

# Philippines: Between a rock and a hard place

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**‘Earth indeed hath witnessed no fury greater than that of Big Pharma, when its patents are threatened in the interest of public health’**

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The Philippines, like so many other countries in this time of COVID-19, is caught in the worst of all possible worlds, or between a rock and a hard place. On one side is the greed of western governments that want to hoard most of the vaccines, and western pharmaceutical corporations that will do anything to keep complete control of their patents and charge poor countries sky-high prices for vaccines. On the other, bungling governments that can't organize a decent, orderly program of vaccination.

## Corporate greed

As my friend, the economist Jayati Ghosh, writes, “This vaccine grab by rich countries meant that most of the world would get safe and approved vaccines only in 2022, and in some cases not even until 2024. In mid-January 2021, the head of the World Health Organization (WHO) noted that while 39 million vaccine doses had already been administered in the rich countries...170 [of the] poorest countries had received no vaccines at all.”

Meantime, in desperation, developing countries have tried to get the so-called “waiver” from Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) at the World Trade Organization (WHO), which would allow them to withhold enforcement of patent rights and to promote production of the vaccines locally or in developing countries with manufacturing capacity. Not surprisingly, the rich countries where the western vaccine companies are based have blocked the waiver. Earth indeed hath witnessed no fury greater than that of Big Pharma, when its patents are threatened in the interest of public health.

But it's not only corporate greed that is preventing the vaccines from reaching our people in the needed quantities. It's the amazing level of incompetence among our government officials, one that matches that of the Trump administration during the vaccine rollout in the US in late November and December of last year.

## The Pfizer fiasco

First, there was the failure of Health Secretary Francisco Duque to pay attention to the necessary papers to get Pfizer to assure the Philippines an early delivery of its vaccine. It wasn't clear what

these papers were, but what Pfizer wanted, apparently, was not just Duque's signature, but a law that would exempt Pfizer from being sued in the event of vaccine malfunction, something that most officials at the IATF seemed to have been unaware that Pfizer was demanding until much later.

Then there's been the confusion over who and who hasn't been granted emergency use authorization (EUAs) by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). For some reason, this late in the game, only Sinovac and AstraZeneca appear to have been granted EUAs, and the FDA says the drug companies are not applying, though it doesn't enlighten us on why this is the case. People are asking: why is the EUA so hard to obtain from our FDA, when other governments have readily given it to many other vaccine manufacturers?

This is, after all, an emergency. The fact is, no one in the government really knows when the other vaccines will be available, and with the slow pace of delivery, it will not be surprising if not much will be available for the general population until 2024, as Jayati Ghosh warns may be the case for many developing countries.

In the meantime, for two solid months the nightly news has been filled with Metro Manila LGUs preparing for the arrival of the vaccines. To see if this was true, I decided to visit our local barangay health center in Quezon City. Despite the mayor's almost nightly appearance on television assuring us how prepared the city was to roll out the vaccine once it arrives, in fact, no such plan existed, and the local health official said she did not know when one would be available. One would not be surprised if this were also the case in some other LGUs.

Meanwhile, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque no longer seems to want to serve as a cheerleader for the vaccine rollout, and seems more intent nowadays on describing as "stellar" the Duterte administration's "limiting" COVID-19 infections to over 616,000 and nearly 12,800 deaths. I guess Roque thinks that compared to the awful record of the United States, everything is "stellar." It does not seem that the guy is aware of the performance of our neighbors: Vietnam has had only 35 deaths, Thailand 86, and Singapore 30, *and their governments are mortified that this many of their citizens have died.*

### **...but the Duterte Death Machine rolls on**

With COVID-19 out of control with over 5,000 daily infections, the only thing that seems to be functioning these days is the administration's death machine, which claimed nine lives over a week ago in what Vice President Leni Robredo has rightfully called a "massacre." But not all killings taking place these days are premeditated, as shown by the fact that two government gangs that could not shoot straight, one from the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) and the other from the Quezon City Police Department, ended up firing on each other in a drug bust, with a couple of agents ending up kaput.

But containing COVID-19 is no longer the main focus of our political elites. The coronavirus may end up decimating us, but our public officials are now more preoccupied with the succession to the presidency in 2022. Is it going to be Sarah or Bong or Bongbong or Manny? That's the conversation in the rarefied circles of our elites these days, not COVID-19. As the French say, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. The more things change, the more things remain the same. Or to slightly alter the biblical saying, COVID you will always have with you.

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**Walden Bello** is a former member of the House of Representatives. He has had two COVID-19 tests, both of which turned out negative.

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