Gov’t partially lifts travel ban on South Korea

BY CHRISTINA MENDEZ

The government has partially lifted the travel ban imposed on Filipinos who want to tour South Korea, following an assessment of the Interagency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF), presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo said yesterday.

The IATF came out with the decision after the team led by the Department of Health Central Office discussed the circumstances brought by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

“The IATF has approved to allow Filipinos to travel to South Korea, except to the whole of North Gyeongsang province, including Daegu City and Cheongdo county, where the virus outbreak is concentrated,” Panelo said.

Panelo, however, maintained that all Filipinos who intend to visit other parts of South Korea shall execute and sign a declaration, signifying their knowledge and understanding of the risks involved in their trip. A health advisory pamphlet shall likewise be given to them upon their departure.

The government will continue to impose the ban on the entry of foreign nationals from the aforementioned areas into Philippine territory. This was implemented last week following the rapid increase of COVID-19 cases in South Korea.

The government task force, according to Panelo, was guided by the Health Security Risk Assessment Matrix, which evaluates the hazard, exposure and context relative to the risks involved, before the partial lifting of the travel ban was implemented.

“The IATF has also agreed that there are to be no new imposition of travel restrictions or lifting of the same as regards other countries or jurisdictions. The IATF assures that the review concerning travel restrictions and protocols to and from the Philippines shall be regularly conducted by it,” he said.

The Philippine government has imposed travel bans to all Filipinos who want to tour Hong Kong and Macau, but Filipino workers and students are allowed to go there.

Diplomatic officials and their families are also exempted from the travel ban in the affected countries.

Because of the outbreak of the disease in Hubei province in China, the Philippine government has imposed a total travel ban on China, canceling direct flights from and to the country.

Meanwhile, Panelo also announced that the Department of Foreign Affairs is preparing for the repatriation of 148 Filipinos from Macau via a chartered flight, while the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration is arranging to repatriate 48 of its active members there via one commercial flight.

“The IATF, composed of its member agencies, is on top of the situation apropos the COVID-19 and the Office of the President recognizes its concrete efforts in battling the virus as we aim to protect the safety and health of our people,” he said.

No new cases in 4 weeks

During the Cabinet meeting last Monday, Health Secretary Francisco Duque III reported the government’s efforts to contain the spread of the virus in the country, especially to avoid local transmission.

Duque provided updates to the President and the Cabinet, particularly that the Philippines does not have new positive cases of COVID-19 in the last four weeks.

“This means that as of present, the Philippines has zero cases of persons suffering from the virus,” Panelo said.

Duque proceeded to report that the World Health Organization has acknowledged the Philippines’ efforts in implementing necessary measures as the country is among the nine that have been able to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Despite this, the health chief stressed that “the Philippines needs to be ready anytime for whatever phase of the virus may cause our country and our people.”

Panelo said Duque summarized the government’s response to the COVID-19 as follows: incident management, planning and multi-sectoral coordination; surveillance and risk assessment; laboratory and diagnostic capacity; clinical best practice management; successful repatriation of all 49 Filipinos from Wuhan; positioned resources, such as personal protective equipment; risk communication and community engagement; imposition of travel ban on China, Hong Kong and Macau and selected areas in South Korea, and operational logistics.

Missing South Korean found

The DOH also reported that the “missing” South Korean man who arrived in Cebu from Daegu last Feb. 25 has been found.

DOH Assistant Secretary Ma. Rosario Vergeire said the foreigner is now being monitored as he is undergoing quarantine in a “rented” space in Cebu.

Vergeire said this means the 26 Koreans who came to Cebu a day before the Philippine government imposed a partial travel ban in South Korea are all accounted for.

Aside from this man, eight other Koreans are also undergoing quarantine.

Vergeire noted none of them have manifested symptoms of COVID-19.

Flight cancellations

AirAsia Philippines yesterday started canceling some of its flights between the Philippines and South Korea in compliance with the govern