

No change in quarantine levels despite variant case, Duque says

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DEPARTMENT of Health (DOH) Secretary Francisco Duque III on Thursday, January 14, 2021, said the current community quarantine classifications will remain despite the detection of the highly contagious B.1.1.7 Sars-cov-2 variant in the country.

He said any changes would depend on data analytics and recommendations of experts to the Interagency Task Force (IATF) for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases. The IATF is set to meet Thursday night to discuss developments related to the first B.1.1.7 case in the country.

Duque said, however, that he will recommend the inclusion of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the list of countries covered by travel restrictions until January 15.

The first B.1.1.7 case, a 29-year-old Filipino male from Kamuning in Quezon City, went on a business trip to Dubai in the UAE on December 27, 2020. He returned to the Philippines via Emirates EK 332 on January 7.

Quezon City Mayor Joy Belmonte, in a television interview, said 10 other Quezon City residents were on the same flight. Contact tracing is ongoing.

The UAE is not among the 32 countries currently covered by the restrictions. Foreign travelers from these countries are prohibited from entering the Philippines while Filipino travelers may enter but will be required to undergo facility-based quarantine for 14 days. As of Thursday, the list includes the United Kingdom, United States, Portugal, India, Finland, Norway, Jordan, Brazil, Denmark, Ireland, Japan, Australia, Israel, The Netherlands, Hong Kong, Switzerland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Lebanon, Singapore, Sweden, South Korea, South Africa, Canada, Spain, Austria, China, Luxembourg, Oman, Pakistan and Jamaica.

During the Laging Handa briefing Thursday, Duque said the country is not “defenseless” against the new variant because health protocols are in place.

The government requires all citizens to comply with the minimum public health standards, which include proper wearing of face masks and face shields, and physical distancing.

Duque also urged the public to avoid crowded and enclosed spaces.

He encouraged local government units to strengthen anti-covid efforts such as early detection, aggressive contact tracing, and isolation of suspected and probable cases.

DOH Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire, in a television interview, said the recommendation to impose travel restrictions on UAE is a proactive measure to ensure that the healthcare system is prepared for a spike in B.1.17 cases.

“This is the recommendation of our experts for us to buy time to analyze this case, determine other individuals affected by this variant and prepare our healthcare system kung may makita tayong pagtaas ng kaso,” she said.

Belmonte, meanwhile, said there is no need to place Barangay Kamuning on lockdown.

The patient and his girlfriend had gone straight to a hotel for the mandatory 14-day quarantine from the Ninoy Aquino International Airport Terminal 3.

He was found positive for the virus on January 8, diagnosed with pneumonia and brought to a quarantine facility in Quezon City.

The girlfriend tested negative for Sars-cov-2. She is under strict quarantine.

Belmonte said Kamuning has one of the lowest numbers of infection in Quezon City.

"Since hindi naman lumapag sa barangay, hindi naman siya umuwi at 'di pa lumalabas 'yung resulta ng BHERT (barangay health emergency response teams) na positive sila, although quarantined na sila ngayon, wala pa tayong sapat na batayan na i-lockdown 'yung Barangay Kamuning," Belmonte said in a television interview.

She said they have immediately conducted contact tracing of the direct contacts of the patients including the barangay health workers who facilitated his transfer to the quarantine facility. They have been tested and have gone into isolation./ Sunstar Philippines