PH still coronavirus-free: DOH

BY JOCELYN MONTEMAYOR

HEALTH Secretary Francisco Duque III yesterday said there is still no confirmed case of the novel coronavirus (nCoV) in the Philippines even as the government kept a close eye on 11 foreigners who are in the country with a travel history to Wuhan, China, where the virus is believed to have originated.

At the same time, Duque, in a briefing in Malacanang, urged the public to be more discerning of the information they receive and avoid being a party to an “infodemic” or spreading false or fake information about the nCoV and other possible diseases.

Duque said the 11 foreigners are among 39 who had shown signs of coronavirus-related health events like the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) and the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV). He said they include several Chinese, a Brazilian, a German and an American.

Duque said the foreigners, identified as persons under investigations (PUIs), are either located in isolated areas or are in Metro Manila, Mimaropa, Western Visayas, Eastern Visayas, Central Visayas and Northern Mindanao.

The Health Department reported that several of the 11 PUIs were either due for discharge or were supposed to be discharged during the weekend after testing negative for the nCoV, including a five-year-old boy whose samples sent to the Victorian Infectious Diseases Reference Laboratory tested negative.

As of yesterday, three of the 11 have been discharged, according to DOH Epidemiology Bureau head Dr. Chito Avelino.

“And hopefully, in the days to come, we will be able to discharge more,” Avelino said, adding the three have been cleared by laboratory tests.

The Manila Health Department said a 27-year-old Chinese working in a gaming firm who was confined at the Metropolitan Hospital in Bonoado last Jan. 25 after manifesting symptoms of the virus has tested negative. He arrived in the country last Jan. 8.

“As per investigation, the patient had fever and cough but negative on history of travel to Wuhan, China and no history of exposure to a host or positive case,” Dr. Arnold Pagan, Manila City Health officer, said, adding as of yesterday the patient no longer had fever.

Duque said the public should exercise self-protection measures like proper-hand washing, coughing etiquette, cooking food thoroughly, avoiding eating raw meat and delicacies, and consuming enough water.

He admitted the country does not have the capabilities to test and confirm the nCoV cases and instead send samples to Australia for further tests. He said experts from Japan are set to arrive soon to help efforts to identify those affected by the virus.

Duque urged everyone to avoid
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being part of an “infodemic,” saying the spread of false information about the nCoV is more dangerous as it could cause panic, among others.

“Let’s not be party to the viral spread of infodemic, to the viral spread of false, fake news because this will not do any good,” he said, adding there is no cause for discrimination against any nationality, person or place.

Duque said the DOH and the Department of Foreign Affairs are set to discuss whether there is a need to issue a travel ban to areas affected by the nCoV or if there is a need to repatriate Filipinos staying in affected countries.

He also said there is no need at present to suspend classes due to the nCoV scare.

Some Filipino-Chinese schools suspended classes yesterday because some of their students and instructors travelled or were in contact with persons who travelled or came from or went to China, especially Wuhan.

The schools included the Hope Christian High School, Pace Academy, Saint Jude Catholic School, Stephen’s High School, Uno High School, Philippine Academy of Sakya and the Chiang Kai Shek College.

“In so far as DOH is concerned, we’re not aware of the reasons why they decided to suspend classes. There really is no need as of now,” Duque said.

Education Secretary Leonor Briones said while private schools have a “greater degree of autonomy” than public schools when it comes to suspending classes, these institutions should conduct make-up classes.

LOOKING AFTER OFWS

The DFA said the Philippine Consulate in Shanghai is in touch with members of the Filipino community in Wuhan and also advised Filipinos overseas to take necessary precautions and follow the advice of local health authorities in their areas.

DFA Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs Sarah Lou Arriola said around 150 Filipinos are in Wuhan, which was locked down by Chinese authorities as part of effort to prevent the spread of the dreaded virus.

The Philippine Consulate General in Hong Kong earlier issued an advisory urging Filipinos in the former British colony to cooperate with the Hong Kong government, which has raised its response level to the highest “emergency response level.”

The consulate said Filipinos in Hong Kong who will require assistance should call the consulate through its hotline number +85291554023. There are about 238,000 Filipinos living and working in Hong Kong.

GOVT BLAMED

Agusan del Norte Rep. Lawrence Fortun blamed the government for allowing flights from Wuhan, China to land in the country amid the outbreak of the nCoV.

“Why were we still allowing flights from Wuhan to land in the Philippines in the first place? Why did we have to wait for their (China’s) announcement of lockdown before deciding to prohibit entry of flights coming from a place already confirmed to be the epicenter of the outbreak of a fatal virus that has turned epidemic?” the administration lawmaker said in a statement.

“And now, we have to send at least 500 travelers back? And that is not even a decision reached by our authorities, but the airlines,” Fortun added.

Fortun said the government should not only focus on Wuhan “since the Chinese government itself has restricted travels not only to and from Wuhan but other cities and provinces as well.

“When circumstances already warrant, we need not wait for another announcement of lockdown before considering bans of flights from these places,” he said.

Fortun warned officials that they need to be on their toes now that the country has more visitors from China and other East Asian countries on top of the many Chinese working in POGOs (Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators).

“Public health and safety dictate the country must be protected with very strict implementation of inviolable protocols,” he said.

“The Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines, the various airport agencies, and the DOH must not leave anything to chance. Leave no stone unturned, lest we forget (1918).” – With Gerard Naval, Ashqi Hachero, Wendell Vigilia, and Noel Talacay