Travel ban to Macau, HK lifted partially

BY GERARD NAVAL and ASHazel HACHERO

THE Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) yesterday approved a partial lifting of the travel ban to Macau and Hong Kong despite the threat of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

“The task force agreed to authorize travel to Hong Kong and Macau for permanent residents of the respective special administrative regions, Filipinos leaving abroad for study, and overseas Filipino workers, provided that the travelers sign a declaration signaling their knowledge and understanding of the risks involved,” said Health Secretary Francisco Duque III, whose department chairs the

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IATF-EID

The task force also decided to expand the coverage of those allowed to enter the Philippines.

Duque said “Filipinos and their foreign spouses or children, and holders of diplomatic visas will now be allowed entry into the country subject to the required 14-day quarantine.”

Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Brigidio Delay said, “OFWs (overseas Filipino workers) returning to work in Hong Kong and Macau have been exempted from the outbound travel ban by the IATF-EID, subject to certain procedural formalities.”

The partial lifting came quicker than the two weeks promised earlier by Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr., in response to appeals from overseas Filipino workers.

Duque said the IATF-EID opted to redefine the exemptions from the travel restrictions based on “thorough risk assessment of the current situation.”

Chief Presidential Legal Counsel Salvador Panelo, concurrent presidential spokesman, said among reasons for the partial lifting is the persistent request of OFWs to lift the travel ban as their employment is put at risk by the prolonged restriction.

The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) said the lifting of the travel ban means that the restriction on the deployment of Filipino workers to Macau and Hong Kong has also been lifted.

“Implementation is upon effectiveness of the lifting (of travel ban),” said POEA Administrator Bernard Olalia.

Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III said a formal resolution from the POEA is no longer necessary for the deployment ban to be lifted.

“There was no resolution on the deployment ban on Hong Kong and Macau as it was the IATF-EID that imposed a travel ban,” said Bello.

The Philippines imposed the travel ban on China and its two special administrative regions on February 2 due to the COVID-19 threat.

This was despite the position of the World Health Organization that no travel restriction is necessary.

OFWs stuck in the country have been asking government to lift the ban on Hong Kong and Macau, saying they might not be able to return to their employers.

A group calling itself #StrandedPH even sent a letter last Friday to the International Court of Justice in the Netherlands to appeal to the Philippine government to allow workers to travel to Hong Kong and Macau so that they could return to their work.

The travel ban covered Mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau when it was imposed on February 2. Taiwan was later included but the ban was lifted following strong criticisms from OFWs and protests from Taipei.

China, specifically Wuhan City in Hubei province, is the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak which has spread to at least 20 countries and regions.

The disease, which was discovered in December last year, has killed at least 1,800 persons, mostly in mainland China, and infected some than 73,000 individuals worldwide. – With Jocelyn Montemayor