Flight ban eased during quarantine

The government has allowed Filipinos and foreigners to fly out of the Philippines any time during a 30-day “enhanced” community quarantine imposed on Luzon, lifting the 72-hour period given them to take their flights. Restrictions, including outright bans and mandatory quarantines, will remain for travelers coming from Iran, Italy, China, Hong Kong, Macau and parts of South Korea. —STORY BY THE INQUIRER STAFF

By Leila B. Salaverria and Jerome Aning
@Team_Inquirer

The government has lifted a 72-hour window it had given Filipinos and foreigners to fly out of the Philippines as part of more stringent measures to contain the coronavirus after President Duterte imposed a one-month “enhanced” community quarantine on Luzon, the Philippines’ largest island.

All overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), balikbayan and foreigners are now allowed to fly out of Luzon airports at any time during the 30-day quarantine period following the modification of the policy on foreign travel made by the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infections Disease (IATF-EID), Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nogroales announced on Tuesday night.

Nogroales, who is also spokesperson for the IATF-EID, however, said Filipino tourists would be barred from leaving the country.

The 72-hour period, which was announced on Sunday, was to end at 11:59 p.m. on Thursday. The announcement was followed in the next two days by numerous rebookings by Filipinos, balikbayan and foreigners who had swamped the ticket offices of several airlines, some angered by the delays in the rescheduling of their flights and the high rebooking fees.

“There was some confusion with other government agencies yesterday, but we discussed this with the DOT and the IATF-EID, and we were able to clarify that OFWs are indeed allowed to travel,” Immigration Commissioner Jaime Morente said on Wednesday.

The Department of Tourism (DOT) on Wednesday welcomed the decision to lift the 72-hour window.

This would give more time for the DOT and other government agencies to arrange for transportation and flights from the provinces, according to Tourism Secretary Bernadette Romulo-Puyat.

Stranded tourists

The DOT has created a tourism airport team to provide 24-hour service to stranded tourists at Ninoy Aquino International Airport (Naia) and other airports, and provide assistance in arranging flights, transportation, meals and accommodation.

The Manila International Airport Authority (MIAA), which operates Naia, said it had authorized its accredited taxis to drive passengers to or from the airport, but it advised drivers to avoid Edsa, according to MIAA public affairs chief Connie Bungag.

The IATF-EID said the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration might also provide transportation for OFWs leaving for abroad.

Under the new foreign travel rules, travelers may head to the airport within 24 hours of their scheduled departure. They may be accompanied only by one person who must carry a copy of the traveler’s e-ticket or itinerary on the way to the airport and back.

Travelers from abroad are allowed entry into the country subject to strict immigration and quarantine protocols. But those coming from Italy and Iran must present medical certificates validated by their governments that they were in good health not more than 48 hours before their flight to the Philippines.

Returning Filipinos

Filipinos abroad, including their foreign spouses and children, and other permanent residents may return to the Philip-
of the country had stranded about 100 people at Clark International Airport (CRK) since Sunday after the cities of Cebu and Puerto Princesa refused to receive domestic flights from Clark last week.

The passengers insisted on staying at the airport lobby or at waiting areas than at a hall near the health center of Clark Development Corp., about 5 kilometers away, said Teri Flores, corporate communications chief of Lipad, the consortium that operates CRK.

CRK would be closed to local flights but would accommodate international flights starting Thursday, she said.

Domestic flights had been suspended since Sunday, stranding many passengers.

Lipad has been coordinating with representatives of local airlines, local governments, the DOT and Red Cross to help stranded passengers, Flores said.

On Wednesday, only Air Asia left for Tacloban City. Cebu Pacific and Philippine Airlines had canceled all their domestic flights.

Cebu Pacific canceled all its domestic flights beginning Tuesday and mounted its last international flights on Wednesday.

As of Wednesday afternoon, Philippine Airlines had no advisory on whether it would be mounting new international flights.

Departing Filipinos

Philippine carriers are having difficulty mounting international flights due to travel bans imposed by some countries. Among countries that barred Filipino travelers are Canada, Kuwait and Qatar. Saudi Arabia continues to accept Filipino and Indian medical workers. Australia, New Zealand, Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia require travelers from the Philippines to undergo a 14-day quarantine upon arrival.

The DOT said it was coordinating with local governments and the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines to arrange “sweeper” or special domestic flights to fly foreign tourists stranded in Palawan, Siquijor and Boracay to Naga.

Nagores said that under the new BATF/ED guidelines, the only hotels that would be allowed to operate during the quarantine were those with guests who have existing booking accommodations as of March 17, 2020, or guests with existing long-term leases, and employees from exempted establishments.

No new hotel bookings would be allowed and hotel operations would be limited to providing basic lodging to guests, he said.

—WITH REPORTS FROM TINA G. SANTOS, KRIXIA SUBING-SUBING AND TONETTE OREJAS INQ