Travel ban on Iran, 3 other countries? Not now: DOH

TRAVEL

Italy, 1,501 cases in Iran, 268 cases in Japan, and 108 in Singapore.

The IATF-EID has imposed total travel bans on China and partial travel restrictions on Macau, Hong Kong, and South Korea. A total travel ban had also been imposed on Taiwan but it has since been lifted.

MACAU REPATRIATION

Duque said there is no need to quarantine nearly 200 Filipinos set to be repatriated from Macau, saying they did not come from COVID-19 “epicenters.”

“The repatriates from Macau will be treated as PUMs (persons under monitoring),” he said, adding the 196 returning Filipinos will be required to be placed under home quarantine.

“The local governments will be monitoring them for fever, cough, colds, and other symptoms,” said Duque.

Meanwhile, 19 more Filipinos from the Diamond Princess cruise ship are also expected to be repatriated from Japan after being discharged by hospitals where they were treated for the virus.

DOH Assistant Secretary Maria Rosario Vergeire said the 19 are among 40 Filipinos who have tested positive for the virus. The other 21 have been repatriated to the Philippines.

A total of 80 Filipinos from the cruise ship had tested positive for the virus.

Vergeire said 16 persons currently quarantined at the New Clark Center in Tarlac are now considered persons under investigation (PUIs) after manifesting symptoms of the disease.

Of the 16, she said 15 have tested negative and have been

“We have one additional case that is still being tested and monitored. He had diarrhea and had to be brought to a referral hospital,” said Vergeire.

The DOH also reported that there are now 662 PUIs nationwide as of March 4, according to its daily COVID-19 case tracker.

Of the 662, 39 are still isolated in different medical facilities while 623 have recovered and have been discharged.

Vergeire said the admitted PUIs include 19 individuals with travel history to South Korea that manifested symptoms upon their return home.

Duque also said the DOH has reiterated its appeal for lawmakers to provide them a P2 billion supplemental budget to combat the virus.

“We are awaiting the approval by the Committee on Appropriation. We have sent a letter two weeks ago. But as you well know, there have been changes in the committee chairmanship in the House,” said Duque, adding he doesn’t know how this has affected the agency’s request.

For the moment, he said the DOH will have to do with the P530 million budget allocations for “other supplies.”

The DFA yesterday confirmed earlier information that three Filipinos have tested positive for the virus in Singapore.

KUWAIT REQUIRES PROOF

The Kuwait government is set to require expatriates from the Philippines and nine other countries to present proof they are free of the virus before they are allowed to enter the Middle East country.

The new protocol, according to an advisory issued by the Kuwait Directorate General of Civil Aviation, from the Philippines, also covered by the new protocol are expatriates from India, Bangladesh, Egypt, Syria, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Georgia and Lebanon.

The oil-rich kingdom has reported 59 COVID-19 cases as of Wednesday.

Less than a month since lifting the deployment ban to Kuwait, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) is set to slow down the processing of papers of overseas Filipino workers bound for the Middle East state.

Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III said the scale down will affect all OFW sectors, including skilled, semi-skilled, professionals, and household service workers.

The labor chief said this is due to the burdensome requirements set by the Kuwaiti government in employing OFWs.

“They will be requiring so many additional requirements from our workers. And that’s giving more burdens to our workers. So we might as well go to other countries, where there are not so much requirements,” said Bello.

FEELING THE BRUNT

Almost 4,000 workers have felt the brunt of the virus, according to the DOLE.

In a press conference, DOLE Assistant Secretary Dominic Tuty said at least 55 business establishments have either been forced to suspend operations or alter their business hours due to the virus.

“Based on the regional reports that we have gathered, there are 35 establishments who submitted reports. And these establishments will be adopting flexible work ar

3,255 workers,” Tuty said.

“We also have around 20 establishments, who went into temporary suspension of operations. It involves a little over 300 workers,” he added, noting the affected businesses are from Regions 6, 7, and 12 and are in the tourism sector.

To help prevent more adverse effects, Bello said they are encouraging companies to adopt flexible work arrangements.

“We have flexible work arrangements is if this situation prolongs, companies will suffer losses and the first thing they will do is retrench workers. We don’t want that to happen. We want to prevent that,” said Tuty.

While several local workers have started feeling the effects of the virus, such is not the case for OFWs, according to Bello.

He stressed that displaced OFWs in COVID-19 affected countries are merely “isolated incidents.”

“We are not losing workers in the overseas. We don’t have that type of loss of work, especially if you are talking of Hong Kong, Japan, and Macau, and even Taiwan. There are no incidents of employment loss,” said Bello.

“There are isolated cases. But, by and large, there is no large rate of unemployment to our OFWs,” he added.

Bello said that among the “isolated cases” they have received are those from Hong Kong, where OFWs were displaced because their employers are relocating.

According to the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, they are helping 40 displaced domestic workers from Hong Kong, 35 of them having been terminated by their
patients with severe cases.

WHO emergency program head Michael Ryan said the need in Iran was “more acute” than for other countries.

While the case numbers in Iran appear to be bad, he said, “things tend to look worse before getting better.”

The International Olympic Committee on Tuesday said the summer games in Tokyo set to begin on July 24 were still expected to happen despite Japan having nearly 1,000 coronavirus cases and 12 deaths. Health officials said they would continue to monitor the situation in Japan before any final decision on the Olympics is made.

**DRUGS VS VIRUS**

**TOKYO.** — Takeda Pharmaceutical Co said on Wednesday it was developing a drug for high-risk patients infected with the new coronavirus, joining several other drugmakers seeking to develop a treatment for an illness that has killed over 3,000 people.

The Japanese firm said it was working on a plasma-derived therapy which had previously been shown to be effective in treatment of severe acute viral respiratory infections.

Its research would require antibodies from patients who have recovered from the coronavirus infections or who have been vaccinated, once a vaccine has been developed.

“By transferring the antibodies to a new patient, it may help that person’s immune system respond to the infection and increase their chance of recovery,” Takeda said in a statement.

It is also studying whether its currently marketed or pipeline products might be effective treatments for infected patients, the company said, adding those efforts were at an early stage.

Takeda joins other drugmakers working on developing drugs to treat the flu-like disease which has struck more than 90,000 people worldwide.

US-based Gilead Sciences Inc said last week it had started two late-stage studies to test its drug, remdesivir, in patients with severe and moderate cases of the illness.

Pfizer Inc said on Monday it had identified certain antiviral compounds it has in development that have the potential to inhibit coronavirus and is engaging with a third party to screen the compounds.

**FACEBOOK WEIGHS IN**

Facebook Inc will provide free advertisements to the WHO as it seeks to ensure users are not misinformed about the virus, its risks and how to react to it, Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg said on Tuesday.

“We’re giving the WHO as many free ads as they need for their coronavirus response along with other in-kind support,” Zuckerberg said in the Facebook post.

Users who search for posts on the virus on Facebook would now see a pop-up that directs them to the WHO or local health authority for the latest information, Zuckerberg said.

He also pledged again that the company would remove false claims and conspiracy theories flagged by leading global health organizations to help combat misinformation about the coronavirus.

Facebook will be working with global health experts and give support and “millions more in ad credits” to other organizations.

In February, the company said it would ban advertisements for products offering any cures or prevention around the coronavirus outbreak, and those that create a sense of urgency around the situation.

**MORE DEATHS**

Three more deaths from the coronavirus were reported by Washington state on Tuesday as the nation’s largest and only fatal outbreak of the respiratory disease reached beyond the Seattle area in what appeared to be the first instance of coast-to-coast transmission.

A North Carolina resident tested positive after returning from a trip to Washington state, where the individual was exposed, and apparently infected, during a visit to a nursing facility at the center of a recent surge in cases in suburban Seattle.

The total number of people diagnosed with the coronavirus in the greater Seattle area rose to 27 on Tuesday, including nine deaths, up from 18 cases and six deaths tallied on Monday, the state Department of Health reported.

**AUSSIE PANIC-BUYING**

SYDNEY. — Australia’s major grocers put strict limits on purchases of toilet paper on Wednesday, after shoppers stripped shelves in a rush of panic buying spurred by fears over a coronavirus, while the country recorded its fourth case of local transmission.

One of the first nations to take a hard line in tackling the epidemic, Australia imposed border controls a month ago on visitors from the epicentre of the outbreak in China.

However, Australia now has 44 cases, four of them involving people who caught the disease despite not having left the country.

Despite the few sufferers compared to countries such as Iran and South Korea, social media has been awash in recent days with photographs and videos of people stockpiling goods, from staples to sanitizers.

The demand for toilet paper, in particular, has sparked the trending hashtags #toiletpapergate and #toiletpapercrisis on Twitter, along with photographs of overloaded shopping trolleys, and calls for calm from baffled officials.

“We are trying to reassure people that removing all of the lavatory paper from the shelves of supermarkets probably isn’t a proportionate or sensible thing to do at this time,” Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy told a parliamentary panel on Wednesday.

The biggest grocery chain, Woolworths Group Ltd, limited sales to four packs a shopper, to keep up stock levels while suppliers ramp up production. The local arm of Costco Wholesale Corp limited buyers to one bulk buy pack each.

Even Prime Minister Scott Morrison has weighed in on a purchasing trend that appears to be at odds with other countries’ stockpiling of items with a long shelf-life, such as tinned goods, telling the public major grocers had assured him they could meet any spike in demand. — Reuters