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Philippines ends compulsory mask wearing outdoors



Athletes training without any masks on at a university campus in Quezon City. PHOTO: REUTERS



Mara Cepeda
Philippines Correspondent

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SINGAPORE - The Philippines has dropped its rule requiring people to wear masks outdoors, joining nations that have eased mask mandates due to lower Covid-19 infections and higher vaccination rates.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr approved a recommendation of the inter-agency task force on Covid-19 to make mask wearing optional when outdoors beginning on Monday.

However, this will be allowed only for low-risk individuals in non-crowded open spaces with good ventilation.

Face masks will still be mandatory in outdoor areas where physical distancing cannot be maintained. The mandate also remains for all indoor settings, including public transportation.

Vulnerable sectors of society, such as senior citizens, people with weakened immune systems, schoolchildren, those who have not completed their Covid-19 vaccination and sick individuals, are "highly encouraged" to wear their masks.

Minimum health protocols such as physical distancing will still be observed at all times.

Several other countries in Asia have already eased their mask mandates in public places, though face masks are still recommended indoors.

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In Singapore, face masks are no longer required in most indoor settings, except within hospitals, polyclinics, residential care facilities, ambulances and public transportation.

The same goes for Malaysia, which now allows voluntary mask wearing indoors except for people on public transport and in medical facilities, as well as those who have tested positive for Covid-19.

But Filipino public health experts and the Department of Health (DOH) believe it is still too early to drop the outdoor face mask rule as fewer individuals in the country have taken their Covid-19 booster shots compared with other nations where the mask mandate has been removed.

DOH data showed that while more than 72 million individuals have been fully vaccinated, only 18.2 million have received their booster shots. The country has a population of about 109 million.

In contrast, Singapore has fully vaccinated more than five million out of its 5.45 million residents. More than 4.2 million have received their booster shots as at Aug 29.

The Marcos government kicked off a booster vaccine campaign in July to encourage more Filipinos to get their shots, opening additional vaccine sites in malls, markets and schools.

Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire, DOH's interim chief, told reporters on Sept 8 that the agency prefers to keep mask wearing mandatory, but understands the need to strike a balance between health and the economy.

She said other officials in the Covid-19 task force argued that the number of tourists would increase if the outdoor mask policy is lifted.

"What we have compromised would be, this will be done among low-risk individuals and in low-risk settings," Dr Vergeire said.

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Dr Tony Leachon, who previously advised the government's Covid-19 task force, told ABS-CBN News that the Philippines has a booster rate of only around 18 per cent, or 18 million.

He noted the country's Covid-19 positivity rate is still at 11.6 per cent, more than twice the World Health Organisation's 5 per cent benchmark. Positivity rate is the percentage of all Covid-19 tests performed whose results turned out to be positive.

"I think you need a minimum of around 50 per cent (booster rate) to consider lifting the face mask mandate outdoors. And it's quite difficult to make a decision if the decision will be fragmented, considering we're an archipelago region," said Dr Leachon.

As at Sept 7, about 3.9 million people had been infected with Covid-19 in the Philippines, with more than 22,800 cases currently active. The virus has killed more than 62,000 people in the country so far.

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