

The Response of the Philippine Government in Handling the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

All countries in Southeast Asia have faced the threat of widespread outbreaks of Coronavirus (COVID-19). One of the countries in Southeast Asia that experienced the most significant impact from COVID-19 is the Philippines. This paper discusses the COVID-19 threat as a form of non-traditional human security threat and the Philippines Government's need to carry out securitization and response measures to prevent the spread of the threat. In addition, this paper also explains the impact of COVID-19 in the Philippines and the new normal conditions after the lockdown was put in place by the government. This descriptive analysis shows that the COVID-19 outbreak, as a non-traditional security threat, impacted various Philippines' sectors. This result also indicates the Philippine government's response in dealing with the impact arising from the COVID-19 outbreak and the implementation of new normal to drive the economy. Therefore, we divide the discussion into four parts: First, an overview describes the Philippines' COVID-19 cases. Second, explain the impact of a pandemic in various fields. Third, define the response of the Philippine Government in dealing with COVID-19. Fourth, describing the challenges in dealing with COVID-19 in the Philippines and the new normal situation in force in the Philippines.

I. INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus 2, known as COVID-19, was discovered in Wuhan in December 2019. This virus was only officially recognized by the Chinese government in January 2020. It was immediately declared a "global health emergency" or Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) by WHO at the end of the month [1]. The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus has a significant impact on the health sector and affects the economic, social, and political well-being of billions of people worldwide. In the early development of its dissemination, the Director-General of WHO warned the world community to

be aware of the spread of "infodemic," namely waves of misleading and misleading information spread from various media channels that might cause panic the community [2]. This was triggered by the drastic increase in COVID-19 cases outside China, only a few months from the first case. Then because of transmission around the world, WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020. The Philippines is one of the countries facing COVID-19 cases, based on a survey in February. It found that 69% of Filipinos felt the Philippine Government's response was appropriate in responding to COVID-19 [3]. However, the actions of

the Philippine Government also received criticism and feedback from its citizens. Since the virus outbreak in Wuhan, the Philippines has been anticipating Chinese travellers' arrival and the return of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) trying to escape the disease's early epicenter in Hubei province. Positive cases of COVID-19 in the Philippines confirmed on March 7 and on March 16, after which President Rodrigo R. Duterte imposed the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) in Luzon following an increase in COVID-19 cases in the Philippines [4].

In this paper, the authors explain the impact of the COVID-19 case in the Philippines and its response. The author divides the discussion into four parts: *First*, an overview describes the Philippines' COVID-19 cases. *Second*, explain the impact of a pandemic in various fields. *Third*, define the response of the Philippine Government in dealing with COVID-19. *Fourth*, describing the challenges in dealing with COVID-19 in the Philippines and the new normal situation in force in the Philippines.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on a search for previous research with the same relationship with the research topic, previous research can be used to explore more deeply about the research topic.

The journal entitled "The Economics of COVID-19 in the Philippines" is the work of Leandro S. Estadilla published in the Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics in 2020. This journal explains the decline in the Philippine economy that has occurred due to the spread of COVID-19. This journal focuses on the weak level of consumption of the Filipino people and the tourism factor where no foreign tourists are travelling amid the spread of COVID-19. Initially, this

journal explained the link between COVID-19 and decreased consumption. The relationship between the two is related to a cause-and-effect relationship, COVID-19, which has become a global pandemic, has forced the world community to undergo quarantine until lockdown. This condition then causes them to be unable to work because they have to be at home. For people working in a job that requires them to leave the house, this policy will not have a big impact, but also the person has a job that can only be done directly. It becomes a problem. Moreover, the Philippine government has forced companies to close temporarily. This policy then led to mass layoffs because the company required some costs to keep the company running even without income. This journal then compares several economic conditions from various countries affected by COVID-19, such as China and Singapore, which have previously declared themselves successful in maintaining the stability of their countries' economic conditions by avoiding the possibility of a significant decline in the country's economic level. The remainder of this journal describes the Philippine government's policies and measures to decline the economical rate.

Journal entitled "Covid-19: Navigating Inclusive Recovery towards the New Normal" by R.U. Mendoza in 2020 explained the framework for understanding the phase of the crisis response caused by Covid-19. These phases include assistance, recovery, the possibility of a "new normal" and a balancing act between economic and health policies. Based on this journal, there are two forms of transmission caused by COVID-19, namely transmission related to the virus and transmission triggered by an economic slowdown. This journal emphasizes the Philippine health sector's vital role as a

buffer for a more inclusive and stable economic recovery. Good health care and response can effectively deal with the virus, which indirectly minimizes economic costs. The journal believes that countries with adequate and inclusive health care and social protection do not need to use drastic crisis prevention measures to reduce costs.

III. ANALYSIS

A. Overview of COVID-19 Cases in the Philippines

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a disease that attacks the respiratory tract where the mode of transmission is through droplets of throat fluids or direct contact with sufferers. In other words, the spread occurs person-to-person. This virus can survive long enough on surfaces so that transmission can happen quickly and may not even be realized. The symptoms experienced by sufferers may differ, ranging from minor symptoms such as coughing or fever to large symptoms that cause an acute shortness of breath syndrome [5].

COVID-19, which was declared a global pandemic, this statement was given after seeing the spread that had spread to various countries. The spread of COVID-19 also reached the Philippines. The spread was initiated by a pair of Chinese nationals who vacationed in the Philippines in January 2020. The Philippines began investigating Covid-19 on January 22-March 1, 633 suspected Covid-19 cases were reported. The Philippines' first confirmed case of Covid-19 is a 39-year-old woman, while her partner, a 44-year-old man, has been declared the second case of Covid-19 in the Philippines and the first case of death due to Covid-19 outside China due to her death on the February 1. Both were the initial cases of COVID-19 in the Philippines, and both were treated at San Lazaro Hospital in

Manila on January 25. The symptoms suffered by the first case were only cough and sore throat, while in the second case, they had fever, cough, and chills. Furthermore, the third case emerged on February 3, by a Chinese nationality woman who was found to have recently travelled to Wuhan. Knowing the existence of these three cases, the Philippine government searched for COVID-19 sufferers by tracking down people who had contact with the three [6].

B. Impact of COVID-19 in the Philippines

The rapid and widespread spread of COVID-19 has caused an uproar globally, and Filipinos are no exception. The Philippines is not only dealing with physical health problems but also problems related to mental health. This problem arose after the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic, making the Philippine government quarantine its citizens. This panic can be triggered by various things, such as receiving inappropriate information or other things such as lifestyle changes. With the uncertain, complex, and rapid development of the COVID-19 pandemic, strategic health emergency communication is needed to provide timely and adequate information. This panic created a social stigma that attacked paramedics.

The panic experienced by some Filipinos has developed into anger, as seen in several attacks aimed at paramedics. As happened on March 27, 2020, a nurse in Sultan Kudarat province became a victim of sprinkling bleach on the face with five adult men. The attack took place on the same day that Governor Suharto Mangudadatu stated that he would lock down the entire Sultan Kudarat area as one of the efforts of the local government to contain the spread of COVID-19, so this incident

can be said to be an example of the response to people's fear of the implementation of the lockdown policy. Another attack took place in the city of Cebu in which a nurse was nearly injured by being pelted with chlorine. Meanwhile, there are still several cases of assault against medical personnel. Some shops and restaurants drive away because they thought if medical personnel are the source of disease. COVID-19 and do not want them to transmit the disease to the broader community. Responding to the attack, medical personnel were prohibited from returning to their homes. As a result, they are forced to spend their rest in the hospital, where they are on guard [7].

However, on the other hand, based on a survey from Rakuten Insight in the Philippines in April 2020, 66% of their respondents did not panic buying during the quarantine period. The survey also shows that 64% of their families have lost their jobs since the quarantine period. (Sanchez, 2020) This shows that after some time after the quarantine, people are getting used to controlling their emotions of panic, even though on the other hand, they will face economic problems in the future as a result of job loss and a decline in economic levels.

Furthermore, the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) policy imposed a total lockdown, which in turn disrupted Filipinos' normal daily activities. The education sector has also been affected by the spread of COVID-19. Even though the Philippines' education system is still not ready for distance learning or what is known as a virtual learning system This condition occurs because teachers and other educators have not received training for online learning systems. Besides, not all students have access to online learning. For this reason, learning is stopped, but educators continue to communicate with families or acquaintances of students

who can be contacted. Only a few educational institutions are ready to implement a virtual learning system [8].

COVID-19 also has an economic impact, a vital area in social life in society. Similar to what is happening in the world today, the Philippines is also facing the same problem, namely a decline in economic figures, this situation occurs because of a decrease in consumption and production figures. This policy forces residents to stay at home, which means that indirectly this policy has hampered production factors. So, to be sufficient for the continuity of a company or factory, employers are forced to reduce or lay off several their employees. Also, this policy has a major effect on the lack of tourism [9].

Various social events were not canceled to avoid the widespread spread of COVID-19 in the Philippines. Palarong Pambansa, one of the sporting events in the Philippines organized by the Ministry of Education. The Palarong Pambansa Championship is a competition that is eagerly awaited by Filipino students. Also, there are annual festivals such as the 25th Panagbenga Flower Festival which is a series of large festivals that were initially held to eliminate people's fears after the great earthquake that hit Luzon in 1990. The festival will certainly invite many tourists, but its implementation must be postponed until the end of the spread of COVID-19 in the Philippines. Furthermore, various international music festivals and concerts had to be cancelled [10]. The failure to carry out these various events certainly caused material losses for the organizers. Besides, the cancellation certainly disappointed Filipinos and missed the opportunity for the surge in the number of tourists who were attracted to the event.

C. The Philippine's Government Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

On January 30, 2020, or a few weeks before the Philippines reported the first case of COVID-19 in its country, the Philippine government had planned to ban flights from China and on February 2, the Philippine government closed flights from China. The ban was followed by banning flights from Hong Kong and Macau. Even so, the Philippine government still opens international flights from other countries [11].

Apart from taking various precautions, President Duterte has also tried to calm the public by convincing his citizens that COVID-19 is not something to be overly afraid of. In a press conference on February 3, 2020, President Duterte told his citizens that the Philippines is in a safe condition and there is no need to be overly afraid even though the virus has infected several countries. Besides, President Duterte also said that the two cases in the Philippines were Chinese citizens and not Philippine citizens, so there is nothing to be afraid of [11].

On March 8 2020, through a recommendation from the Secretary of Health, President Duterte signed a proclamation of 992 that put the Philippines under a public health emergency because of the threat of COVID-19. Based on this proclamation, there are several things that the government will do, namely, controlling the prices of commodities and staples, providing interest-free loans, and providing allowances for frontline medical personnel. Through this proclamation, all institutions in the Philippines are asked to provide full assistance in efforts to deal with COVID-19. The proclamation was signed after more than a month the WHO declared COVID-19 as a world public health emergency and the Philippines

announced there were 10 cases of COVID-19 in the country [11].

Besides, in March 2020, the Philippines closed schools to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus and will reopen at the end of August. However, on 25 May, President Duterte, through his speech, indicated that schools would be closed for a long time. The Ministry of Education itself has taken several steps in dealing with this, namely increasing online classrooms.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council established the Inter-agency Task Force for Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) based on regulation No. 1685 headed by the Ministry of Health with the health secretary as its head. IATF-EID has a function as the president's main advisor regarding management and implementation related to policies dealing with COVID-19. The Philippine health secretary as the head of the Inter-agency Task Force for Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) has the authority to ask law enforcement agencies to help implement quarantine and various efforts to deal with the spread of the COVID-19. Subsequently, through Resolution No.16, the IATF-EID established a Technical Group Working (TWG) whose members consist of representatives from departments and armed forces in the Philippines.

Under the IATF-EID, the Ministry of Health is working with government agencies to develop inter-agency cooperation plans to deal with Covid-19. The plan contains a four-door strategy framework that integrates the handling of COVID-19 based on color codes, namely white, blue, red. This color determination is based on the health situation in the area. In other words, the areas with the worst conditions will receive treatment first [12].

The Philippine Department of Health found a positive case of COVID-

19 whose transmission was proven through community transmission on March 12 2020. Responding to this, President Duterte through the IATF-EAD recommendation, raised the alert level to the red zone level 2. This was accompanied by tightening quarantine and banning travel together. This zone applies to city and provincial levels throughout the Philippines. Then, President Duterte announced that he would quarantine the city of Manila from March 15-April 14. However, the quarantine was extended because President Duterte on March 16, declared an increase in community quarantine or Enhance Community Quarantine (ECQ) which covers the Luzon region is valid from March 17-April 14. A ban has also accompanied the quarantine period's extension on land, sea, transportation, and air. Due to ECQ, Filipinos are advised to work from home and use online communication to conduct business transactions. When the ECQ was declared, COVID-19 cases in the Philippines had reached 187 cases.

On March 19 2020, the Philippines had tested less than 1200 people for COVID-19. The Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) is the only one that accommodates the COVID-19 test with a few test kits, totalling 4,500 kits from WHO at that time [13].

Due to a lack of resources to deal with COVID-19, President Duterte signed Republic Act 11469 known as the "Bayanihan to Heal as One Act" or Bayanihan Act on March 24, 2020. This law will become effective on April 1. The law allows the executive department to provide public and private hospitals with additional equipment, staff, and doctors. This hospital can be used as a COVID-19 hospital or a patient quarantine place. Also, these hospitals can provide rapid COVID-19 tests and provide insurance for workers in the health sector.

The Bayanihan Act will form the basis of actions by the Philippine government in dealing with the pandemic situation. The following are some of the provisions in the Bayanihan law [14]:

- Liberalize the provision of incentives for the manufacture or import of equipment or supplies of goods required for implementing policies. This includes medical equipment and supplies provided that imports of the aforementioned goods are free of import duties, taxes, and other fees.
- Provision of a Social Amelioration Package (SAP) as an emergency subsidy of P 5,000 to P 8,000 for 18 million households whose livelihoods are affected by the quarantine. This program targets workers who do not receive compensation from their place of work [12].
- Postponed the deadline for submission of any documents that are required by the government, including tax payments.
- Applying a minimum of 30 days interest-free payment grace period for all loans, including personal loans, salaries, housing, motorized vehicles, and credit card payments due on ECQ. This regulation is mandatory for all banks, be it quasi-banks, financial companies, lending companies, government service insurance systems, social security systems, and other financial institutions. Besides, people with more than one loan coverage will also be given a minimum grace period of 30 days for each loan.
- Especially for tax emergency measures, tax document stamps

will be removed for borrowers whose loan maturities are due within the ECQ period. This policy was issued by the Philippine Ministry of Finance (DOF) under the Bayanihan Act.

After the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act was passed, the Philippine government made a countercyclical package that focused on four things, namely [11]:

- The first focus, the Philippine government, provides a PhP 305.2 billion budget to support vulnerable groups and individuals, including displaced workers, small businesses, and local governments. Of the budget, as much as PhP 205 billion was used as cash subsidies for 18 million low-income households, and as much as PhP 35 billion was used as subsidies for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) workers.
- The second focus, the Philippine government, provides a PhP 35.7 billion budget to support the health sector. This budget includes payments for COVID-19 health insurance, special risk allowances, medical equipment, and personal protective equipment, and includes costs for increasing the capacity of the COVID-19 test.
- The third focus, the Philippine government, provides a PhP 830.5 billion budget to support fiscal and monetary policy in the country. This figure includes loans from multilateral and bilateral partners of PhP 310 billion or \$ 6.1 billion.
- The fourth focus, the Philippine government, focuses on creating new jobs on the economic recovery plan.

On 2 July 2020, the IATF-EID approved the National Action Plan (NAP) phase 2 by the National Task Force (NTF). Carlito Galvez Jr, as the chairman of NTF against COVID-19, stated that this stage 2 NAP seeks to restore the Philippine economy while still protecting the health of the people of the Philippines. This phase 2 NAP is led by a local government unit (LGU). In this case, the local and national governments cooperate in testing and contact tracing efforts, while the central government and the private sector cooperate in providing testing laboratories. At NAP stage 2, IATF designed 4 anti-covid-19 czars, namely testing, tracing, isolation, and treatment [15].

In NAP phase 2 the testing target was expanded from previously only focusing on the symptomatic and front liner to asymptomatic from other sectors and industries such as government employees. This strategy requires 10 million tests by the department of budget (DBM) and the Department of Health (DOH). The LGU is also increasing its testing capacity by building a large swabbing facility and drive-thru testing center. Metro Manila's "Ospital ng Sampaloc" became the first venue for a free walk-in COVID-19 test center. The Philippine Government also established the "One Hospital Command" with 3 main objectives: synergizing public and private health institutions' responses in dealing with Covid-19 patients. Create bed allocation guidelines and expand hospital capacity. Establish a "public and private referral system" to deal with hospital overload [15].

On September 11, 2020, the government issued Bayanihan Act 2 which is an improvement of Bayanihan Act 1. This law prioritizes funding for government programs in dealing with pandemics, such as 1 Increasing the infrastructure of health facilities,

2. Providing benefits to workers in the health sector, 3. Funding cash funding program to overcome unemployment, 4. Agricultural and industrial sector assistance funding affected by Covid, 5. Financing of vaccines [15].

Furthermore, the Philippine Foreign Minister, Teodoro Locsin Jr., said that the Philippines would get 30 million doses of the Novavax vaccine – made in India. Locsin said that the vaccine would be available in July 2021. The vaccine is produced by a large Indian company, Serum Institute of India (SII). Serum Institute of India (SII) produces Covavax, Novavax, Astrazeneca AZ 1222, and anti-cancer drugs that can also be used for COVID-19. The government has also signed a tripartite agreement with the private sector to get 2.6 million doses of the Coronavirus vaccine developed by pharmaceutical companies and British-Swedish biopharmaceutical, AstraZeneca. The Philippines also plans to buy 25 million doses of China's Sinovac Biotech vaccine which will be delivered in March 2021 [16].

Due to the emergence of a new variant of SARS-COV-2 that appeared in the U.K., the Philippines temporarily banned flights from the U.K. from 24-31 December as a precautionary measure. President Duterte has also approved IATF-EID resolution 90 to prevent the new virus from entering. Under this resolution, passengers who have been to the U.K. within 14 days of arrival in the Philippines, including those who are transiting, are not allowed to enter the Philippines [17].

D. Challenges in Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 is rapidly spreading to all corners of the world today. Lower middle-income countries encounter problems such as overburdened health

systems and income-reducing lockdown policies. In response to the turmoil, the Philippine Government responded with a series of social protection programs. Although the government's response has been given to address the problems that emerged when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, there are still many challenges facing the Philippine Government, such as [18]: *First*, logistical and communication barriers that make it difficult to provide services, including important matters related to pandemics such as health and others. *Second*, rural areas in the Philippines, which are relatively poor, rely heavily on government services. *Third*, rural and remote areas are less connected to the central government, and COVID-19 is likely to weaken connections further, potentially weakening policymakers' response to the needs of the Philippine community. *Fourth*, many migrants who return to their home areas have the potential to spread disease. Finally, the food system itself is highly dependent on rural areas, where most of the food originates; farmers need access to markets not only for their output but also for vital inputs and services. However, some of the current COVID-19 policies focus on maintaining agricultural production.

E. New Normal in the Philippines

President Rodrigo Duterte placed the country in a public health emergency on March 8, 2020 but placed Metro Manila under public quarantine from March 15 to April 14, which was later extended to May 15 [19]. The lockdown entails restrictions on the movement of people (strict home quarantine and social distancing) and travel, as well as the closure of large business establishments.

Later, President Rodrigo Duterte announced that he was lifting one of the most stringent and longest-running

lockdowns in Southeast Asia, as the Philippines turned to rebuild an economy devastated by the coronavirus pandemic with a new normal. Starting June 1, 2020, those living in Metro Manila can leave their homes without "quarantine" to purchase essential goods and services [20]. More companies will be allowed to reopen. The mall will be allowed to reopen more shops. However, restaurants are still limited to takeaways and deliveries, while salons, spas, cinemas, bars, and clubs will remain closed. Riders can return to take buses, trains, taxis, and motorized rickshaws, and travel to places outside of Metro Manila. However, checkpoints will still be there to ensure only those working or on running supply and buying essential goods will be out on the road. Necessary travel to places outside of Metro Manila will be permitted, although the airport will remain closed for domestic and international flights [21].

This transition aims to revive an economy that has stalled due to the lockdown. A mayor in Metro Manila said the pandemic had a "devastating impact," especially on workers. About five million Filipinos are likely to lose their jobs by the end of the year, and a crippling recession may persist into the next year, labor officials and economists have warned [22].

What is certain is that once the lockdowns are lifted in different parts of the world, life will take on a different kind of "normal." In this "new normal," there are two aspects that can impact Philippine foreign policy [23]. First, the pandemic highlights the importance of non-traditional security issues. The COVID-19 pandemic has definitively exposed the line's arbitrariness separating "high politics" from "low politics." Indeed, the Philippines' way of securing the virus is proof that the pandemic is now seen as a clear danger and poses a danger.

For the Philippines, the "new normal" demands better health facilities and more generous subsidies for the agricultural sector, minimizing supply chain disruptions and ensuring a safety net in providing public goods and access to social services. The "new normal" also requires better cyber-infrastructure and capacity to allow technology access for various groups in society [22].

Thus, non-traditional security concerns illustrate that, at best, highly militarized responses are only useful in the short term. In the long term, this national security response is more difficult to sustain than to move incrementally but directed toward a more developed response. Besides, pandemic securitization is fraught with politics and the exercise of power, and the longer that is in effect, the harder it is to maintain.

Therefore, the problems accompanying the "new normal" require a fundamental change from the Philippines, although whether this change is feasible or not is more a matter of political will. The country ultimately needs to develop resilience by increasing governance capacity. This, in turn, could lead to the refinement of its foreign policy and the improvement of its international relations.

IV. CONCLUSION

So far, there have been many threats that have disturbed state security's stability globally, including non-traditional threats. There has been a growing recognition among Southeast Asian countries that non-traditional security concerns do indeed threaten the region's stability and prosperity. Nonetheless, because of their liberal origins, few regional countries are willing to turn to model human security against current or future threats. However, public health issues such as COVID-19

have forced countries to go beyond that conception to consider human security responses to incipient or potential threats, including those carried out by the Philippine government.

The initial response of the Philippine government in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic was fast. This can be seen from the Philippine government's initial response, which immediately closed flights from China even though no positive cases of COVID-19 were detected in the country. Although the government takes the COVID-19 virus seriously, the government understands that public diplomacy is also important so that people do not have excessive fear in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, President Duterte as the country's main actor continues to try to convince his people that COVID-19 no need to be overly feared.

After detecting a positive case of Covid-19 in his country, President Duterte signed a 992 proclamation that placed the Philippines under a health emergency. The government has also formed the Inter-agency Task Force for Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) as a special agency that assists the government in dealing with COVID-19. Besides, various programs have been implemented in an effort to deal with Covid-19 such as online schools, work from home, and community quarantine or Enhance Community Quarantine (ECQ).

As a guide in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, President Duterte signed the Republic Act 11469 or "Bayanihan to Heal as One Act". Seeing the economic development of the Philippines which continues to decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government formed the National Action Plan 2 which aims to restore the economy without neglecting health protection. In the National Action Plan 2,

the government established the One Hospital Command and upgraded the Bayanihan Act, which focuses on protecting public health and restoring the country's economy.

In an effort to provide a vaccine, the Philippine government has obtained the COVID-19 vaccine from various companies such as Covavax from India, Astrazeneca from the British-Swedish biopharmaceutical, and China's Sinovac Biotech vaccine. Besides, the government has also responded quickly in dealing with a new variant of the COVID-19 virus by temporarily banning flights from Britain and agreeing to resolution 90.

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