DOH SETS PURCHASE OF ANTI-VIRAL DRUG FROM CHINA

By Macon Ramos-Araneta and Rey E. Requejo

AS THE number of patients under investigation continues to fall, Health Secretary Francisco Duque III said Tuesday they intend to buy the first approved antiviral drug to treat the new coronavirus.

"Yes, once it has been cleared by the Food and Drug Administration," Duque said in a text message in response to the query about the Department of Health's plan to procure the drug.

The Japanese Health Ministry imposed the quarantine after it discovered that a man who disembarked in Hong Kong on Jan. 23 had tested positive for the coronavirus.

An additional 88 people have tested positive for COVID-19, the Japanese health ministry said Tuesday.

The new cases came from a total of 681 fresh results, the ministry said, taking the total number of positive cases on the Diamond Princess to 542.

All passengers and crew on board the ship, which has now been tested, are being moved to evacuate their citizens from the boat.

South Korea announced the latest to announce it would remove its citizens from the Diamond Princess, where more than 400 people have tested positive for COVID-19.

Japan has faced criticism for its handling of the situation, with dozens of new infections detected almost daily since the ship arrived in early February.

But it has defended its approach and Health Minister Katsunobu Kato insisted again Tuesday that passengers who tested negative will be allowed to leave the ship from Wednesday.

"We have done tests for everyone (on the ship)," he told reporters.

"Some results have already come out, and for those whose test results are already clear, we are working to prepare disembarkation from the 14th," he said.

Kato said the process would last two or three days.

But those who have close contact with people who have tested positive will have their quarantine reset to the date of their last contact with an infected person.

Crew are also expected to remain to observe another quarantine period after the last passengers leave the ship.

So far, the United States, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong and now South Korea have said they will evacuate their citizens from the ship.

South Korea will send a presidential aircraft on Tuesday to fly back four nationals and one Japanese spouse, an official told reporters.

There are 14 South Koreans on board in total, but the other 10 have declined to be evacuated from the ship because they live in Japan, the Yonhap news agency reported.

Early Monday, more than 300 Americans were evacuated from the ship, among them over a dozen who have tested positive for the virus.

The American, like citizens from other countries being evacuated from the ship, will have to undergo another 14-day quarantine.

Canada said Tuesday that it had "secured a chartered flight to repatriate Canadians on board the cruise ship" but would not give the number or when the process would take place.

There were 536 Canadians on board the ship, with 32 already tested positive for the virus.

While foreign governments have announced their decision to remove citizens as an attempt to reduce the burden on Japanese authorities, many have interpreted the evacuations as criticism of Tokyo's handling of the situation.

The US and Australia have said citizens that if they decline repatriation and an additional 14-day quarantine, they will not be allowed home for at least two weeks, suggesting they do not believe the ship-based quarantine has worked.

At least 454 people on the ship have so far tested positive for the virus and been removed to local hospitals for treatment.

Japan has also confirmed at least 52 cases domestically, including many involving people with no history of recent travel to China.

Authorities have said the virus is being transmitted locally now, and have asked citizens to avoid crowds and non-essential gatherings.

On Monday, the German team of the Tokyo Marathon, which had been expected to attract some 36,000 runners, was canceled. Only elite athletes will now be able to take part.

The public celebration for Emperor Naruhito's birthday has also been scrapped over virus fears.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines said Sunday church activities will continue despite virus fears.

"This coming Holy Week, there is no need to cancel masses and other activities for the season as we have implemented several measures," said CBCP vice president, Cabucan Bishop Pablo Virgilio David, in an interview over Church-run Radio Veritas.

Instead of marking Good Friday with a cross using ashes on Ash Wednesday, David said they recommended that these will only be sprinkled over their heads.

Ash Wednesday, which falls on Feb. 26 this year, marks the start of the 40-day Lenten season.

Churches were advised not to put holy water at their entrances. The faithful can just wait for the priest to sprinkle holy water.

Earlier, the Department of Health and the Archdiocese of Singapore suspended church activities such as the blessing of ashes due to the threat of COVID-19.

Earlier, the CBCP ordered priests to hand out communion wafers instead of placing them into the mouths of worshippers.

It also discouraged the faithful from holding baptisms while singing "Our Father" and shaking hands during the sign of the cross.