Dengvaxia issue was politicized — Noy

MANILA, Philippines — After Malacañang voiced its openness to allowing the use of the controversial Dengvaxia vaccine, former president Benigno Aquino III yesterday said those who caused panic against a backdrop of politics and bad motives should be held liable for causing undue harm to the public.

“The thing that could have protected the health of our citizens cannot deliver anymore because of politics and a lot of bad motivation,” Aquino said on the sidelines of the commemoration of the 10th death anniversary of his mother, former president Corazon Aquino in Parañaque City.

Aquino, who was at the receiving end of public backlash of the Dengvaxia controversy, said with hundreds already dead due to the vaccine scare and dengue-related deaths, the people behind the scare should be held accountable.

“The protection that could have been given to a lot of people was not given... It is like scandal and alarm. If there are people who were killed, they should be held liable,” he added.

The Duterte administration stopped the P3.5-billion vaccination program after its manufacturer, French company Sanofi, released a study stating that Dengvaxia could increase the health risks of those who have not been infected by dengue.

DOH data showed that from Jan. 1 to July 13, there were 130,463 dengue cases – including 561 deaths. This is higher than the 67,690 cases, including 367 deaths, recorded during the same period in 2018.

Malacañang yesterday said it was open to making Dengvaxia available again if experts declare it to be effective in addressing the rising cases of dengue in the country, citing the need for serious study.

Aquino and several of his Cabinet members are facing criminal charges over the deaths of children who were given the vaccine.

Asked whether Malacañang’s change of heart has vindicated him and his Cabinet, the former president said vindication could only materialize if the conditions of those affected are met.

“They let the wrong thoughts spread. They scared the public. Now, even if the Palace says it is safe to use, the fears of the people are still there,” he said.

Iloilo Rep. Janette Garin, who was Aquino’s health secretary, has asked the Duterte administration to revive the Dengvaxia vaccination program, saying the vaccine could have prevented the dengue outbreak in some provinces.

Garin said the vaccination program, which was launched while she was health chief, intended to cut dengue-related hospitalization by 80 percent and to reduce the severe cases by 93 percent.
Presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo said experts should be consulted to determine if the vaccine is safe.

“They said the spreading of dengue fever is serious. We need a vaccine for that. We need to find a vaccine. If there is none and if we know that Dengvaxia can be given to those who have been infected by dengue, why don’t we try it?” Panelo said at a press briefing.

“We just have to consider, we have to make a stand. As I said earlier, it needs (or) requires a serious study before we can use it,” he added.

Panelo said there is no conclusive finding that Dengvaxia caused the death of children who were given the vaccine.

“If that’s the situation, if it’s true that Dengvaxia is effective only to those who have suffered dengue, then it can be used. We just need to ensure that those who will use it are the ones who had dengue, otherwise there would be problems,” he added.

While he entertained the possibility of Dengvaxia being made available again, Panelo said this was just a suggestion and the government is not yet resuming the vaccination program.

“Doctors want Dengvaxia

Amid the rising prevalence of dengue in the country, the Doctors for Truth and Public Welfare (DTPW) is pressing for the immediate lifting of the ban on the use of the controversial vaccine.

The group urged yesterday the Department of Health (DOH) to include Dengvaxia in the list of 2019 Essential Medicine and Essential Diagnostics.

“Dengvaxia remains banned in the Philippines, in the meantime, we have a national dengue alert,” DTPW co-convenor Minguita Padilla said in a statement.

“The Philippines has the highest incidence and death rate from dengue in this part of the world. Yet it is the only country in the world that has banned it,” the group added, stressing that now is the right time to bring the vaccine back to the market.

According to the DTPW, the recent declaration of the DOH of a national dengue alert indicates that the country falls under the “high risk” population that the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended for Dengvaxia use.

Padilla called on government officials to pay heed to the scientific evidence provided to enable the country to move forward from the Dengvaxia scare for the sake of public welfare.

About 800,000 children were provided with Dengvaxia before the vaccine’s manufacturer, Sanofi Pasteur, admitted that it poses higher risks to people without prior dengue infection.

Sanofi’s admission prompted the DOH to suspend the immunization program while the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) ordered a permanent ban on the use of Dengvaxia.

The FDA said the permanent revocation of the Certificate of Product Registration (CPR) of Dengvaxia is still in effect and the appeal was sent to the Office of the Health Secretary for evaluation.
Negros town declares outbreak

The Negros Occidental provincial health office (PHO) has recommended the declaration of a dengue outbreak in two cities and three municipalities in the province, with 27 dengue-related deaths and 4,230 cases.

These were the cities of Kabankalan and Bago, and the towns of Cauayan, Murcia and Candoni.

Only Murcia town, which has 147 cases of dengue and a lone death from January to July this year – a 400 percent increase compared to the same period last year – has declared an outbreak.

Compared to the same period last year, dengue cases in Negros rose by 43 percent, from 2,948 to 4,230 this year.

Kabankalan City topped the 31 Negros Occidental local government units. Bacolod City, meanwhile, has 598 cases without deaths.

Gov. Eugenio Jose Lacson earlier issued Executive Order No. 19-19 declaring a dengue heightened alert in Negros Occidental.

Meanwhile, the province of Bulacan has the highest number of dengue cases in Central Luzon for the current year.

Data provided to The STAR by the Regional Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit of DOH in Central Luzon showed that a total of 9,773 dengue cases were reported by different disease reporting units in the region from Jan. 1 to July 20 this year, with Bulacan registering the highest number of cases at 2,405 followed by Tarlac at 2,134, Nueva Ecija 1,771, Pampanga 1,301, Aurora 977, Bataan 713 and Zambales 472.

This is 20 percent lower compared to the same period last year at 12,164 cases wherein Tarlac registered 3,624 cases; Bulacan 2,565; Pampanga 2,269; Nueva Ecija 1709; Bataan 1,081; Zambales 579 and Aurora 337.

The province of Aurora registered a 190 percent increase while Nueva Ecija had four percent increase in cases.

Meanwhile, the total number of deaths from dengue in Central Luzon for the same period this year was 35 compared with 38 last year.

For this year, a total of nine deaths due to dengue were reported in Nueva Ecija, eight in Tarlac, six each for Aurora and Bulacan, three in Zambales, two in Pampanga and one in Bataan.

The DOH is set to meet with its regional directors tomorrow to review the strategies in combatting dengue, which cases continue to rapidly increase.

In an interview, DOH Undersecretary Eric Domingo said the directors were summoned to the central office in Manila to report on the dengue situations in their areas of jurisdiction.

“They will have to give updates… what they have done so far. With this, we can calibrate our programs if necessary,” he noted. – With Gilbert Bayoran, Ramon Lazaro, Shiela Crisostomo