

Covid-19: Its Impact on the Philippines — Part IV (corrected version)

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We publish below the fourth article of a series of five.

II. Impact of COVID-19 on People's Lives

As the Philippines enters its 6th week of a social lockdown and shuttered economy manifestations of political fatigue and cultural toxicity have unfolded among PRRD's administration and the people. The idea that a second extension of a lockdown has created different tendencies within the government officials. The Inter-Agency Task Force for the Emerging Infectious Disease (IATFEID or IATF) has shown varied but serious concerns on the economic implication with another extension. The agency is composed of 8 departments which are principally tasked to confront and manage the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. There is no corresponding mechanisms on the Regional, Provincial and municipal levels. At the end of this month for instance, the country will be losing an estimated amount of 1 trillion pesos (March 15-April 15= P630 billion and April 16-30 = P325 billion) and almost zero growth for the beginning of the second quarter of this year. Such concerns have been coming from the economic team of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte (PRRD).

Another group of PRRD's men and women within the IATF has been showing their support for another extension of the lockdown to tighten the authoritarian grip of PRRD because of serious manifestations of social unrests.

The people have begun to doubt PRRD's promise of financial aid and food packages because as the second extension is about to begin, the financial help through social amelioration program has not even reached 50% of the 1st tranche of the two tranches. This is amidst the billions of pesos made available by Congress and several billions worth of donations (both financial and materials). These poor people are convinced that while they should close their ranks to fight against the destructive effects of COVID-19, they should also watch and be vigilant of attempts to close the democratic space which should be opened and respected at all times.

A third tendency within the PRRD's administration is how to come out with proper balance with the lockdown to physically contain the contagion without putting the country's economy on ice. On this basis the lockdown can be modified in some areas and can be very hard in other communities.

The almost two months of enhanced social lockdown without corresponding enhancement of the distribution of the Social Amelioration Program have resulted in toxic cultural practices in the country like physically hurting the medical frontliners in so many ways because they want to save their own skin. The worst (or one of the worst) is treating the country's new heroes (in pre-COVID-19 period) – The Overseas Filipino Workers or OFWs – as villains and in many cases they become unwelcome in their own communities because they might be COVID-19 carriers. In the old normal, everybody in the country could simply refer to these attitudes as ingrate or unfilipino.

But the most revealing of the intensifying differences among the IATF and the PRRD's administration is what resigned National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) Director General Ernesto Pernia – a senior member of the PRRD's economic team had said in an interview using the analogy of an orchestra, that if the IATF is an orchestra it has not been well conducted – that is why he resigned. He was not clear though if he was the one making the out of tune note.

● PERFECT STORM OF VIRUS AFFECTING THE COUNTRY'S POOR AND THE VULNERABLE SECTOR: LIFESAVERS THROWN TO THE ELITE

Several days from now, the first extension for the lockdown in Metro Manila and the whole island of Luzon ends and the second extension in whatever form or duration will be declared by PRRD. The President has been consulting different experts and the Inter-Agency Task Force regarding the substance and mechanisms of the extension. Basically this is consulting or talking to itself because all the members of the Inter-Agency are PRRD's appointees. As in the past, the people whose lives they are going to decide are not or never consulted.

And if one wants to read the mind of PRRD and his administration, the reason/s he gave 3 years ago for extending Martial Law in Mindanao for 3 times is worth reviewing. And this was because the terrorists and fundamentalists were still present and therefore there had been clear and present danger so he extended the Martial Law in the whole island of Mindanao.

Since last week, PRRD has been mentioning that the lockdown will remain as long as there is no available vaccine to cure COVID-19. And to date, it will be at least 18 months before a safe and medically proven vaccine can be on the market. Then this statement was followed during his weekly report (April 20) that he is offering P10 million for anyone who could produce this vaccine. In fact, PRRD said that if he is happy he will make it up to P50 million but the worst is that he was mentioning this seemingly unlimited amount in his pocket while he was saying about the drying up of funds to fight COVID-19. Nobody (to date) has produced the vaccine in the country but even in the global level

Meanwhile, the people have been considered as mere statistics and numbers in terms of COVID-19 cases and casualties. They have not been consulted and considered in terms of their socio-economic and psychological status and well-beings.

In fact, the President's announcement of the lockdown extension (calibrated or modified) will not give serious consideration of what has happened in the 1st extension of the lockdown (April 15-April 30). Different government agencies in charge of providing and distributing aids and food packages like the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Department of Interior and Local Government(DILG) and Department of Labor and Employment(DOLE) have been remiss in their implementation of the amelioration and relief aid for the millions especially the workers, farmers and the informal sectors. In the fourth weekly report (April 20) of the President to the Congress and to the nation, only 8.8% of the 2 million farmers (households) received their financial aid package.

With regards to the workers, the number directly affected by the pandemic (no work no pay) are more than 8 million and this includes the 2 million workers from the 79,000 small and medium enterprises which have closed shop.

Forty two(42) days after the lockdown only 345,000 of them were able to receive the first tranche of the cash aid or 17.25%. These packages were given through beautiful acronyms like Cash Amelioration Program (CAMP) and Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers or TUPAD (Livelihood Aid for the Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers). With the first tranche not completed yet, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), the PRRD's department in

charge of implementing these programs just declared that there are no more funds available.

For the CAMP, PRRD's administration was able to release P1.7 billion for 345,685 and P1.4 billion for 250,440 TUPAD program. There is also an aid package for the Small Business Wage Subsidy Program (SBWSP) which includes 79,000 small and medium enterprises with around 1.6 to 2 million workers. As of this writing, they have not received anything yet. And just like with the farmers, DOLE has passed the task to continue the distribution to agencies like Social Security System (SSS) and the Department of Finance (DOF). This will be another long bureaucratic process and financial aid will be done through the Automatic Teller Machine (ATM) which the majority of the workers do not have. According to the data of DOLE as of April 28, 2020, there are 2.3 million workers who were displaced higher than their March 2020 estimate of 116,000 to 1.8 million displaced workers. Geographically, 6 out of 10 workers are from Metro Manila, Cebu and Davao. Further, 6 out of 10 displaced workers have come from the small businesses. Only 3-4% of these workers have their aid package processed. Another delay of the social amelioration program (SAP) for these workers might be a question of life and death already.

With regards to the Emergency Social Amelioration Program (SAP) for the 18 million poor households nationwide, this program is divided into two; 1) Ang Pantawid Pampamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) and 2) Social Amelioration Program (SAP). The target households for the 4Ps are 4.3 million households and the total number who were able to receive the aid package is 3.7 million households or 85.7% households. But for the second group (the non 4Ps), the total target households for this package is 13,491,535 households or 13.5 million households and only 3,933,621 households were able to receive or just 29.2% families as of this writing.

In terms of the transportation industry like the drivers, out of millions of the drivers in the country, only 40,480 drivers were given P323 millions worth of cash aid and only in the National Capital Region. Leaders of the biggest Associations of Drivers in the Philippines claimed that not a single member of their association were able to receive the amelioration package.

The reason for this much delayed aid package is again, they have to compare their data with other departments and the different departments will validate their notes with the local government units. And this is for 42 days already. The head of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) for the delay is the difficulty of the social and physical distance protocols set by IATF of the constituencies like far-flung areas or the island municipalities and barangays. So, one can just imagine for the non-existing delivery of the basic services even in the pre-COVID-19 period of the government if the above mentioned reason is given for the current non delivery of aid package of the 1st tranche of the SAP. But even if this reason is given for the sake of argument, the case in Metro Manila has proven it wrong. The City of Makati has just released 1.3% of the cash aid and the case in Manila is just 5.6%. And the worst is that, there is no central database for the different government agencies, so that they can have the reference point. But even this last reason, some sectors have tried to muddle the issue like, there is a need to have the National Identification System first. They are suggesting that the government should prioritize this first before the Social Amelioration Program. The Law on the National ID System was passed last year but currently the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) is still processing the implementation of its first phase.

As the COVID19 has continued to shackle and stifle all aspects of the people's lives, the fangs of hunger have been making its clear presence especially among the poor. But one thing has been magnified that is- there can be serious and profound cover-up in the highest echelon of PRRD's government. For more than 3 years now, there is no clear database for its social programs. The billions approved annually by Congress and downloaded to the different departments have been thickly padded. The base year of 2015 _ and or the basis of the total number of the poorest of the poor is simply imagined figures. Again, if we take the case of Iligan City from Mindanao. The city's

population in 2015 was 342,618 or 68,523.6 HHs, currently the Mayor of the city claimed that there are more or less 128,000 HHs. The difference in four years is 59,476 HHs or an annual increase of 11,895.2 HHs. An annual increase of 59,476 individuals in a city like Iligan is simply statistically impossible. This means that there is a daily birth of 165. Mortality cases have not been factored in here. So this might be the figure that DSWD has based its annual budget. The COVID 19 has made people behind this gigantic paddling of "names" of peoples and cannot simply hide them from the eyes of the hungry people. The billions worth of social amelioration program is too big an amount to hide even if they include all the dead people in a year. The Filipino term for this is "Talagang bubukol."

What has been highlighted now for the 2nd extension of the lockdown is the reason that many people have not been strictly following the protocols of the lockdown. People have been going out of their houses not observing the stay-at-home policies and the social distancing. The mainstream media has been projecting this line of thinking. Many could not simply or refuse to link the non-delivery of financial and food packages of the government for the poor and hungry people. They (the people) have to go out because their families have suffered hunger for several weeks already. They considered death of hunger as the more immediate and visible problem than the death brought about by the unseen COVID-19. The drivers for instance in Metro Manila have to go out to beg for a few amounts so as to bring some food for their families.

Not a few private individuals and institutions have tried to fill up gaps left open by the government by giving dole outs and food packages. But they (individuals and institutions) could not replace the role of the government backed by Congress approved billions or even trillions of pesos from the taxpayers' money.

It is a perfect storm for millions of the poor in the country. They have to face the health and humanitarian catastrophes brought about by COVID-19 and the inefficiency of the highest degree of the government services highlighted by the pandemic. The people have been seriously affected by tsunami of sufferings and anxieties like in no other time. They are the ones being suppressed by the civil and military apparatus of the Philippine government. Too bad, the people could not hold these irresponsible people who have failed to timely and regularly give them the aid package while they are forced to stay-at-home. And worst, they are the ones used to justify the de facto military rule in the country. It would be like the best defense of an Administration who has not prepared the country and its peoples for the unstoppable arrival of a pandemic including the socio and economic impacts. And yet they are also used as a convenient escape for not delivering its basic constitutional duty to ensure the health and welfare of the people with full respect of their human rights.

As the second extension of the enhanced community quarantine has been announced only 30% of the first tranche of the aid package (both of financial and food aid fund) has been downloaded from the department level which claimed releasing around 97% of the package to the LGUs since the first week of April. Anyone could not help but ask the question like, "Where is the money now?"

When one sees the current situation where millions of people are locked down for almost two months with very strict policies and regulations (with overt instruction from the President to shoot dead the violators) and considering that most of those locked down were poor (with no-work-no-pay and no food daily existence), not complying with the timely distribution of social amelioration program (SAP) and food packages basically due to government's neglect is a crystal clear picture of a perfect storm hitting the country and the poorest of the poor.

But the picture can also portray that the COVID19 pandemic strongly impacting the world in all its aspects has conveniently provided the authoritarian/rightist governments in the world to govern their respective countries and control the social unrest triggered by the health disaster which has

morphed into economic catastrophe. Such governments have crafted laws and rules using the pandemic COVID 19 but seem to create conditions that the poor could really and hardly follow and therefore would prefer to violate the rules on social distancing and stay at home policies to solve the hunger problem of their families. In the name of their safety against the virus they are suppressed and controlled. The people's reaction to such suppression will be the basis for stronger authoritarian grip and less democratic governance.

Reasons can be cited for this CRIMINAL NEGLECT from the side of the government are the absence of basic and centralized data, blatant corruption and patronage politics. And in the forty days since the lockdown, PRRD's administration has arrested 130,000 for violation of COVID-19 protocols and measures linked to the pandemic.

Thousands more were apprehended for curfew violations. In fact, the country ranked number 4 in the world after Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa for COVID19 related human rights violations according to the United Nations Council for Human Rights. But nobody was arrested or held accountable for the CRIMINAL NEGLECT for not releasing or delaying social amelioration program (SAP). Again if PRRD wants to extend the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), they should first implement the first tranche of SAP and enhance also its implementation and punish those SAP violators. If a government like that of PRRD's is curtailing basic rights and ruling by decree because of its health concerns and people's welfare brought about by COVID19 pandemic then why no corresponding concern for peoples' health and welfare because of lack of food and hunger and basic rights to earn their living. The obvious contradictory concerns by the government have led many to think that such moves are securing and perpetuating certain interests but surely it is not the peoples'.

It can help one to profoundly understand the PRRD's outlook in the context of the Marawi Siege in 2017 because the key players in this kind of war are the same key players in the war against COVID-19. After so much neglect on what the intelligence data were saying (later on the AFP leadership-headed by now DILG Secretary Eduardo Año would admit that they got the wrong interpretation of the data) and did not take proactive actions. From January to April 2017, the terrorists led by Abusayyaf and Maute groups had launched battles from the municipalities of Butig & Piagapo before May 22, 2017 Siege of Marawi but nothing had been done. PRRD had even mentioned based on the intelligence data that the AFP knew about the stockpiling of arms in the city. But why did he not order the AFP to get these firearms? Nobody knew. When the battle of Marawi erupted, Martial Law was immediately declared in the whole island of Mindanao while PRRD was in Moscow. The Martial Law would be extended 3 or more times by Congress and agreed upon by the Supreme Court. More than 400,000 Meranaws were displaced and until now many of them cannot still go back to their burned and devastated houses and lives. There was a clear neglect of why the Marawi Siege did happen. The fundamentalists and the terrorists made the attack but it could have been avoided or at least minimized the destruction and loss of lives. Nobody is held accountable for this criminal neglect.

As stated in the third series of this paper, the principal players of the battle of Marawi are now the key players in fighting COVID19 pandemic. Billions of pesos have been pouring in to rehabilitate the city and its people (the big part was released during the Martial Law period) but up to now, no substantial change has been done and majority of the population of Marawi have not yet returned to their city. Every time the Meranaws would insist on rebuilding their shattered life and destroyed houses, they were told that there are still unexploded bombs in the most affected area.

Again it is helpful to remind everybody that the reason given by PRRD to launch war in Marawi is to save the people against the terrorists namely Abu Sayyaf and the Maute Group at that time. Now people in Marawi are silently witnessing the revival of the new and young leadership of the

fundamentalist group/s in the city. What will happen in the next few months in Marawi, nobody could tell. What is obvious though is that it's the population of the city who have been displaced and destroyed and not the terrorists (new breed) and the fundamentalist ideas.

Currently, it has been the knowledge of everybody that the security sector of PRRD is building a military camp in the center of the city based on the claim that this is a military reservation. What has happened with all the billions of pesos both donated and allocated nobody could tell except that before the end of 2019, almost half a billion had to be returned to the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) because it could not be absorbed by PRRD's management team in the rehabilitation and rebuilding of Marawi. A very bad picture that money intended to help rebuild Marawi and people's lives was returned while thousands of those displaced do not have permanent homes.

Now, the reason given by PRRD of imposing the Community Quarantine is the presence of COVID 19. Everybody knows that the virus brought about by the Novel SARs2 will be here to stay longer if no vaccine is discovered to destroy it. PRRD had mentioned last week that he would just lift up the community quarantine (in whatever forms) if a vaccine would be discovered. This will take the middle of next year. Meanwhile, the people of Marawi have a triple burden on their shoulders.

The majority of the members of the Senate and led by the Senate President had asked the current Secretary of Department of Health (DOH) to resign, an obvious step of frustrations from the Senate for the snail-pace response by the DOH's leadership. For three months (since January 2020), the senators did not see any serious steps from the leading PRRD's department against COVID19 to prepare the country of the pandemic. Aware that there is no vaccine at hand, the leadership of DOH Secretary Francisco Duque III did not ensure the frontliners would be protected when confronting the contagious virus. The senators could not understand why they were not in a hurry in setting up more testing centers to identify the virus carriers and isolate them. In fact, locking down of areas and communities should be based on the results of the massive and aggressive testing. But what had surprised not only the senators but many people, was the sudden change of DOH's scientific reasons of the Department of the unreliability of the medical equipment: personal protective equipment (PPE) and face masks coming from China. The spokesperson of DOH cleared China the day after the announcement due to the Chinese Embassy's intervention and made shameless cover up that those medical paraphernalia are from another source abroad. Further, several countries had complained about the same thing on the same date the DOH raised the complaint. In fact, The Netherlands, which ordered around 1.2 million PPEs, facemasks and others, had to return to China the first 600,000 or 50% of which had already arrived in their country for being unreliable and the Netherlands government could not risk their frontliners using these defective equipment in treating the COVID-19 patients.

After the clearing of China by the DOH, nothing has been heard on this issue. If there are connections between this medical issue it is the extraordinary high number of cases in the country's frontliners affected by the virus but nobody could tell. The country in fact, though the DOH has continued to receive the medical supplies from China- many have been donated.

The move of the Senators to Secretary F. Duque's resignation did not materialize because PRRD simply said that he still trusts the DOH Secretary.

Meanwhile, on the eve of the second extension (last days of April), there was a silent but conspicuous change in PRRD's fight against COVID19. This is the re-appointment and taking over of Harry Roque as the spokesperson of the IATF and in concurrent capacity as PRRD's spokesperson. In effect, Roque has replaced cabinet Secretary Carlo Alexie Nograles as IATF spokesperson and Presidential Legal Counsel Salvador Panelo who acted as PRRD's Spokesperson.

Currently Harry Roque is both the spokesperson of PRRD and the IATF. Actually in substance, there is no difference between the two positions. IATF is composed of 8 departments where the heads are all PRRD's appointees but with Roque's return (he was once PRRD's spokesperson but resigned before election - when he had tried to run as a senator against the advice of PRRD), is saying something. PRRD's administration needs somebody like Roque with his background as a Human Rights lawyer to speak on behalf of the President in his fight against the illegal drugs and the COVID-19. Both campaigns have defined PRRD's administration with regards to issues affecting the people at the expense of Human Rights and democracy. It has been known by many who know Harry Roque that he would speak in behalf of his principal even if it contradicts his basic principles especially on Human Rights and International Law.

Currently, the number of people arrested for violating the protocols set by PRRD in the campaign against COVID 19 far exceeded the total number of people tested for the virus in the country. But nobody has been arrested for the criminal neglect of withholding the social amelioration program (SAP) and the food aid for the hungry people who suffered the loss, not only their livelihood, but basic human rights as well.

Meanwhile, the IATF through their initiative of PRRD's economic team has approved an amount of P613 billion or more than \$6billion as economic stimulus for the big business sector. Another P35 billion for the small and medium business aid package has also been approved.

Indeed, with COVID19 becoming a great equalizer where a playing field has been leveled up, those who are now the new favored elite can have a bigger advantage at the expense of not only the old oligarch but most especially the toiling masses in the country. With another extension of the lockdown in the country and where it is still far from the cusp of limiting much more defeating the COVID19, the current situation has intensified the country's crisis.

In addition, the RA 11464 or the law which says that Bayanihan is needed for the nation to HEAL AS ONE is becoming unreachable unless the country and the people should first ACT AS ONE. Having enhanced quarantine can only be bearable if the social amelioration fund and aid package can be proportionately enhanced as well. The effort should be done together with aggressive testing so as to locate and identify the COVID-19 carriers so that they can be isolated and cured.

Success can never be a coincidence; its formula can be a combination of efforts by medical professionals including all the frontliners, government, private sectors and the society at large. This is a sure step of seriously strengthening the armor of our defenses against the COVID-19. This is also putting flesh to the belief that human capacity to overcome whatever challenges when working together is simply limitless.

While the 2nd extension is about to start, we should brace ourselves with the next extension and the best way to prepare for such endeavors is to expose and prosecute those who committed the criminal neglect of not implementing the COVID-19 Social Amelioration Program.

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(4th of 5 Series)

P.S.

- Raymund De Silva is a political activist based in Mindanao for more than three decades.