500 PINOYS FROM VIRUS-HIT SHIP STAYING AT ATHLETES' VILLAGE

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Health Secretary Francisco Duque III on Thursday said around 500 Filipinos on the coronavirus-wracked cruise ship Diamond Princess in Japan would be repatriated on Sunday.

Duque told reporters that like the 30 repatriates from Wuhan City, in central China, the epicenter of the new coronavirus epidemic, the Filipinos from the cruise ship will be quarantined at Athletes' Village at New Clark City in Capas, Tarlac province.

According to Duque, he and Interior Secretary Eduardo Año have written to the local government of Capas to inform it of the “unanimous decision” of the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases to again
use Athletes' Village as quarantine for the repatriates from the Diamond Princess.

Capas local officials earlier protested the use of New Clark City for the Wuhan repatriates, saying the virus might spread in the town and infect their constituents. They said they weren't consulted on quarantining the repatriates at Athletes Village.

Gov't prerogative

Despite the huge number of repatriates this time, resistance isn't expected. Duque, who heads the interagency task force, stressed that it's the national government's prerogative to decide which place to use as quarantine.

"The President himself said during the meeting with the local chief executives on Monday last week that it will be the national government in the end which will make the decision with regard to the repatriation of our compatriots," Duque said.

Citing information relayed by Foreign Undersecretary Brigido Dulay, Duque said the tentative number of repatriates was 500. He said most of the more than 100 crew members who earlier declined repatriation may have had "a change of heart."

The government tentatively set the repatriation for March 5 then moved it up to Feb. 25. But because of developments in Yokohama, where the ship is docked, adjustments had to be made for the trip to be done two days early.

"The Japanese government has decided to close down the ship. This is not for sure yet because we are getting this information from Dulay. But we really have to bring them out as soon as possible," Duque said.

The 14-day quarantine of the more than 3,500 passengers and crew of the ship ended on Wednesday. Of those aboard the vessel, 538 are Filipinos, all but seven are crew members.

So far, 41 Filipinos have tested positive for the virus. The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) said on Wednesday that the infected Filipinos were in hospitals in and around metropolitan Tokyo receiving treatment.

With more than 620 confirmed cases aboard, the Diamond Princess had the biggest new coronavirus cluster outside mainland China.

Date explained

Duque was reported earlier as saying the Filipinos from the cruise ship would be repatriated on March 5, although Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. ordered them repatriated immediately.

In a phone interview on Thursday, Duque clarified that

the March 5 repatriation date came from the DFA. He said he wanted the Filipinos taken off the ship immediately because they were likely to be infected, as the vessel, according to health experts, was serving as an incubator for the virus.

"I want them repatriated right away. I don't want them to be exposed to a closed system. It's like a petri dish," he said.

"But the March 5 (repatriation date), that came from DFA," he said.

The information that more than 100 Filipino members of the ship's crew had declined repatriation because they did not want to lose their jobs also came from the DFA, he added.

Reached for comment, Dulay said the repatriation would take place next week.

"As of now the details are still being fleshed out in Tokyo. But we are hoping to repatriate our people early next week," Dulay said in a text message to the Inquirer.

According to Assistant Foreign Secretary Eduardo Menez, "the March 5 date was originally proposed because the crew were supposed to do another 14-day quarantine on the ship."

"But recent information is that the additional quarantine can be done in home countries," Menez told reporters.

The plan

According to interagency task force's plan, the new batch of repatriates, like the group from Wuhan, will arrive at Clark International Airport. Two planes would be used to ferry the Filipinos, with one arriving two hours earlier than the other.

Prior to embarkation, they would be checked for any symptoms of the disease. Only those who are asymptomatic would be allowed to board, while those who show symptoms would have to be treated first in Japan.

On disembarkation, they would again be checked by personnel from the Bureau of Quarantine and if they are symptomatic, they would be taken to any of the 16 hospitals tapped by the Department of Health (DOH) to care for the repatriates during their two-week quarantine.

Those who have tested positive for the virus but have recovered could be taken home, but they would also be quarantined.

The precaution is necessary because much is still unknown about the virus, Duque said.

To date, the DOH has monitored 556 people for the virus. Of these, 133 remain hospitalized, while 420 have been discharged.

The confirmed cases remain three, all of whom are Chinese nationals who traveled to the Philippines. One has died and the other two have recovered and returned to China.