

Philippines declares public health emergency, sets 'no-touch' rule on Duterte, as coronavirus cases rise to 20

"The relevant question is are we missing cases"

Monday 9 March 2020, by [ROBLES Raissa](#) (Date first published: 9 March 2020).

- **The declaration enables the Philippines to launch a whole-of-government effort to handle the widening coronavirus outbreak**
- **Meanwhile, people have been warned to avoid contact with Duterte, a leader who enjoys being surrounded by crowds and often hugs citizens**

President Rodrigo Duterte on Monday declared a "state of public health emergency" over the Philippines' widening coronavirus outbreak, prompting his security team to impose a "no-touch" policy on him, as the number of infections rose to 20.

Health assistant secretary Rosario Vergeire on Monday said "intensified surveillance" was the reason the country saw a spike of 15 new infections over a span of four days.

According to the Presidential Proclamation 922, the Covid-19 outbreak "constitutes an emergency that threatens national security which requires a whole-of-government response".

The declaration would enable the government, with the aid of the police and other national agencies, to "enforce quarantine and disease control prevention measures", as well as "capacitate" local government units to prevent loss of lives and "contain or prevent the spread of Covid-19".

The move came two weeks after Health Secretary Francisco Duque wrote to Duterte's chief aide, Salvador Medialdea, to advise the palace to issue such a declaration "in the event of local transmission" to ease procurement processes and access to funding, and enable authorities to impose community lockdowns and travel restrictions.

The first case of local transmission - a 62-year-old man with no recent history of overseas travel - was confirmed last Friday, prompting Duque to raise the alert to "Code Red Sublevel 1" - the step before a "community quarantine" or lockdown is imposed. The patient's wife later also tested positive.

Colonel Jesus Durante, the commander of the Presidential Security Guard (PSG), told media that politicians, reporters and other visitors meeting Duterte and his family would be "thoroughly screened" before being granted close access. The president's speaking engagements "could be cancelled", he added.

"Specifically, PSG will implement a no-touch policy between Duterte and the public," Durante said.

Duterte enjoys being surrounded by crowds and has a touchy-feely personality. He often embraces and shakes hands with women and men, and once publicly kissed a woman on the lips during a speaking engagement.

On Monday, mayors in five of the 17 cities that comprise Metro Manila announced they had infected residents or were visited by confirmed Covid-19 cases.

Despite this, Duque on Monday said it may be premature to place the whole of Metro Manila, which has a population of 12.8 million people, under lockdown. The health secretary said there should first be “sustained community transmission” and “many clustering of cases” to warrant community quarantine.

Senators have demanded to know if the number of confirmed cases was being “under-reported” by the health department.

Duque said on Monday that while the country’s ability to conduct local tests had sped up, with results coming out in about 24 to 48 hours, only a limited number of patients could be tested as the health authorities did not have a lot of test kits.

According to medical doctor Edsel Salvana, a molecular biologist and infectious disease expert at the Philippine General Hospital run by the University of the Philippines, “there is no under-reporting. The more relevant question is are we missing cases”.

Even “the best surveillance systems in the world miss cases”, he added.

As to why the government was not testing more widely, Salvana said each test costs 5,000 to 8,000 pesos (US\$99 to US\$160). “Testing is complicated and not many places are capable of doing the test well.”

Duque said the partly state-funded Philhealth insurance would cover from 14,000 pesos of a patient’s medical costs for mild cases, to more than 50,000 pesos for each seriously ill patient. Philhealth claims to cover 93 per cent of all Filipinos.

Due to the heavy burden this would impose on state coffers, presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo said Duterte would not stop operations of Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (Pogos) because revenues from the gambling industry would help defray Covid-19 costs.

Duque said the government had already released an initial 2 billion pesos to cover the purchase of protective equipment for health workers.

The government has come under criticism for not getting its act together in handling the coronavirus outbreak. A countrywide mall sale last week was abruptly cancelled after Duque said he did not know about it, even though he was part of the task force on Covid-19.

The Department of Tourism announced during Monday’s press briefing that a tour of Boracay and other tourist spots led by Duterte, and a programme to drum up hotel stays would go as planned this week, even though the president’s security team had announced the public was not allowed to interact with him.

The Department of Trade and Industry also announced price control measures on protective masks but did not say when these would be on supermarket shelves and chemists.

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P.S.

- South China Morning Post. Published: 9:32pm, 9 Mar, 2020:
<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3074343/coronavirus-philippines-declares-public-health>
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