PH to repatriate maids fired in HK due to virus scare

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Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. on Tuesday ordered the repatriation of Filipino maids in Hong Kong who had been reportedly fired due to the new coronavirus scare.

Also on Tuesday, the government eased its ban on travel to South Korea because of the country’s robust efforts to contain the new coronavirus outbreak.

Locsin said he was “deeply disgusted with Hong Kong” after the South China Morning Post reported that dozens of foreign workers were fired in recent weeks because they defied their employers’ order not to go out during their days off, or their employers claimed they had lost their jobs or wanted to leave the city in fear of the new coronavirus outbreak.

“We’ll prepare for their repatriation pronto. Deeply disgusted with HK which begged us to let domestic workers return to work,” he tweeted on Tuesday.

Protection from Hong Kongers

Locsin was referring to his working for the lifting of the travel ban to Hong Kong to allow Filipino migrant workers vacationing in the Philippines to return to their jobs in the Chinese special administrative region in February despite its increasing number of new coronavirus infections now known as COVID-19.

Locsin had also defended Hong Kong’s ability to handle the outbreak, saying Filipino workers who would fall ill would be well taken care of because the city had better hospitals than the Philippines.

“I extracted promise from Chinese ambassador that they’d be given same protection from COVID-19 as HK residents. I should’ve specified ‘from Hong Kongers’,”

Locsin reminded Hong Kong authorities that during the special Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean)-China foreign ministers’ meeting in Vietnam on Feb. 21, he defended China against accusations it mishandled the outbreak.

“When the West turned on China for COVID-19 I stood up for her before the vicious West at the Asean-COVID-19 meeting. I said that I begged my President to let Filipino domestic workers return to their jobs in HK showing my trust in the Chinese city. This I guess is thank you,” Locsin said.

The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) did not respond to requests for details of the repatriation plan.

Ban eased

As of Tuesday, Hong Kong had 100 confirmed coronavirus cases, with two deaths. The cases included two Filipino maids who had already recovered.
Health Secretary Francisco Duque III, head of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases, announced on Tuesday the relaxation of the ban on travel to South Korea to enable Filipinos to return to their jobs there, except in North Gyeongsang province where the infections in the country are concentrated.

As of Tuesday, South Korea has 4,212 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus, including 22 deaths. "The South Korean government has implemented stringent infection control measures to contain the spread of COVID-19," Duque said. "South Korea has also reported a low case fatality rate of only 0.5 percent and the successful containment of local transmission to only certain areas."

Presidential spokesperson Salvador Panelo said Filipinos who would travel to South Korea should first sign waivers stating that they’re aware of the risks of going there.

A health advisory pamphlet will be handed out to them before their departure, Panelo said in a statement.

Duque also said the government would repatriate 148 Filipino tourists and 48 migrant workers from Macau this week. He said the tourists would be brought home on a chartered flight and the workers on a commercial flight.

Earlier, Assistant Health Secretary Maria Rosario Vergeire said the Filipinos from Macau would undergo home quarantine if they were asymptomatic, as their circumstances were different from those of the repatriates from Wuhan, the epicenter of the new coronavirus outbreak in central China, and those of the Filipinos from the coronavirus-wrecked cruise ship Diamond Princess in Japan.

"The Diamond Princess was a special situation. The transmission dynamics were different. They were in a contained place, and we don’t know their circumstances there. There was also sliding exposure, which means they weren’t exposed to the virus at the same time," Vergeire said.

**15 repatriates ailing**

The Department of Health said that as of Tuesday, 15 of the repatriates quarantined in Athletes’ Village at New Clark City in Capas, Tarlac province, had shown symptoms of the disease. Fourteen have tested negative and one is waiting for the results of tests.

The DPA said no Filipinos were among the 1,694 confirmed cases of the disease in Italy.

There are 161,885 Filipinos in Italy as of January, it said. ---WITH REPORTS FROM JOVIC YEE AND JULIE M. AURELIO [INQ]