As cops enforce quarantine, 5 metro mayors bat for curfew

By Macon Ramos-Araneta and Willie Casas

Police began closing off access to Metro Manila on Sunday, imposing a quarantine that officials hope will curb the nation's rising number of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) cases.

Officers in military fatigues and armed with rifles blocked off main roads into the city of some 12 million as domestic flights to and from Metro Manila were halted early Sunday for a month-long isolation of the capital.

Mass gatherings and school at all levels have also been called off, but delays and exceptions have led public health experts to question how effective President Rodrigo Duterte's measures will be.

Striking steps were also being taken elsewhere in the country, with one church in Borongan, Samar, deciding to hold its Sunday service with worshippers separated by yellow barricade tape.

The tape crisscrossed the pews so that no two worshippers could sit next to each other.

Though the Philippines has detected a fraction of the infections seen in hot spots such as China and Italy, its confirmed cases nearly doubled in recent days to 111, with eight deaths.
“We are sorry for the inconvenience, but we have orders to follow,” said police corporal Meljayric Sajonia at a checkpoint on the southern edge of the capital.

The sealing of the city will not be total, as people going to work will be allowed to enter through checkpoints. Buses and trains will continue to operate inside Metro Manila.

Passengers who showed work ID cards were allowed through, with temperature checks at some entry points.

“I have no problem with the checkpoints,” said Michael Sausa, a hotel supervisor. “It’s better that we prevent the spread of the virus.”

Ahead of Sunday’s closure, people packed grocery stores to stock up, and tens of thousands also boarded buses leaving the capital while it was still permitted.

Buses continued to roll into Metro Manila’s main transit hubs on Sunday, but many had one vacant seat between passengers as a precaution against the virus.

Local leaders moved on Saturday to impose an 8:00 pm to 5:00 am curfew, with exceptions for travel to work, buy essentials or seek medical assistance.

However, Duterte’s spokesman Salvador Panelo said the President would have to approve a curfew covering the entire city and has not yet done so.

Panelo also played down worries over the loss of livelihood for some because of the community quarantine.

“Nobody will die of hunger,” he said in Filipino. “In one month, you won’t die. We need to make a small sacrifice because you might be a carrier of the virus.”

Mayors of Manila’s 17 local government areas are also pushing for shopping malls, the centers of life in the country, to be temporarily shut.

They remained open on Sunday but with temperature checks and free hand sanitizer at entrances.

Senator Francis Tolentino said people would have to give up some civil liberties to protect the health of the general public.

He said imposing a curfew balanced “preserving the rights of the few” against the “health of the majority.”

Senator Grace Poe said the implementation of a curfew in the National Capital Region will have unforeseen outcomes on the economy, delivery of public services, and the general welfare of the people, especially the poor.

“How will the government cushion its impact on the livelihood of workers who will be temporarily laid off?” she asked.

“What assistance can the government offer to small businesses which will be forced to shut down operations or operate in reduced hours?” she added.

So far, five local governments—in Manila, Makati, Muntinlupa, Navota and Las Piñas—have passed ordinances that establish curfews.

Manila Mayor Francisco “Isko Moreno” Domagoso said his city would impose a curfew from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. as a measure against the spread of COVID-19.

A resident may only be allowed to go out during curfew hours in cases of emergency, and for purposes of buying
basic needs and fulfilling work-related requirements, he said.

"During the curfew hours, no person will be allowed in the streets, commercial establishments, recreation centers, malls or other areas outside the immediate vicinity of their residence," Domagoso said.

Muntinlupa City would impose a similar curfew, said Tez Navarro, public information officer of the city.

This comes after Metro Manila mayors signed a resolution recommending the curfew to contain the disease.

None of the mayors explained how limiting travel during hours when most people would be home or on the way home would reduce COVID-19 infections.

Makati City will also impose a curfew, Mayor Abigail Binay said Sunday.

Malls will also be prohibited from operating until the quarantine ends on April 14 or "until further notice depending on the situation," Binay said.

Drugstores, groceries, hardware clinics, and banks, however, will be allowed to operate. Restaurants may continue operations for take-out and delivery, which is allowed until 8 p.m.

Navotas also passed an ordinance imposing an 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew.

In an interview over radio dzMM, Steven Tan, SM Supermalls president, said mall department stores and cinemas will be closed, but supermarkets and pharmacies will remain open during the community quarantine.

Jennyle Tupaz, president of Ayala Land Malls Inc., said Ayala malls in Metro Manila will be closed starting Monday. Supermarkets and pharmacies and banks will remain open.

Robinsons malls will also be closed starting Monday.

Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte-Carpio put her entire city on community quarantine. People were urged not to leave their homes, except to go to work, buy food or medicine or go to the hospital.

Mass gatherings, religious activities, and classes in all levels are suspended until after the state of public emergency has been lifted.

The Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority (SBMA) has ordered temporary restrictions in the entry of persons to the Subic Bay Freeport Zone to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

SBMA chairman and administrator Wilma T. Eisma said the entry restrictions will be effective for about a month, starting 12 a.m. on Monday, March 16, until 12 a.m. of April 14, or while the state of public health emergency declared by Malacañang is in force.

Ilocos Norte, which has yet to record a case of COVID-19, has been put under community quarantine nonetheless.

"Ilocos Norte remains COVID-free but in all likelihood, COVID is already here in our province. To be clear we do not have any confirmed cases but I believe we have to act as if we do have a confirmed COVID case here in Ilocos Norte," Gov. Matthew Marcos Manotoc said in a Facebook video.

Iligan City in Lanao del Norte declared a state of calamity Friday. The move came a day before health officials reported the death of Mindanao's first COVID-19 patient on Saturday in Cagayan de Oro City.

With AFP, PNA