

Philippines tilts towards full-blown Covid catastrophe

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Covid-19 patients are dying in tents outside of overwhelmed hospitals while the government grapples for a coherent response

MANILA - The Philippines is grappling with the region's worst Covid-19 outbreak, a surge in infections that some fear could soon tilt the country towards a humanitarian disaster without a quick course shift.

The Philippines has logged an average of more than 10,000 new daily infections in the past week, the highest infection rate in Southeast Asia, prompting the government to extend lockdowns that will inevitably exacerbate the nation's already deep and wide economic pain.

Healthcare institutions are again overwhelmed [as hundreds of patients](#) desperately struggle to gain admission across Metro Manila's and other cities' hospitals. The nation's presidential spokesman and contact tracing czar are among those who contracted the disease in the past month, reflecting the depth of a crisis that has hit the highest echelons of society.

Many Filipinos aren't making into the hospital, with reports circulating that patients are dying inside tents set up outside health care facilities as they wait to be admitted. Over 13,000 have died from Covid-19, massively more than the less than 100 who have succumbed in Thailand.

An already snail-paced mass vaccination program, which only began in March, has taken a hit after Philippine authorities [decided to suspend](#) AstraZeneca's vaccine for people under 60 years of age amid concerns over rare blood clotting among younger recipients.

The thrust of the nation's vaccination rollout so far has relied on China's Sinovac Biotech and AstraZeneca jabs, both of which have come under question in terms of their safety and efficacy.

During a pre-recorded April 12 address, President Rodrigo Duterte, dressed in a denim shirt with rolled-up sleeves, spoke to the nation with his characteristic chutzpah, putting to rest rumors that he had died of Covid-19 in an overseas hospital.

"If you want me to die early, you must pray harder. What you want to happen is to see me go," the president said visibly flanked by his top cabinet members in an apparent show of government unity amid rising public discontent.

"When I disappeared for several days, I did it on purpose. The more you rummage about for me like a child, and the more you mock me, the more I'm filled with zest," he said defiantly.

In a largely incoherent and rambling speech, Duterte made contradictory statements, telling the public at one point "do not be afraid... we must be prepared for this", only to add later with despairing fatalism, "we cannot do anything about it."

In an abrupt policy shift, Duterte relaxed lockdowns across the national capital region, which is responsible for close to half of the Philippines' economic output.

Last month, Duterte re-imposed enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) measures in major urban centers, resulting in the closure of big businesses with the exception of essential sectors despite earlier dismissing the latest wave of infections as "a small thing in our lives."

The modified ECQ will allow the steady re-opening of malls and public transportation as the government struggles to revive a hammered economy, which contracted by close to 10% last year, among the worst performances worldwide.

Duterte's latest policy reversal has been slammed by epidemiologists and healthcare experts, who have warned of premature loosening of what they say are desperately needed lockdown measures.

The OCTA Research Group, a think tank comprised of data scientists, has warned that daily detected cases are still "very high" and that "significant viral transmissions continue."

The Healthcare Professionals Alliance Against Covid-19 has called on the government to revamp its health policy by adopting a more effective mass vaccination program, more aggressive contact tracing that doesn't excessively rely on time-consuming PCR tests and an integrated national health management system that allows for more accurate assessments of the situation on the ground.

According to data by the Philippine College of Emergency Medicine (PCEM), made [available through Rappler news agency](#), as many as 310 Covid-19 patients in need of emergency care struggled to gain admission to 14 of the major health facilities and hospitals in Metro-Manila.

Because the data covers only 14 out of 159 health facilities in the national capital region, the true figure could run in the thousands.

Duterte's presidential spokesman Harry Roque came under fire after it became known that he managed to quickly secure admission at the Philippine General Hospital after testing positive for Covid-19.

Former government adviser and leading infectious diseases expert Dr Anthony Leachon lambasted what he sees as a "leadership vacuum" amid the ongoing crisis. He has zeroed in on a "very limited vaccine supply" and limited government contact-tracing amounting to 37,000 Covid-19 daily tests on average.

Former police officer and "contact tracing tsar" Benjamin Magalong admitted that there were only three contacts traced for every single confirmed case, far below the number necessary for effective disease containment.

Magalong, who is the mayor of the northern city of Baguio, was recently forced into self-quarantine after contracting Covid-19 himself.

So far only 1.1 million out of a population 108 million have received at least a first vaccine dose. More than 3 million doses of Sinovac and AstraZeneca have been secured via a combination of bilateral government and private sector deals as well as donations under the auspices of the World Health Organization.

The Southeast Asian country has received [525,600 doses](#) of AstraZeneca vaccines, amounting to almost a fifth of the country's existing inventory, while 2.6 million doses purchased by the private sector will be delivered in the coming weeks.

However, AstraZeneca vaccines have faced new regulatory restrictions amid global concerns over rare adverse side effects for younger adults.

“This temporary suspension does not mean that the vaccine is unsafe or ineffective — it just means that we are taking precautionary measures to ensure the safety of every Filipino,” said Food and Drug Administration chief Rolando Enrique Domingo, seeking to avoid a widespread vaccine scare.

As a result, the Philippines will now be largely dependent on its limited stock of Chinese vaccines, which are yet to be certified by the WHO and undergo full-fledged peer-review by independent experts.

The director of the China Centers for Disease Control, Gao Fu, recently [admitted](#) that Chinese vaccines “don’t have very high protection rates” and suggested China could soon start mixing its different vaccines to improve their efficacy.

But what’s clear to most Filipinos is that Duterte’s government needs to recalibrate its policy mix before the country tilts towards a Brazil-style humanitarian disaster.

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