

Presidential Communications Operations Office

Presidential News Desk

**TALK TO THE PEOPLE OF PRESIDENT RODRIGO ROA DUTERTE
ON CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019 (COVID-19)**

[21 April 2021]

PRESIDENT RODRIGO ROA DUTERTE: Okay, good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. *[Officials: Good afternoon, Mr. President.]* Before I proceed, let me welcome and also our thanks to our guests tonight who took time to join us and help us explain to the people why things are way they are.

You know, there are a lot of questions that --- which has to be answered because the people have the right really to know what's going on. After all, we serve them.

So nagpapasalamat ako kay Dr. Edsel Maurice Salvaña, member Technical Advisory Group (TAG)-COVID 19; Dra. Marissa Alejandria, member TAG for COVID-19; Dr. Anna Lim, member TAG for COVID-19; and Dr. Cynthia Palmes-Saloma, executive director, the Philippine Genome Center University of the Philippines.

You know, this is not really a scheduled meeting. But the last time we had a Talk to the People, which Secretary Bello of the Department of Labor was invited, in a nutshell, he was complaining about the length of time that the OFW and returning travelers or travelers and OFWs are being detained -- to use the word "too long," that's what he said. And it has depleted the budget that has been allotted by government sa kanila sa Department of Labor.

So there was a bit of a discussion but I thought it wise to just maybe cut it and since this is a question of science and medical issue, it would be useless for us to be debating here and talking about these things. We will just invite the experts and --- so that they can shed light, provide enlightenment to us and to the public why this is so.

Now, the thing here is I'd like to ask Secretary Bello, are you --- do you want or are you ready to repeat your --- ? They are here. I would rather that sabihin mo na lang 'yong sinabi mo noon kasi wala sila dito so that they can respond correctly and accurately to your --- well, it might be your misgivings or it might be your doubts. Hindi nila narinig eh, Bot. So kailangan --- you might just repeat it. Anyway, it's for public good. Wala namang problema diyan kung sino ang mali, kung sino ang hindi. There is nobody here who is really correct and nobody here who is totally wrong insofar as public good is concerned. So I would rather that you repeat what you have complained, if it was really a complaint, and you have the floor.

DOLE SECRETARY SILVESTRE BELLO III: Thank you, Mr. President. And with due respect to our medical experts especially the Technical Working Group of the Inter-Agency Task Force, I came up with a report, Mr. President, about the heavy burden that the new protocol has on our resources.

Ang sinasabi ko nga, Mr. President, from the record of the IATF, NTF, TGROF, One-Stop Shop, 'yong COVID-19 testing positivity rate of returning overseas Filipinos for 2020 is only 2.07 percent. Ngayon, under 2021, Mr. President, the current quarantine protocol of 7 to 9 days stay of OFWs in hotel quarantine facilities, the COVID-19 testing positivity rate is only 1.5 percent.

Kaya po kami nakikiusap sana, Mr. President, na kung maaari we go back to the original protocol noon na pagdating nung ano nung ating mga OFWs, swab agad sila. Then, they are quarantined for five days while waiting for the result of the PCR test. Eh kapag negative sila, then they can be transported to their final destination kasi, Mr. President, aside from the economic ano consideration, these OFWs have long

missed their homes. Ang tagal nila abroad kumikita, naghihirap para lamang kumita para sa pamilya nila. Ngayon inuwi natin sila and they have to stay for almost 14 days in quarantine. Notwithstanding the fact na after 5 days, they have been found to be negative. Bakit hindi natin sila pauwiin, Mr. President?

And going back to my figures na 2.7 percent lang naman ang nagpapakita na 'yong ating mga overseas Filipinos eh nagpo-positive sila. Kaya iyon po ang pakiusap namin. Of course, I will still adhere to the decision of the IATF, Mr. President. Kaya lang gusto ko pong iparating iyong kalagayan ng ating mga OFW. Talagang hirap na hirap sila, Mr. President. They are crying.

Itong cellphone ko, Mr. President, no less than 3 to 500 text messages I receive from them everyday na "Kailan kami uuwi?" "Ang tagal naman ng resulta ng PCR." Ganoon, Mr. President, and we cannot close our eyes to the miseries of our OFWs. Kaya iyon pakiusap lang naman, Mr. President. Kung puwede naman, kung puwede lang. Kung hindi naman, then we still submit to the decision of the IATF, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: Okay, is that all? Iyon na 'yon, Bot? Iyon naman talaga ang sinabi mo noon. It's just the same eh.

So I'd like to call si --- before our government members of the panel --- I'd like to call Dr. Edsel Maurice Salvaña. Sir, can you enlighten this --- enlighten us on this?

DR. EDEL MAURICE SALVAÑA: Yes, thank you, Mr. President. Good afternoon to all the members of the IATF and the resource persons. I am --- I completely understand and commiserate with Secretary Bello that this is really something that is a difficult situation, especially quarantine. Ako po last year, nag-quarantine rin po ako and it was really the longest few days of my life na separated from the family. So I understand the personal impact of this po.

However, we know po that COVID, especially the variants of concern have come into the country through the different ano po --- through returning travelers po. And this is why it is really essential that we have some sort of control to prevent the entry of these variants of concern. *[Do I have my slides po? Can I ask the Secretary to share my slides po?]*

While we are waiting, Mr. President, I think that everybody naman is cognizant of the fact that the quarantine has already, you know, it really has an impact. But what our proposed solution po is actually there is data that we can shorten quarantine from 14 days to 10 days provided that the person remains asymptomatic during that whole time.

The second point that we will make po once I have my slides is also that the testing kasi, ang timing po ng testing is really the problem. If the --- if somebody gets infected in transit, on the plane, 'pag tinest niyo po siya pagdating hindi pa po magpo-positive 'yan. It usually takes three to five days for the person to turn positive on PCR. And so that's why po 'yong ginawa natin is we test on the fifth day.

But based on the Department of Health data, in fact, even after the fifth day, there are still about 40 percent of people who still test positive on the seventh day po of arrival. So our proposed solution po kasi is that the testing, even on the 5th day, will still not pick up everyone. So it is either we test on the seventh day or we completely do away with the testing but make sure that we quarantine everybody until the 10th day po. And this can be done in facility, but again it is very expensive or we can do this at home as long as the LGUs can supervise strictly everyday. Parang po 'yong sa Singapore na alam po nila kung lumalabas 'yong tao o hindi para sigurado po na hindi sila maka --- hindi sila maka-spread ng COVID because that is really the biggest concern. If that somebody comes in with a variant of concern and transmit it to the community, which has already happened in Pasay, magkakalat po talaga and magse-search po tayong ulit.

Test on arrival po, tapos if negative, complete 14 days isolation at home or at the LGU. And then noong December 2020 po when we met with you po sa Malacañang because of the variant, ang ginawa po natin 14 days facility-based quarantine and we tested on the fifth day.

And then earlier this year, in February, we shifted to the five-day facility quarantine with testing on the fifth day and kung negative, nire-release po, with the stipulation that the LGU continue to make sure that they quarantine to complete 14 days po.

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So ito po 'yong advantage noong dati before December mabilis po siya kasi testing on arrival and of course it's less costly. The disadvantage is that because kung nahawa ka ng virus in the plane hindi pa magpo-positive 'yong test mo and if we release you, then magsa --- ikakalat mo po 'yong virus in your LGU if they are not very good at ensuring na na-quarantine po kayo ng 14 days. So nasa handoff po ito from the airport to the LGU na nagkakaroon ng problema.

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And then 'yong from December 2020 to February 2021, ito po actually was ideal because we really kept people in facilities for 14 days. And halos nakita niyo naman po wala tayong naging holiday surge. We were able to control the variants up to February.

So your ano po, 'yong --- 'yong inutos niyo po ito na two weeks na facility-based quarantine, this was the most efficient way of controlling the entry. The problem is po it's very expensive and was not sustainable and that is why we changed it in February.

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And when we changed it in February, the stipulation was five days and then test, and then the LGU should strictly monitor the completion of quarantine. And the advantage of this was less expensive and the testing on the fifth day is better than testing on arrival kasi again if you test on arrival, baka nagtatago pa 'yong virus, hindi pa po siya magpo-positive.

Pero disadvantage as Sec. Bello has already said, this is still very expensive and now that we have seen na even up to the seventh day puwede pa silang mag-test positive sa seventh day rather than the fifth day, so may nami-miss pa rin po. And of course, we did have some lapses kaya po kasama rin po doon sa ating surge ngayon nakita po natin kumalat nang kaunti 'yong variants of concern.

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And so 'yong --- just some definitions po. When we talk about true and false positives, 'yong 'pag nag-positive po sa PCR, almost always tunay po 'yan. The only question is whether nakakahawa siya or naka-recover na siya.

And then we can distinguish this naman as long as we look at the history of the traveler, kung nagkaroon na siya ng symptoms, most likely nawawala na 'yon. Pero kung nagsisimula pa lang 'yong symptoms niya that is a real positive. We can distinguish that po.

So true posi --- false positive is very rare. So hindi po namin iniisip 'yon masyado. If somebody tests positive, the safest action po talaga is to isolate, especially kung may variants of concern tayo kasi nakita niyo naman kahit 'yong nangyari sa Benguet, isa lang 'yong makalusot catastrophic po talaga.

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This is --- this really just shows po 'yong rate of RT-PCR result. If you notice, wala pong 100 percent diyan. And that is why we say that testing is optional kasi even if you test someone who is symptomatic, there is still a possibility na magne-negative pa rin 'yong test.

And so this is why it is --- we say that testing is optional for as long as we can complete the 10 days quarantine kasi 'yon po 'yong mas sigurado to say na hindi nakakahawa ang isang tao rather than testing on the first day, on the fifth day or on the seventh day.

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This is --- this just shows that period na nagpo-positive po 'yong virus at kung kailan po siya nakakahawa.

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So ito po 'yong proposed changes, as we have already mentioned, we can shorten the duration of quarantine from 14 days, if there are no symptoms to the end of 10 days, basta walang symptoms we can do it 10 days.

Testing is optional unless somebody is symptomatic. If we are going to test someone who does not have symptoms, it should be done on the seventh day. Ideally pa rin facility-based quarantine but we recognize that this is very expensive. If for LGU home quarantine, as long as it can be assured dapat daily po and strict compliance at home and dapat set up po talaga 'yong house. And then any positive test will be reviewed but safest to assume it is still contagious and we need to complete isolation.

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So there are two options that we are talking about: One is strict facility quarantine and selective testing. So we want everyone to get isolated for 10 days but you can --- optional po 'yong 7th day testing. Kahit walang testing, 'pag nakumpleto 'yong 10 days na walang symptoms, we can release them po.

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And then option two, if kapos po talaga 'yong funds for facility-based quarantine, we can do strict LGU quarantine. If they are set up at home we can do that; if not, sa TTMF kung puwede and selective testing as mentioned on the 7th day po.

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That's it po. Thank you very much.

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: Ang sunod si... Have I called Dra. Anna Ong-Lim?

DR. ANNA ONG-LIM: Good evening po, Mr. President. The Technical Advisory Group had some preliminary discussions po regarding the current issue and we were thinking that based on the data that we have right now, it's a better option to review the testing protocol, make sure that it can be done at a later --- rather, recommend that it be done at a later time. But that the critical intervention should really be that quarantine should be strictly enforced because whether or not testing is done for as long as quarantine can be imposed, then we continue to keep our border safe. So 'yon pong nuances no'n, when the test is best done will actually be moot kung mai-impose po natin nang maayos 'yong quarantine from end to end.

Sir, I mentioned po that the recommendation that the TAG worked on as it met prior to this briefing was actually to propose that it's more critical to focus on quarantine measures because this will ensure that any entry of variants from travelers can be better controlled.

This is really coming from the fact that tests always have a false negative rate and if we really want to secure our borders, then the only way to go is to implement quarantine strictly. Well, preferably for 14 days but at the minimum at least for 10 days po.

And then 'yong testing can actually be something that we will forgo kung mai-implement po natin 'yong sampung araw at kung ano man po 'yong mga savings na mage-generate kahit --- dahil hindi na po tayo magte-test, puwede naman po sigurong maipasok naman doon po sa ating quarantine program if you feel that that's something that will help po.

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: I would call next is Dra. Marissa Alejandria, the member of the TAG for COVID-19 sa Task Force.

DR. MARISSA ALEJANDRIA: Good afternoon, Mr. President ---

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: Good afternoon, ma'am.

DR. ALEJANDRIA: Good afternoon, Secretary Bello. Yes. I appreciate and understand the physical, mental, and emotional burden, plus the financial burden 'no economic burden brought about by our quarantine policy.

However, we recognize also that the quarantine is really one way to prevent the spread of the virus and considering that this virus has a pre-symptomatic 'yong --- may tinatawag tayong phase na kahit wala pang symptom, puwede na siyang makahawa kaya that is the basis po for the 14 days. Iyong incubation period is five to 14 days. So median of five to seven days. Ang pinakainfectious period is 'yong first week: five to seven days. And that was the basis of testing at the fifth day.

But as mentioned by Dr. Salvaña and ---we looked for new data 'no, so there is data from CDC and they did modeling studies also that the --- we can reduce the quarantine period to 10 days 'no from 14 days without testing and the residual 'no transmission risk is just about one percent 'no. It can go down to .1 to 10 percent.

So iyon 'yong parang compromise or it's a good compromise in the sense that we reduce the duration of the period of quarantine with minimal effect on the number of infections that we may miss out so just for as long as they remain asymptomatic without symptoms and they will complete the quarantine period 'no in the LGU, at home, or at the temp --- quarantine facilities with strict implementation and monitoring po.

So we --- the TAG experts now we concur that we can relax the 14 days to 10 days without testing as long as they remain asymptomatic and monitoring is strictly implemented. At any period that the traveler or the overseas Filipino worker gets symptoms during the 10-day, then testing should be done. So the system should be in place 'no to be able to isolate once they get symptoms and they get tested. And then that's the policy that we can adopt if we are to --- considering that the --- taking into consideration the economic burden, the physical, emotional burden that the 14-day quarantine is imposing.

Thank you po.

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: So doktora, maitanong ko lang ho sa inyo. So the 10 days is the barest minimum?

DR. ALEJANDRIA: Opo.

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: It cannot go... Pinakaano na 'yan ho? Ay okay.

DR. ALEJANDRIA: Ten days po without testing. May isang scenario, if you want to test, test at seven days. Iyong first week kasi talaga po 'yong pinakahighest possibility that you will develop symptoms.

So test at seven days and then wait for the result. If negative, then pwede nang ma-release. So mababawasan siguro from 10 to depende on how fast the turnaround time of the result is. Go down to eight days, nine days 'no but with testing. If we want testing. But it has to be at the seventh day. Iyon. That's the other scenario.

Siguro iko-costing 'yon 'no. How much is the cost of the test and the --- kung mabawasan 'yong 10 days ng nine days, eight days 'no if you have a negative result. So the quarantine period should not go below seven days. So naglalaro lang po sa seven to 10 days kung maglalagay tayo ng testing para mabawasan 'yong ngayon.

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: Bot, Secretary Bello, do you have any question?

SEC. BELLO: No more, Mr. President. I think Secretary Galvez and Secretary Año already joined me.

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: It is clear that really the medical guys would really go for the strictest measure. As a matter of fact, they are not --- from what I sense is that they are not ready to move an inch backward.

To them, the paramount interest... You know, we were discussing here about the expense of government. And you would notice that they never mentioned about money except that they are really insisting to the strictest measures to protect our borders nga. So let us... That would be a good discussion after this meeting.

Do you still have anything to say, Dra. Ong?

DR. ONG-LIM: Wala na po. Thank you po, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: Salamat po ha. Then we ---

SEC. BELLO: Pero, Mr. President, I'll go back to the offer of Dr. Salvaña and --- *[Tumatawa si Doctor.]* si Dra. Alejandria na they agreed to lower from 14 to nine. So I think we can settle for that until we come up with our position before the IATF, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: Well, unless also there is something or more than just what I am hearing now and previously, I must also be convinced that it is really... Medyo ano ako, I'm --- I'm quite not comfortable with the relaxation that's being brought about --- being bruited now.

Ako, medyo ano ako, Bot. So let us see.

DR. SALVAÑA: Mr. President?

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: Maybe we would be more educated if we hear Dra. Cynthia Palmes-Saloma baka malinawan tayo. We can agree or disagree. Me, I seem to side with the doctors because I am a frustrated doctor and that's understandable.

[laughter] Go ahead.

DR. CYNTHIA PALMES-SALOMA: Hello po, Mr. President. Okay po. Gusto ko pong sang-ayunan 'yong sinasabi kanina ni Dr. Anna Ong-Lim na *[inaudible]* test at the time of arrival.

So kung magte-test tayo sa time of arrival, pwede rin pong mag-false negative 'yon, 'di ba? Kung mag-test naman po tayo on the fifth day or on the seventh day, mas maganda 'yong chances na ma-catch natin.

But at the very least po, Mr. President, we really have to enforce 'yong strict quarantine 'no. It could be 10 days. The most ideal is 14 days. In other countries, they even do it for 21 days. So iyon po 'yong nakikita natin.

At sa pag-aaral po natin, Mr. President, based on genomic sequences, may isa lang na makalusot, may isa lang na makalusot, nanganak siya nang marami --- if you see the genetic tree po ng virus, may isa lang makalusot, lima, ang lima manganak nang manganak nang manganak.

At iyan po 'yong nakikita natin dito sa mga B.1.1.7, itong UK variant at saka itong mga South African variant. Kung titingnan po natin 'yung roots nila, isa, dalawa lang makalusot, manganak na sila nang manganak.

At alam din po natin na siyempre nanggaling din po kung titingnan natin sa tree, nanggaling din naman sila sa ating borders 'no. So may mga weakness 'yong ating borders na gusto po nating pagbutihin pa kaya naman po kailangan talaga 'yong quarantine measures.

Alam niyo naman, President, kung iuwi natin sila sa mga bahay, alam mo naman tayong mga Pilipino, exuberant. Ang hirap-hirap talaga, magcha-chat talaga sa neighbor, mga kapatid, mga kaibigan.

So kailangan din po na kahit doon, pauwiin man sila sa bahay nila o LGU man sila, we really need to enforce po 'yong strict quarantine. Iyon lang po talaga 'yong ating panlaban dito.

Salamat po.

PRESIDENT DUTERTE: Ang masabi ko, ma'am, is actually kung 'yong protocol sa bahay hindi nasusunod 'yan. In a scale of one to 10, you may have a compliance of only about four. Hindi talaga nasusunod 'yan. So thank you for your --- educating us more of the dangers of COVID-19.

Wala na bang iba? Alam mo si Be --- this meeting was called because of the complaint of --- not really the complaint, but the misgivings of Secretary Bello of the dwindling funds of the OFW na which should only be spent for their care and needs.

So 'yon ang na... At least naintindihan ninyo kung bakit mga may --- there are officials in government which are taking the other view or the extreme measure or would want to paddle in the middle of the river. Maintindihan na ninyo ngayon at least kung bakit.

So nakikita niyo naman lumiliit na 'yong ano pera. He's raising the alarm actually. He's raising the alarm of the possibility of having no more funds to take care of this kind of situation that we are in now.

Kung wala na ho kayong tanong, I'd like to ask the guys here, the Cabinet members, wala na ba kayong tanong? Si Senator Bong, ikaw man 'yong sa Health. You are the chairman of the Health Committee sa Senate. Kung wala ka nang maitanong, we would, well, give our profuse thanks to the panel, to Dr. Salvaña, Alexandria, Ong-Lim, and Palmes-Saloma for your kind presence and your time with us, the pleasure of your company. And thank you for educating us.

I cannot --- I cannot compromise --- there is no compromise here. Hindi ako magko-compromise. So --- just an off the cuff statement before I --- we make the final decision here. I cannot --- I am not ready for a compromise here of about --- lalo na ngayon.

Iyong ibang sakit siguro, puwede pa 'yong mga rabies-rabies diyan. Pero ito, eh talagang as you have said, it's a "dapo dito, dapo doon." And then you have the exponential problem now of how to take care of the Filipinos.

Maraming salamat po sa inyo at sana ma --- we can have you at --- we can call you again to share with us some things that we do not know because we are not doctors. Thank you.

Salamat. *[applause]*

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