PH eases travel ban for OFWs

Workers bound for HK, Macau gain reprieve, says task force

By Rey E. Requejo, Macon Ramos-Araneta and Joel E. Zurbano

Filipinos with jobs in Hong Kong and Macau can now go back to work as they have been exempted from the outbound travel ban on China and its two special administrative regions, the Department of Foreign Affairs said Tuesday.

Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Brigido Duyao said decision was reached during a meeting of the Philippines’ Inter-agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases.

Thousands of Filipino workers bound for Hong Kong and Macau were barred from leaving the country after President Rodrigo Duterte imposed a travel ban to China and its special administrative regions on Feb. 2 as a result of an outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), which has killed close to 1,900 people, mostly in China.

The government offered the stranded workers P10,000 cash aid each and provided them dormitories and food.

There are over 210,000 Filipinos working in Hong Kong and 32,000 working in Macau.

Workers who travel to Hong Kong and Macau will need to sign a declaration signifying their knowledge and understanding of the risks involved.

Senate President Pro Tempore Ralph Recto described the decision to allow Filipinos to return to work in Hong Kong and Macau as a step in the right direction.

He said this will save the jobs of thousands of Filipinos who were vacating in their host country when their government imposed a travel ban to those two places.

“Our compatriots in Hong Kong and Macau form one powerhouse when it comes to sending money to their loved ones back home,” said Recto, who pointed out a quarter of a million of them remitted close to P100 billion from 2018 to 2019.

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Meanwhile, the infectious diseases task force also declared that all Filipino passengers and crew of all flight crews who

request repatriation will be accommodated in accordance with the guidelines set by the Department of Health.

Health Secretary Francisco Duque III said his department will follow strict infection control and quarantine procedures to ensure the safety of the seafarers and health workers who will man the quarantine facilities.

Immigration Commissioner Jaime Morente said the lifting of the travel ban on Filipino workers going to Hong Kong and Macau is an expansion of an earlier directive allowing members of the diplomatic corps to enter the country. The move also allows the entry of Filipino nationals including their foreign spouses and children.

On Thursday, Manila’s casinos will reopen after authorities there lifted a city-wide two-week closure aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19.

The reopening of the local gaming industry comes after the city reported no new infections in the last two weeks, with the number of confirmed cases at just 10 people.

The former Portuguese colony took the unprecedented step of shutting down almost all of its luxurious entertainment sector earlier in the month, including casinos, nightclubs and many bars.

The vast majority of Macau’s tourists are mainland Chinese travelers, drawn to the city’s casinos.

As the only place in China where casinos are allowed, Macau’s gambling houses account for about 80 percent of government revenue.

But arrivals tanked as the epidemic spread.

Authorities said casinos that don’t want to reopen because of low visitation numbers could apply to extend the closure, but they must be up and running within 30 days.

Macau’s government has been keen to ensure the casinos keep employing staff through the downturn and are trying to avoid lay-offs.

Officials and all gamblers and casino staff must wear face masks.

First found in the city of Wuhan in central China, the new coronavirus has infected over 72,000 people on the mainland and 60 in Hong Kong.

It has also taken over 1,000 lives on the mainland and one in Hong Kong. With AFP