

Dramatic spike in Philippines' coronavirus death toll

By Owen Howell
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The Philippines recorded a sudden surge in deaths caused by COVID-19 on Saturday, along with a continued rise in case numbers. The death toll rose by 186, a new record and an alarming leap from the country's average of around 50 deaths per day over the past week. It is the highest single-day fatality rate recorded so far in Southeast Asia.

The spike was attributed to incorrect figures provided by local authorities. The Department of Health said 128 cases previously reported as “recovered” were discovered to be 126 deaths and two active cases. The classifications cover data going back to April.

President Rodrigo Duterte's administration explained the discrepancy in recorded deaths as an inevitable product of the country's continuing validation process, in which reported cases are often duplicates or erroneous entries.

It is not the first time, however, that Philippine authorities have been found to conceal or alter data recording the spread of the virus. From June 12 to August 21, more than 4,000 cases were removed from the COVID-19 tally, apparently because of encoding errors. There were also corrections that revealed 309 deaths, earlier announced as recovered cases.

The official death toll reached 4,371 on Saturday, but this record suggests that the real total could be much higher.

The national government's pandemic response has been marked by a lack of any serious efforts to detect, trace or isolate the disease. In public televised addresses, Duterte has by turns downplayed the threat of the virus and advocated unscientific methods, including washing face masks with petrol.

Confronting the worst coronavirus outbreak in both Southeast and East Asia, the Philippines has seen cases double over just five weeks. After an increase of nearly

5,000 new infections on Saturday, the figures have risen to 261,216 cases. It was the fifth consecutive day on which over 3,000 additional cases were tallied.

Of Saturday's reported cases, 2,619 came from capital city Manila's overpopulated metropolitan area, which has accounted for around half of total coronavirus figures. At least 82 percent of the newly confirmed cases dated back as far as August 30. The government had previously said it was expecting an “irregularly high number of cases this week,” due to the slow arrival of reports from overworked laboratories.

The underfunded health sector is struggling to provide an accurate picture of the virus' rapid community spread across the densely crowded archipelago.

The Philippines currently has only 119 licensed laboratories capable of conducting coronavirus tests. Its testing rate is still among the lowest internationally, performing just 28,018 tests per million people.

As with testing labs, hospitals are unprepared to meet the demands placed on them by the global pandemic. Filipino Nurses United vice president Leni Nolasco has urged the government to immediately hire the country's 200,000 unemployed skilled nurses to address the chronic shortage of nursing personnel in COVID-19 referral hospitals.

The government's recent token efforts to augment the health system—with 5,000 new beds for isolation facilities and \$US61 million for personal protective equipment (PPE)—will prove insufficient to prevent a growing public health crisis.

From the outset, Duterte's government has imposed draconian police-state measures on the one hand, while pursuing ever more frantic bids to resume economic activity on the other.

Production in key sectors was halted in mid-March by a repressive lockdown centred in Manila. Social restrictions were slowly eased in June, with catastrophic results as the virus spread through reopened workplaces. Nevertheless, the government has desperately pushed the economic reopening, particularly since a recession was officially declared in the second quarter.

On Friday, Duterte signed into law a second economic stimulus package, known as Bayanihan II. It includes financial aid of \$US2.8 billion for major corporations affected by the lockdown, as well as a \$US525 million standby fund for future bailouts later this year. Similar to its predecessor, Bayanihan II allows presidential powers to realign funds for pandemic-related expenses.

Congressman Bienvenido Abante Jr. said last week that “funds are scarce” due to the low revenue collections brought about by the pandemic, the *Manila Times* reported. The new package, however, assured private businesses that funds will not be lacking for them, even as depleted healthcare and social welfare programs suffer.

Duterte’s signing of the package came as the government declared a further easing of restrictions across the entire Philippines, which began yesterday. Iligan City, Bacolod City, and Lanao del Sur will remain under modified enhanced community quarantine (MECQ) until the end of the month. For the rest of the country, workers will be herded back into unsafe and crowded workplaces to restart the flow of corporate profits.

Public transportation is gradually reopening. The number of passengers on the Metro Rail Transit was raised yesterday. The Department of Transportation announced that as many as 204 commuters are now permitted on a train (i.e., 68 per wagon). They added that physical distancing would be lowered to 0.75 metres between passengers, to be further reduced every two weeks.

A state-backed contact tracing app, Staysafe.ph, is set to be rolled out in transport terminals in the coming weeks. The app, however, is not a genuine attempt to implement contact tracing, but instead serves to justify the government’s back-to-work drive and the false notion that it is safe to return to places of employment.

The swift reopening of the country’s failing tourism

industry is also on the agenda. Hotels can now accept greater numbers of guests under “specialised programs” outlined by the Department of Tourism, as the country restarts domestic travel.

Significant investments are being made in an expensive new project to rehabilitate Manila Bay for tourism purposes. Interior Undersecretary Jonathan Malaya claimed it would not detract funds from the government’s coronavirus response, despite growing criticism of the project as the health crisis worsens.

Fearful of mass opposition, government officials are trying to justify their failure to contain the pandemic since March. Health Secretary Francisco Duque III said on Friday, as quoted by ABS-CBN News: “I will be the first to admit that our initial response was rather slow, if not laggard. Why? Because nobody actually expected this pandemic.”

Such statements from ruling elites around the world aim to shrug off responsibility for the devastation inflicted by the pandemic. Medical experts had continually warned about a potential pandemic throughout the past decade.

Epidemiologists and health experts from the University of the Philippines have estimated that total cases could reach 310,000 to 330,000 by the end of this month.

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