

# Philippines government declares COVID-19 is “here to stay”

Dante Pastrana  
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COVID-19 infections are increasing again in the Philippines, six months after a massive January surge that peaked at 34,832 daily cases and left in its wake 3,145 dead.

From June 27 to July 3, the weekly officially reported infections totaled 7,398, a 60 percent jump from the previous week, and a sharp rise from three weeks earlier, when 1,675 cases were recorded.

From July 11 to 17, the country recorded 14,640 additional COVID-19 infections, or an average of 2,091 cases a day. The infections rose by 44 percent over the last seven days. Active cases now number 20,511. The total official death toll since 2020 stands at 60,641.

This is a vast undercount. According to a World Health Organisation report, excess deaths in the Philippines associated with COVID-19 from January 2020 to December 2021 were estimated to be as high as 208,000.

The test positivity rate nationwide is at 9.6 percent. According to a *BusinessMirror* report, a sustained case uptrend was observed in 91 percent of provinces and cities. In Metro Manila, the positivity rate was at 10.4 percent. Cavite province was at 16.2 percent, Capiz province at 17.8 percent and Antique province was at the highest, 18.9 percent.

Meanwhile, hospitals reported 16.13 percent of all COVID-19 dedicated ICU beds were already occupied and 228 COVID-19 ventilators were in used.

As with every other government internationally with the exception of China, the newly-elected government of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is making no pretence of combating the pandemic, much less eradicating the virus. Marcos Jr. has not even appointed the health department secretary, who nominally leads the pandemic response.

Former President Rodrigo Duterte had already abandoned most of the public health measures, meagre and underfunded as they were. Mobility restrictions within and into the country were lifted, resulting in

domestic and foreign tourism skyrocketing. According to the Philippine Tourism Satellite Accounts report, “domestic tourism tallied 37,279,282 trips in 2021” and foreign tourists totalled 163,879 that year.

All businesses are now in full operation. Last month, the biweekly testing mandated for unvaccinated workers were scrapped for businesses in areas under Alert Level 1, which is virtually most of the country.

Six million students out of an estimated 27 million were herded back to school for 2021–2022. According to the education department, over 73 percent of public schools were opened. Vice President Sara Duterte, who has been appointed concurrent education secretary, announced she aimed to have full resumption of face-to-face classes in public schools by August.

Even the mask mandate, despite continued popular support, is being rolled back. The governor of Cebu Island, an ally of Marcos Jr, declared masking as optional for the population of 3.3 million,

What remains of the government’s response is mostly a vaccination program that has stalled, with just over 70 percent of the population vaccinated and barely 13 percent having had their first booster shot.

There has been a campaign to shift the responsibility of dealing with the public health calamity to individuals. This has been sold on the basis that the Omicron variant’s high transmissibility and supposed mildness means that eradication is both impossible and unnecessary, and therefore the virus is to be treated as endemic so that people must learn to live with it.

The virus is “here to stay,” Health Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire declared last month in a press briefing. “We’re already teaching our countrymen that we should live with this virus, they must protect themselves by receiving our vaccines and also doing and complying with our safety protocols like wearing face masks.”

However, cases are on the rise again due to mobility patterns, low vaccine uptake, especially for booster shots, and minimal public health standards. Vergeire insisted that as “long as it’s mild and moderate only and asymptomatic, we can survive this. What’s important now is to manage and maintain our hospitals, that the cases admitted won’t increase and we maintain low severe and critical cases.”

In a previous public briefing in June, Vergeire said daily infections could rise to as much as 4,600 by mid-July, citing projections by Australian Tuberculosis Modeling Network. The projections were based on assumptions that included increased mobility, reduced adherence to public health standards, and low uptake of boosters.

These are the very conditions that the ruling elite’s profit-first policy are creating.

With the health department remaining headless, the business elites are moving swiftly to essentially privatise the handling of the ongoing pandemic and thereby head off any re-imposition of mobility restrictions and other public health measures that could impinge on the production of profits.

Last month, Joey Concepcion, multimillionaire businessman and presidential adviser to Duterte, convened an Advisory Council of Experts, composed of medical advocates of vaccine-only and “herd immunity” strategies and economists with close links to international finance, to map out a transition to a “better normal, one that encourages economic activity and does not risk the public’s health.” More bluntly, this is a “normal” of repeated infections, mass debilitation and possibly death for millions of working people.

Concepcion stated: “The most important thing for our business leaders right now is to not lock down. We cannot lock down anymore as rising prices are a big issue for all manufacturers. We don’t want consumers to slow down their spending. This is not good for the economy.”

Concepcion has been spouting medical advice without the benefit of a medical degree. In 2020 as the pandemic surged, he suggested that the poor were naturally immune from the COVID-19 virus as they had long been exposed to viruses and germs because of living in poverty.

Last month, he claimed that Omicron was a blessing because it gave “natural immunity to our people.”

The council’s task, while dressed up in concern with public health, unsurprisingly, is a further doubling down on ending the “pandemic mindset”—the understandable public concern over a scientifically proven fact of an ongoing and uncontrolled pandemic.

A key step is ending the state of the public health emergency declared by Duterte in 2020. It is set to expire in September, unless prolonged by Marcos Jr. That would remove the legal basis of any government measures against the pandemic. It would mean dismantling the anti-pandemic task force, rolling back regulations against the pandemic and ending the government’s power to impose lockdowns and quarantines.

Critically, it would also end free vaccinations and the limited testing funded by local governments, available to those with symptoms or close contacts of COVID-19 victims.

The end of testing alone would be a massive blow to the ability of most workers to shoulder any responsibility for their own health amidst a raging pandemic. RT-PCR testing costs a minimum of PHP2,500, equivalent to a week’s pay for a daily wage worker. The cheaper but less effective alternative, the rapid tests, cost as much PHP900, nearly twice the minimum daily wage of a worker in Metro Manila.

The class interests being advanced by Concepcion and his cohorts are clear. According to *Forbes*, the wealth of Philippine tycoons surged by 30 percent in 2021. The heirs of the late SM Group founder Henry T. Sy Sr., with a \$US16.6 billion fortune, gained a further \$2.7 billion. Real estate tycoon and former Senate president Manuel B. Villar Jr. increased his worth by \$1.7 billion to \$6.7 billion.

Overall, the collective wealth of the 50 richest families and individuals in the Philippines surged by 30 percent to \$79 billion, even as millions of workers lost their jobs and income, and many thousands got sick or died.



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