

The Coronavirus Is a Health Crisis, So Why Is the Philippine Government Treating It Like a Military Operation?

Thursday 26 March 2020, by [REYES Therese](#) (Date first published: 19 March 2020).

President Duterte said that those who violate the strict quarantine rules could get arrested, but critics argue that many are not privileged enough to follow them.

Checkpoints run by police and military currently line city borders across the Philippines' largest island of Luzon. They started appearing on Tuesday, March 17, after President Rodrigo Duterte placed the area, including the capital Manila, under a strict community quarantine to fight COVID-19.

[As of writing](#), there are 202 cases, 19 deaths, and five recovered patients in the Philippines. The country is now [under a state of calamity](#).

Under the government's new policies, people are required to stay at home, with movement [limited to accessing basic needs](#). Work, school, and public transport are suspended [until April 12](#). Most establishments are closed, save for supermarkets, pharmacies, and other stores that offer basic needs. Tasked to monitor and enforce these measures are uniformed personnel.

During a speech on Monday, March 16, Duterte warned that [violators will be arrested](#): "Remember what I said: obey the police and the military. Do not quarrel with them. And do not start a ruckus that would amount to a violation because you will be arrested and brought to prison."

While most Filipinos are concerned about the pandemic and want to cooperate, many are not privileged enough to follow the new policies. The government's militaristic strategy, critics say, could do more harm than good.

"The lockdown actually pushed people more into panic mode," Dr. Josh San Pedro, community physician for the Council for Health and Development and co-convenor of the Coalition for People's Right to Health, told VICE. "Because of the panicking, it actually worsened the situation."

He explained that the 48-hour window between the announcement and the [first day of Metro Manila's lockdown](#) on Sunday, March 15, pushed people to go back to their home provinces. This caused the [coronavirus](#) to spread further, moving the government to extend the lockdown to all provinces in Luzon on Monday.

San Pedro described the government's provisions as "martial law-like," claiming that they are more focused on increasing the presence of uniformed personnel, rather than improving health systems.

This a sentiment many Filipinos hold.

unless the police and military will be out there cleaning the damn streets, we don't need them littered all over Metro Manila and that's that

— LOVE IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS (@hijadepusa) [March 13, 2020](#)

Coronavirus: *exists and starts a pandemic*

Countries with sensible governments: "let's fight this with public health, like normal countries would!"

Philippines: "MORE MILITARY AND POLICE POWER"

— Edge Mendoza (@EDGEinuity) [March 14, 2020](#)

Im in favor of lockdown here in the Philippines. But I understand the critics as to why they insist health solution in lieu of military solution. [#Covid_19PH](#) [#coronavirus](#)

— Twinkle Felizardo (@twinkcool1) [March 15, 2020](#)

San Pedro understands that authorities are needed to establish peace and order but said that many Filipinos in marginalised communities – because of poverty, cramped spaces, and the need to make money to survive from day to day – can't follow social distancing rules even if they want to.

The government advised people to [wash their hands properly](#), [stay at home](#), and [keep at least a one-meter distance](#) from each other while out in public.

While these sound simple, it's actually difficult to follow for those living in lower-income neighbourhoods, where running water is not readily available, nutritious food is a luxury, and homes can be smaller than a one-car garage.

San Pedro regularly works with these communities and said that people started to worry when COVID-19 cases [rose about two weeks ago](#).

"They know, in principle, that these things would be able to prevent the disease, but at the same time, it's a privilege or a luxury for some of them to really say that these are followed in their day to day life," he said.

Under the Luzon lockdown, people are prohibited from leaving their homes unless necessary. Public transportation and most work are suspended, and authorities stop people from travelling between cities.

Daily wage owners have lost their sources of income. Those who still have jobs, like supermarket vendors, pharmacists, and hospital workers, struggle to go to work if they don't have their own vehicles. A nurse working in the frontlines of COVID-19 efforts [walked home for an hour](#) after mass transit was suspended.

The government has responded to this by [providing free shuttles](#) for healthcare workers, but doctors and nurses still struggle as they continue to work overtime in [crowded government hospitals](#). There's also a lack of supplies, leading some health workers to [beg for protective gear on social media](#).

Rather than focusing on restricting movement through militaristic operations, San Pedro said that the government should work to support hospitals more.

“A lot of the discourse has been on individual actions. On washing hands, on doing social distancing, on doing self-quarantine... But, as we have seen in other countries, what seems to be working aside from that, is the government actually doing something with regards to increasing the capacity of your health system to function.”

He gave countries like South Korea and Singapore as examples.

South Korea, which at one point had the most number of cases outside China, launched [drive-thru testing locations](#) that are free and done in 10 minutes. The outbreak has since [slowed down](#).

[In Singapore](#), the government provides self-employed citizens who are on quarantine SG\$100 (\$68.77) per day. Coronavirus testing and hospital bills for those who test positive are also covered.

Testing is also free in the Philippines but [there is a cap](#) on how much the government can provide hospitalised patients.

Now, more than ever, San Pedro said that people’s welfare should be most important. Instead of policing them, he said, the government should work on gaining its citizens’ trust.

“The last thing we want is for our patients to feel that the reason they’re in quarantine is so that they will not be arrested. They feel that they are prisoners in their quarantine.”

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