Until certified, PH should be on guard against Dengvaxia

OUR dengue and Dengvaxia nightmare is not yet over. The dreaded virus has returned in the form of an epidemic.

The Senate inquiry that consumed the public’s attention for two years did not arrive at any firm conclusions. And now here we are again, confronted by the dengue virus. After billions of pesos consumed by the Dengvaxia scam, the nation is still no wiser or more confident in dealing with dengue fever.

Last Tuesday, the Department of Health (DoH) led by Secretary Francisco Duque 3rd declared a national dengue epidemic because of the soaring number of cases caused by the dengue virus, which at this point has claimed 622 lives.

The Health department has recorded 146,062 cases of dengue from January to July this year. This is 98 percent higher than the cases listed in the same period last year.

The incidence of the fever cuts across the entire archipelago, from Luzon to the Visayas, and to Mindanao.

The secretary said: “It is important a national epidemic be declared to identify where a localized response is needed and to enable the local government units (LGUS) to use the Quick Response Fund to address the epidemic.”

The Health department on Tuesday also launched a search-and-destroy campaign to prevent the spread of the mosquito that carries the virus.

Starting last Tuesday, the DoH, together with other government agencies, the LGUS, schools and offices, and communities started conducting the 4 o’clock habit, focusing on mosquito breeding places and destroying them.

These moves are necessary because the government does not have the medicine to contain the virus. As Secretary Duque said: “We don’t have medicine, we don’t have vaccinations that can prevent the spread of dengue, and we only hope that the measures we have adopted will decrease the number of cases we have recorded.”

The dengue alert deserves full public support. Public awareness of the epidemic should be followed by civic action to help our health authorities control the spread of dengue.
Amid the wide public alert, former Health secretary Janette Garin, who achieved national notoriety because of her suspected role in the still unresolved Dengvaxia scandal, has boldly come out in the open and declared that the dengue outbreak could have been prevented had the government not discontinued the Dengvaxia vaccination program. Garin has yet to be cleared of involvement in the scandal that saw the irregular use of public funds to purchase the still untried Dengvaxia and its use in the controversial mass vaccination of more than 800,000 schoolchildren that may have resulted in at least a dozen deaths.

The Palace is correct not to dismiss Ms Garin’s call outright. The extremity of the situation arises from the fact that there is no proven vaccine yet against dengue fever. At this time, Dengvaxia is probably the only dengue vaccine that has been developed.

The matter, said Malacañang, should be discussed thoroughly and extensively.

There is a wide difference of opinion among health experts about the efficacy of Dengvaxia. Some are approving of Dengvaxia. But many also oppose its adoption now. There is still no international approval of Dengvaxia.

Garin and others who were implicated in the Dengvaxia scam are opportunistically using the current emergency as a means to whitewash their accountability. They are urging Secretary Duque and the DoH to allow the use of Dengvaxia, and resume the dengue vaccination campaign.

The huge problem, Ms Garin, is that the government has already tried once to use Dengvaxia, at great cost to the public treasury and at greater cost to the lives of children.

To date, international health authorities will not say that Dengvaxia is safe to use and effective against dengue. Until this certification, our government will be wise to be on guard against Dengvaxia.

This is why the Senate inquiry into the Dengvaxia scam needed closure. After so much talking and publicity, the inquiry produced nothing.

The national government, through the National Bureau of Investigation and our health authorities, should be the one investigating the efficacy of Dengvaxia. This is not for politicians to undertake.

Meanwhile, it would be prudent to abide by the measures the Health department has launched to arrest the spread of dengue. Without a proven vaccine, the word of our Health department is still our most reliable guide in a public health epidemic.