Eciqa quarantine site for repatriates

By MJ Blancaflor and Macon Ramos-Araneta

THE first batch of Filipino repatriates from the epicenter of the novel coronavirus (nCoV) outbreak in China are scheduled to arrive in the Philippines on Saturday, Malacañang said on Wednesday.

Presidential Spokesperson Salvador Panelo said the Filipinos will be arriving at the Clark Airport in Pampanga and transported to Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija to undergo the mandatory 14-day quarantine.

He said Health Secretary Francisco Duque III was instructed by President Rodrigo Duterte to go to the site to properly address the people affected.

“The arrival of the initial batch of repatriated Filipinos will be on Saturday at the Clark Airport and transportation to Fort Magsaysay has already been prepared,” Panelo said in a statement a day after Duterte presided over a Cabinet meeting.

About 42 Filipinos in Hubei province, mostly from the city of Wuhan, have expressed a desire to return home amid the nCoV outbreak, the Department of Foreign Affairs said.

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There are a total of 300 Filipinos in Hubei. Some 150 of the Filipinos are in Wuhan and the rest are from outside the city but within the province, the DFA said.

The Fort Magsaysay Drug Rehabilitation Center in Nueva Ecija can accommodate 10,000 individuals.

Aside from Fort Magsaysay, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said the government is also eyeing the naval station at Caballo Island off Cavite province as a possible quarantine area for returning Filipino workers.

Panelo assured the public that all safeguards against the spread of the virus are in place.

The Bureau of Immigration has implemented the directives of the President such as the general restriction of entry of individuals coming from China and its special administrative regions—Hong Kong and Macau, he said.

Duque will personally welcome Filipinos repatriated from Wuhan, China, when they arrive at the Clark International Airport on Saturday, the Palace said.

The first batch of 42 Filipinos who have requested to be repatriated will undergo mandatory quarantine at the Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija—a facility that can accommodate up to 10,000 people, Panelo said.

Duque will supervise and manage the receiving of repatriated Filipinos to make sure all medical protocols will be implemented, Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nogales told reporters.

The President said he wants to be there to welcome the repatriated Filipinos from Wuhan, but the Presidential Security Group opposes such a move as it could compromise the Chief Executive’s safety.

There are 295,047 Filipinos in China, government data show. About 150 are in Wuhan City, where initial cases of the novel coronavirus were reported last year.

Nogales also allayed concerns of residents living around Fort Magsaysay that the virus will spread to the rest of the province from there.

President Duterte earlier threatened to expropriate the facility that is also used for drug rehabilitation after Nueva Ecija Gov. Aurelio Umali said he was against the idea of using the facility to quarantine Filipinos coming from China.

On Tuesday night’s Cabinet meeting, President Duterte also threatened to charge local officials who will not follow the orders of the national government in relation to nCoV.

Despite being roundly criticized for a “failure of leadership,” Duque still enjoyed the President’s confidence, Nogales said.

“Failure of leadership is a very unfair allegation. Maybe there are lapses, but that will be rectified,” Nogales said.

In related developments:
- The Department of Labor and Employment urged all overseas Filipino workers to report to hospitals and to the Philippine Overseas Labor Offices if they show symptoms of the novel coronavirus. Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III also urged Filipinos working abroad to monitor advisories issued by their host government for information and guidance.