrum is to test a large number of people and especially in the outbreak period when it is actually the best setting for the testing. The result of the testing should be the only scientific basis for implementing social control or the lockdowns.

But most importantly, the country has also several experiences which one can categorize today as success stories, with regards to managing COVID-19 through lockdown and social amelioration support funds.

First is the case of the province island of Guimaras, one of the islands in the Visayas with 174,613 population. In spite of its fourth class status as a province, it has been successful in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Important factor here should be cited as an early step for closing the island from tourists as early as January 31, 2020. Gov. Samuel T. Gumarin, who is a medical doctor, knows the limitations of the province's health infrastructure and knows that the SARs COV2, is a virus and can be very contagious and therefore it could be difficult to control the transmission. When the World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration of the virus as an international concern, he, together with members of the provincial legislative council ( some are also medical doctors) decided to ban the tourists coming from mainland China since at that time it was clear that the virus came from China. And since tourism is one of the main sources of income of the province, the Provincial Council has timely allocated and distributed food subsidies to the population while preparing the only hospital in the province and building quarantine areas for possible place of infected people. Now the province has zero COVID-19 case.

The Second success story which is good to study is another island province of Dinagat with a total population of 127,400 individuals. Dinagat province is part of Mindanao. Like the island Province of Guimaras, Dinagat Gov. Arlene Bag-ao, a Human Rights lawyer, has understood the implication of the virus transmission and therefore together with the provincial council decided earlier on

(February 4, 2020) to lockdown the island from tourists. There are also massive information campaigns so that people will have informed decisions especially when they implement strict screening of boats arriving in their ports. To effectively do this, they have to close their smaller ports (7 ports) in the province and closely watch the main port. All these moves are done in a human-rights based approach. The provincial government has also continued to provide food packages to its people. To date, the island province of Dinagat is COVID-19 free.

The Third success story that is worth mentioning here is the City of Ormoc. It is the capital city of Southern Leyte (an island in the Visayas) with 215,031 population. The current mayor is Richard Gomez - a once screen actor in the country - but his early move to save his city from the virus had paid a lot. The Mayor together with his City Legislative Council made a strict border control on March 13 - 2 days after WHO had declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic. They instituted the isolation of the city through border control and put in quarantine the new arrival in the city. The people of Ormoc City have patiently stayed at home because their government timely distributed food packages. According to the mayor, when they had decided to control the spread of the transmission they immediately bought food supplies, like 65,000 sacks of rice and canned goods. Later, when they understood that COVID-19 is here to stay longer, they bought vegetable seeds and distributed them to the population. Now, people are happy because after almost 2 months of the lockdown, they are beginning to harvest their own vegetables and their city as of this date, remains COVID19 free.

The common denominator of the 3 success stories are that they (officials) have understood the nature of the virus and the nature of pandemic. They did not wait for the national government to make a move before they initiated their actions. They have educated their people and immediately implement the lockdown or secure their borders. They have acted early to supply the population with social amelioration programs and food packages from their own local funds. They have prepared their health care infrastructure in spite of its limitation and secure adequate protection for the medical frontliners. But most especially they work closely and together with their constituencies.

It will surely be too small in terms of population to compare the situation of the three(3) areas with the national government's efforts for the 109 million population of the country. But the principle of not acting the earliest possible time to prepare the nation and the people for the pandemic cannot be justified in any way possible. What had happened in the missing more than 2 months of the government's inaction? When you locked down millions of people and strictly instructed them to stay at home but did not ensure that they would have food and other basic necessities - you are simply and slowly killing them before the virus can catch with them. When you have waited for too long before preparing the already weak health care infrastructure, you are practically courting a sure disaster. When you do not have a central database for the COVID-19 cases then you are making the tracing of possible carriers of the virus very difficult.

The basic and natural characteristics of the country being archipelagic can also be a built-in defense against the virus transmission. As shown in the two examples of the island provinces mentioned earlier and how they secured their ports in the earliest possible states, the country could have been a COVID-19 free nation. If tourists, especially from China would have not been allowed to enter the country since the first admission of the Chinese government, the new coronavirus could be transmitted among and between humans then the first case in the country in the last week of January 2020 could have been avoided.

A national and coherent plan to combat COVID-19 could have been easily implemented with the 7,109 islands in the country. The country could have a national and centralized plan but could decentralize its operations and implementations- giving more creative initiatives among the government officials in the islands and the LGUs.

And lastly, but not definitely the least the AFP and the PNP or the security infrastructure of the country could have been oriented and tasked to secure the nation's territorial areas in the economic exclusive zones in the West Philippines Sea (WPS) and from the blatant invasion of the Chinese people flooding the nation with illegal and anti-social activities under the cover of the Philippine Offshore Gaming Operations (POGOs).

**These Chinese “invasions” and illegal activities are the only significant areas where the COVID19 have not stopped as almost all economic, political and even cultural and religious activities have come to a halt because of the pandemic.**

But for a country like the Philippines, the one that COVID19 pandemic has clearly highlighted has been the need for the rectification and the change which should be worked out by the people is the one which did not create the social economic and political infrastructures which have allowed the easy “invasion” of these kinds of virus in its territory. The change can surely come from a different framework other than the current one.

As the people prepare themselves for the new normal that is aside from the faceless future and enhanced information technology, it should definitely be what it is not today.

Meanwhile, as the country braces itself with the arrival of a very strong typhoon Ambo (“Vong fong”-international name)-first typhoon for this year, many people are still waiting for the completion of the 1<sup>st</sup> tranche of the SAP. Their immune system and their energy seriously sapped because of these inadequacies and inaction of their own government, it will be unimaginable if people could still survive and withstand another storm of any kind.

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**P.S.**

- Raymund De Silva is a political activist based in Mindanao for more than three decades.