

Luzon-wide lockdown after April 30 not needed, health experts tell Duterte

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BIG DECISION. President Duterte meets with COVID-19 task force members and health experts from the private sector before making a final decision on whether or not to extend the Luzon lockdown. Malacañang photo

MANILA, Philippines – There was a near-consensus among health policy experts [consulted](#) by President Rodrigo Duterte that the current Luzon-wide lockdown be lifted on April 30, with only some parts of the region to remain under quarantine.

"There was almost a consensus that an ECQ (enhanced community quarantine) doesn't have to be implemented over the entire Luzon," Presidential Spokesman Harry Roque said in a virtual press conference on Tuesday, April 21.

"Their recommendation is to continue ECQ (enhanced community quarantine) where there is an outbreak of COVID-19 – NCR, Cebu (City), and Davao (City)," Roque added.

He later added Calabarzon and "portions of Bulacan" as areas that experts believed should remain under lockdown after April 30.

Luzon, home to 57 million Filipinos, has been on lockdown since March 17. The lockdown period is supposed to last until April 30, though the government prefers to use the term "ECQ."

Roque said that Presidential Adviser for Entrepreneurship Joey Concepcion also backs a lifting of the Luzon-wide lockdown on April 30. But quarantine measures would be implemented in localities with a high number of COVID-19 cases.

"The private sector's suggestion was to find out which barangays have high infection rates and implement ECQ there," said the Duterte spokesman.

Some experts who attended the meeting had specific dates in mind for a continued quarantine period. Health reform advocate Anthony Leachon, for instance, supports a modified quarantine from May 1 to 15 in Metro Manila.

Why continued quarantine for select areas? The list of areas that health experts believed should remain under some form of quarantine was based on the number of COVID-19 cases there and the likelihood of another outbreak.

Mahar Lagmay, executive director of the University of the Philippines Resilience Institute, said the implementation of ECQ, whether modified or as is, would depend on how close a province is to its "outbreak threshold."

Metro Manila, which accounts for more than half of the total coronavirus cases in the country, is at this threshold, said Lagmay.

Cases in the region are now at 3,785. Calabarzon comes next with 818 cases, followed by Central Luzon with 285 cases. Cebu province, including independent cities, has 186 cases. Davao region, meanwhile, has 97 cases.

Duterte's questions. The President's main agenda for the meeting was to find out the consequences of relaxing or totally lifting current lockdown measures in Luzon.

According to Roque, the President asked: "What will happen if he lifts ECQ to certain kinds of people? What good will lifting or relaxing ECQ give to certain sectors of society? How many people will die if ECQ is lifted, modified, or retained?"

Other questions the spokesman quoted were: "Is there a possibility of a second wave of COVID-19 if ECQ is relaxed or lifted? If people are allowed to leave their homes, will the disease spike anew or is this just really round one of COVID-19?"

One silver lining Duterte noted was the higher number of recoveries compared to deaths. As of writing, 613 patients recovered from the virus while 428 have perished.

While the number of recoveries recorded have exceeded the number of deaths in the country in the past week, the number of new cases during that time was often more than 200 per day.

Apart from experts' recommendations and inputs from government agencies, Duterte will also consider the advice of the World Health Organization that any relaxation of quarantine measures must be done in a staggered or gradual manner. – **Rappler.com**