Philippines begins lifting lockdown despite rising infection rates

By Owen Howell
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On Monday, the Philippine government commenced its plans to reopen businesses by ending a three-month lockdown of Metro Manila, the country's capital and COVID-19 epicentre. Millions of Filipino workers are being forced back on the job, despite a rapid rise in the number of infections.

Last week witnessed 4,051 new confirmed coronavirus cases, an increase of nearly 29 percent. Since May 28, there has been an unprecedented surge in the daily number of cases. A new record was set last Friday, with a spike of 1,046 cases, while the second highest number, 862, was reported on Sunday. The total number of infections now stands at 20,382, with 984 deaths.

In the face of these shocking figures, the government is recklessly pushing ahead with its premature reopening of the economy.

Social restrictions in Metro Manila and throughout the main island of Luzon, which is home to nearly 60 million people, are being downgraded to a "general community quarantine," from the previous stage of "enhanced community quarantine."

Transportation Secretary Arthur Tugade stated that public transport will return in a limited form, with shuttle buses and trains permitted to restart operations. Meanwhile, the Ninoy Aquino International Airport announced it will resume domestic flights.

Non-essential businesses, including restaurants, gyms, beauty salons, sports facilities and churches, are allowed to open at limited capacity, as are hotels and tourist spots. The changes are set to be in place until June 15, when restrictions will be further relaxed.

The return to work in the Philippines is part of an international campaign being waged by the ruling classes of every country, which are abandoning any serious attempt to contain and eradicate the coronavirus. This drive is not based on current scientific knowledge about the virus or its ability to spread, but is motivated solely by the economic interests of the financial elite.

The relaxing of restrictions follows increasingly strident appeals to the government from company executives, transnational corporations and investors.

Official gross domestic product (GDP) fell 0.2 percent in the first quarter of the year, the first contraction since 1998. The fears of big business over the pandemic's impact on corporate profit-making have outweighed any public health considerations in the government response.

In order to justify meeting the demands of this financial oligarchy, and prepare the grounds for a return to work, President Rodrigo Duterte has publicly rejected known facts and proclaimed that the number of COVID-19 infections in the Philippines is negligible. Immediately after delivering a report of record-high infection figures in a press briefing last week, Duterte said: "All in all, for me, it's not so bad."

His remarks, completely out of touch with the horrific reality, sparked anger from health experts, along with workers and peasants, whose lives will be placed at risk due to the reopening.

The lack of significant lockdown measures could result in potentially catastrophic transmissions in Manila, the most densely populated city in the world. The capital region has been the source of more than 60 percent of the country's confirmed cases. Any implementation of adequate social distancing on the reopened Manila transit system, which services around 300,000 commuters daily, will be impossible.

The Philippines' testing rate is among the lowest in the world. While capacity has allegedly reached 32,100 tests per day, the actual number of tests performed is much lower. For example, only 8,496 tests were conducted on May 27, in a country of 109 million people.

Even this is an increase on rates up until early May, when testing was negligible. This serious delay in available testing led residents in provincial areas, where social restrictions were virtually non-existent, to worry that there may have been undetected outbreaks in their communities. The official records of cases and deaths are undoubtedly a gross underestimation of the real extent of the spread.

World Health Organisation (WHO) representative Dr Socorro Escalante recently highlighted the government's failure to conduct contact tracing needed to combat the virus. She explained that tracing must begin once a suspect case visits a hospital, instead of upon confirmation of laboratory results, as is currently being practiced. "By that time, we have already spread the infection to many people and that's really very, very late," Escalante said.

The pandemic has had a catastrophic impact on the Philippine health care system, which was unprepared for a crisis of this scale. Due to a widespread shortage of protective equipment, at least 2,480 health workers have been infected, including 695 doctors, 905 nurses, 155 nursing assistants, 93 medical technologists, 46 radiologic technologists and 308 non-medical hospital staff. As of last week, 31 medical workers had died from the virus.

As is the case internationally, the pandemic and the pro-business government response is creating a social crisis of unprecedented dimensions. Labour Secretary Silvestre Bello has warned that the 2.6 million workers who lost their jobs after the pandemic began could be joined by 7 million more before the end of the year.

Unemployed workers, confronted with economic destitution at home, are offered no choice but to return to work under unsafe conditions. Cabusao, a young aviation firm worker, told Channel News Asia this week: "I have to go back to work… The fear of contracting the virus will always be there."

The government has been slow in distributing the pitiful cash handouts that it promised to around 20 million impoverished families. The relief funds, just $US100 per person, have not yet reached all eligible recipients three months into the crisis. In the meantime, large numbers of low-income workers have stood all day in long queues to receive cash and food aid from charities.

Hunger has also surged during the pandemic. The *Nikkei Asian Review* cited a survey conducted in early May, which found that 16.7 percent of Filipinos residents, an estimated 4.2 million families, experienced hunger at least once in the previous three months, doubling from 8.8 percent in December.

President Duterte is well aware that growing social opposition among workers and the poor has been accelerated by the pandemic. Last week, the presidential Malacañang Palace announced it was "necessary" to extend Duterte's special emergency powers, which were due to expire within weeks.

The measures will now be extended until September. They strengthen the powers of the executive branch— i.e., Duterte—placing hospitals and other public services under its direction. They also include provisions for the imprisonment for two months of anyone accused of spreading "fake news" online, along with fines ranging from 10,000 to 1 million pesos.

The government will attempt to use these measures to suppress opposition to the premature reopening, and the further corporate restructuring that will accompany it.

Duterte repeatedly threatened the population with martial law through the course of the lockdown, during which heavily-armed police officers and military troops arrested a total of 57,177 people for alleged quarantine violations. Police records show that nearly a quarter were arrested without a warrant.

Parliament approved a new "anti-terrorism bill" on Wednesday. It aims to provide a legal basis for the warrantless detention and wiretapping of anyone deemed by the government to be a "terrorist."

In a letter to the House Speaker, Duterte certified the bill as "urgent," writing that its purpose was to "adequately and effectively contain the menace of terrorist acts for the preservation of national security and the promotion of general welfare."

There is no doubt that Duterte, as with his "war on drugs," will use the new law as a means of criminalising any opposition to the government and provide the military absolute impunity in targeting political opponents.