

**CONTRA-SONA**  
**(PRESIDENT DUTERTE'S DEFAULT IN ROADMAP RESPONSE**  
**TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC PLAGUES THE NATION)**

**By: Rep. Edcel C. Lagman**

We would like to lend our voice to the commendation of President Rodrigo Duterte in coming to the House of Representatives yesterday despite the still raging pandemic to discharge his constitutional duty of delivering the State of the Nation Address (SONA).

The grave and ominous setting of President Rodrigo Duterte's 5<sup>th</sup> State of the Nation Address is unprecedented in Philippine history.

It is for this reason that the nation expected him to announce and discuss his administration's roadmap in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit belatedly.

**GRAVE HEALTH STATISTICS**

As he spoke yesterday, a total of 80,448 persons in the country have tested positive for the novel coronavirus; 1,932 have died due to the infection; and only 26,110 have so far recovered,

leaving 52,406 still infected, hospitalized, in isolation or in the throes of death.

The Philippines has held the dubious distinction of being the ASEAN's laggard in comprehensively and coherently countering the contagion – from mass testing and controlling the spread of the virus to promptly treating those infected and protecting healthcare frontliners.

This unbelievable complacency, if not incompetence, of government officials is clearly reflected in our COVID-19 statistics.

On July 21, 2020, Reuters reported that the German online statistics portal Statista found that of the 30 countries worldwide most affected by the pandemic, the Philippines ranked 24<sup>th</sup> in terms of testing rate with only six countries worse than us.

The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center also ranks the country 2<sup>nd</sup> in the ASEAN Region in terms of COVID-19 positive cases and coronavirus-related deaths. Only Indonesia, with a population of 273 million people, more than twice the Philippines, has more cases and deaths than the Philippines. While we are

inching closer and closer to the 100,000 level, Singapore has less than 50,000; Malaysia has less than 9,000; and Thailand has just over 3,000.

Amazingly, the rest of the ASEAN Region seems to be almost unscathed by the deadly virus – as of July 26, Vietnam has only 417 cases, Cambodia 225, Brunei 141, Timor-Leste 24, and Laos 20.

Among almost 190 countries worldwide, we are the 30<sup>th</sup> nation with the highest number of infections and the 33<sup>rd</sup> with the greatest number of COVID19 deaths.

One of the most heartbreaking ironies of this pandemic is the record high of 36 doctors, nurses, and other frontline healthcare workers who have perished due to the viral infection – the very people who have unselfishly and courageously cared for those ravaged by this virulent virus.

In its most recent update on July 25, 2020, the DOH has recorded 4,215 health workers positive for COVID-19 or 5.4% of all cases. Of this number, 36 have died in the line of duty.

Former Health Secretary and well-respected cardiologist Dr. Esperanza Cabral underscores that as early as the first week of April, doctors and other healthcare professionals have emphasized and enumerated four imperatives that the Duterte administration must accomplish to reduce the projected devastating effects of the virus: know the enemy, take care of the ill, safeguard our frontliners, and protect the citizenry from socioeconomic harm.

On all four imperatives, the Duterte administration must be given a failing grade. In the words of Dr. Cabral: “what we have done is too little, too late and we will have to ramp up our response if we are to get out of the deep hole we are in.”

Several days ago, Dr. Joshua San Pedro, Co-Founder of the Peoples’ Right to Health emphasized that: “We are the only country on the WHO’s Western Pacific region that still has community transmission. All of our neighbors in the Western Pacific region have clusters of just imported cases.”

## **ESCALATING UNDEREMPLOYMENT**

As the President addressed the nation yesterday, unemployment has escalated to 17.7% of the labor force as of April 2020 or 7.3 million jobless Filipinos compared to only 2.4 million Filipinos or 5.3% of the labor force in January, 2020.

Our current unemployment rate is unprecedented in recent Philippine economic history. And all regions in the country had unemployment rates above 10%.

The baseless and improvident denial of ABS-CBN's franchise renewal has thrown to the streets 11,000 jobless network employees, not including the thousands more whose jobs are dependent on the operation of the giant network.

The unemployment problem will be exacerbated in the coming months with the Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello grimly forecasting that by December this year a total of 10 million Filipinos will be out of work.

## **HUNGER AND POVERTY**

The most recent SWS survey on self-rated hunger reveals that the pandemic has taken a distressing toll on Filipinos. Survey data show that there were 4.2 million Filipino families or 16.7 % of the population who were involuntarily hungry in May 2020. This is double the SWS data as of December 2019 which pegged self-rated hunger to 8.8% of the population or 2.1 million families.

On the other hand, the poverty incidence will surely surge.

## **ECONOMY CONSTRICTS**

As of yesterday, the economy continues to constrict. The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation has predicted a negative 7% growth in the second quarter. It also forecast the economy to continue to be in a recession with the third and fourth quarters registering negative growth of 4.4% and 3.9% respectively.

In his column in BusinessWorld, economist Andrew Masigan concludes that “[t]his will bring the full year contraction rate to 3.85%. The last time the Philippines posted negative growth was in 1998.”

In other words, our economy is in the worst shape it has been in more than two decades.

The most optimistic forecast for 2020 done by the World Bank, is a negative 1.9% growth. The country's own economic managers predict a shrinkage by 2.0 to 3.4%. The Asian Development Bank's forecast is negative 3.8%.

Foreign Direct Investments or FDI plummeted from \$971 million in April 2019 to only \$311 million in April 2020, for a hefty 67.9% decline. For the period January to April, the decline was 32.1%. This continuing decline has resulted in further loss of jobs.

With FDI's down, the government has to compensate for the decline in foreign investments by maximizing assistance to local investors and businesses by giving interest-free and concessional loans to beef up or resurrect their operations, both to MSMEs and larger business concerns.

Cash remittances through banks fell by 16.2% from \$2.441 billion in 2019 to only \$2.046 billion in April 2020. The \$395 million

difference means roughly a P2 billion income loss to Filipino families in April alone. The losses will be larger as more OFWs are repatriated and the world recession deepens toward December.

As of May 2020, the government's budget deficit was P562.2 billion, excessively higher than a deficit of only P1.2 billion over the same period in 2019. The budget deficit is projected to reach P1.613 trillion in 2020, which will be 8.4% of GDP. In 2019, the deficit was only 3.5% of GDP. The amount 1.613 trillion pesos will have to be borrowed internally or externally, thus raising the national debt by that amount.

Maintaining a low budget deficit is not sacrosanct as long as the government is willing to spend in order to contain the pandemic, uplift the beleaguered citizens and redress the financial plight of businesses.

As of yesterday, more than 3,000 businesses have closed, are about to close or have retrenched workers according to the labor department. Some casualties of the pandemic are well-loved and venerable restaurants like Alfredo's Steak House, Shangri-La Finest Chinese Cuisine, and Gourmet Gypsy Café all in Quezon City



Even with the recent easing of lockdown restrictions, it's still a hard road ahead for thousands of businesses all over the Philippines. For once, businesses – whether big or small – are in the same deep hole.

The 10 industries most affected by government's quarantine measures are: the arts, entertainment and recreation industry whose revenue loss amounted to 82.3% of pre-COVID levels; the travel, hotel and restaurant industry that lost 81.9% of revenues; technical repair services plunged by 77%; educational services dropped by 76.8%; construction activities dove by 74.6%; servicing of motorized vehicles sank by 73.4; financial and insurance services fell by 71.2%; sports and fitness services dropped by 70.4%; real estate plummeted by 68.6%; and professional, scientific and technical services fell by 67.1%. (BusinessWorld, 14 June 2020).

The so-called multiplier effect in economics is often illustrated positively. It can also work negatively, however. When it does, its transmission of economic impulses may be compared to the transmission of the novel coronavirus.

For example, if demand for the product of Industry A falls, the industry may reduce production to avoid accumulating stocks of unsold goods. The fall in production will result in a fall in employment as overtime work will become unnecessary, full-time workers may be asked to work part-time, and part-time workers may lose their jobs. The reduction in income will mean a reduction in consumption of the goods produced by Industry B. Industry B will respond by reducing production and consequently employment and income of workers. The workers will then have less money to spend on the goods produced by Industry C, which will in turn trigger reductions in production, employment, income, and consumption. And so on. The contamination or transmission of negative impulses may go beyond Industry Z.

## **MEASLY MASS-TESTING**

As of yesterday, only 1.1 million Filipinos or a measly 1.0% of the population have been mass-tested. More than a month ago on June 25, the country's testing czar Vince Dizon announced that the

country can now run over 50,000 COVID-19 tests daily. But less than a week ago on July 21, a Reuters article quoted DOH Secretary Francisco Duque as saying that the government aims to conduct between 32,000 to 40,000 tests per day, less than what was projected earlier. What is now the real score on mass testing?

The importance of mass testing cannot be overemphasized in a pandemic, especially one where infected individuals may be asymptomatic and can therefore be walking around, reporting to work, going to the supermarket, or riding public transportation, among other daily activities, thus infecting others.

At the very beginning of a communicable disease outbreak, the most crucial response of government is to direct public health officials to begin testing for the infection because this leads to prompt identification of cases; quick treatment of infected individuals, and their immediate isolation to prevent spread. Early testing also helps in contact tracing and identifying hotbeds of the disease in the community.

As of yesterday, the Duterte administration has failed to finalize an economic stimulus package unlike our Asian and ASEAN

neighbors which have much bigger packages in US dollar equivalent.

## **QUAGMIRE OF A MESS**

Why are we in this quagmire of a mess?

There are a number of reasons for this predicament, from the flippant to the overriding.

## **THE PRESIDENT IS JOKING**

First, the President from the start, and even occasionally now, appears not to be dead serious in addressing the pandemic.

When Covid-19 first entered the country, with the arrival on January 21, 2020 from Wuhan, the initial epicenter of the novel coronavirus, of a Chinese couple who were both infected with the viral disease, President Duterte days later quipped that he wanted to slap the invisible virus by intoning: "*P---inang idioto na corona na ito. Hinahanap ko, gusto ko sampalin ang gago.*"

What should have been done immediately even before the arrival of the infected Chinese couple was to ban the entry of Chinese nationals to the Philippines.

But the President's renowned affection for China prevailed and what he did on January 31 or ten full days after the infected Chinese couple arrived in the country, was to ban – not all flights from China and Hong Kong – but only flights coming from Hubei Province whose capital is Wuhan.

This was superfluous because since January 23 the entire province of Hubei was already on lockdown and no flights were allowed to and from the province.

The pandemic first reached our shores because the President failed to impose a timely Chinese travel ban. In fact, it is more precise to say that he refused to impose it.

The President's affection for China is mysterious in the sense that surveys show that Filipinos mistrust China. A June 2019 SWS survey revealed that Filipinos gave a trust rating of -24 to China. This worsened to -33 in another survey in September. A more

recent SWS survey in July 2020 shows a further decline in the trust rating of China to -36, which SWS classifies as bad.

Like other populist leaders in obstinate initial denial of the adverse impact of the novel coronavirus, President Duterte during a March 11, 2020 speech in Malacañang said “I’ve been told to – *masyado namang takot itong corona na ito*”. “They are discouraging long meetings and large congregation.” “You folks are too scared of this coronavirus epidemic”. “*Naniniwala pala kayo. Sus*” – “Fools, don’t believe it.”

The President even defied the “no touch policy” set by his own Presidential Security Group to protect him from COVID-19. The President even bragged that he prefers to hug, rather than shake hands, with ladies visiting the Palace.

A week ago, the President jokingly prescribed gasoline to disinfect face masks.

All of these jokes trifle with the government’s already delayed, inadequate, and erratic response to the viral contagion.

Now, to the more serious reasons for our dire predicament.

## **FLAWED IATF**

To start with, the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) is flawed in its composition and lacking in objectives.

It must be recalled that the IATF was created by Executive Order 168 which was issued by former President Benigno Aquino III on May 26, 2014. The IATF was principally organized to address health concerns for emerging infectious diseases like the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Avian Influenza, Ebola, and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV), all of which did not reach pandemic proportions unlike COVID-19.

Considering that the COVID-19 pandemic has devastated both the people's health and the country's economy, it was imperative to correspondingly amend the original composition and objectives of the IATF, which the Duterte failed to do.

The present composition of the IATF lacks the inclusion of medical experts and seasoned economists.

The Secretary of Health who is the Chairman of the IATF has faltered a number of times. Former Secretaries of Health and distinguished Filipino epidemiologists should have been made official consultants, if not members of the IATF.

Other than the Secretary of the Department of Budget and Management, the economic team of the government is excluded from membership in the IATF possibly to exempt them from a fiasco. The Secretary of Finance and the Secretary of the National Economic Development Authority are not members. The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas is not even represented in the IATF.

### **MILITARISTIC APPROACH**

Former high-ranking military officials play starring roles in the IATF like Secretary Eduardo Año of the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), Secretary Rolando Bautista of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Secretary Gregorio Honasan of the Department of Information and



Communications Technology (DICT), former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines Gen. Carlito Galvez as Chief Implementer and Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana as Head of the National Task Force COVID-19 and enforcer of IATF's policies on handling the pandemic.

With the militarization of the pandemic response, it is said that there are now only three dreadful choices for Filipinos: infection, starvation, and incarceration.

### **FLIP-FLOPPING PRONOUNCEMENTS**

The general perception of this administration's response to the pandemic is not only that it is tragically erratic, it is also haphazardly organized and miserably ineffective.

This is further exacerbated by the IATF's and the President's often unreliable, vacillating, even conflicting pronouncements. During a pandemic fueled by an extremely virulent virus, the cacophony of voices emanating from the Duterte administration can only result in even more confusion and deaths, rising

infections, the continuous sinking of our economy, and growing distrust of the government.

Examples of these are the President's vacillation on opening of face-to-face classes and the conflicting statements of education officials on physical and online learning; the ever-changing alphabet soup of ECQ, GCQ, MGCQ, MCQ; the confusing nomenclature and tabulation of COVID-19 positive cases; the laughable and senseless requirement of requiring motorcycle backriding married couples to use a barrier which motorcycle manufacturers find extremely hazardous; the lack of coordination with LGUs who are in the forefront of responding to the pandemic in the local communities; and the lack of concrete data in the distribution of social amelioration funds and wage subsidies resulting to duplication of beneficiaries and exclusion of qualified beneficiaries.

## **REPRESSIVE POLICIES**

Just like the Duterte administration's treatment of the drug menace as purely a police issue and not poverty and health concerns, the implementation of health protocols like quarantine

restrictions, social distancing, and wearing of face masks have been implemented with strongarm tactics by military and police enforcers.

The military and the police saturate every nook and corner of the community harshly implementing lockdown protocols and directives but hardly mindful of the public health nature and objective of the community quarantine. Primarily driven by blind compliance with orders from the IATF, they are oblivious of their role as duty bearers and the people as rights holders.

Reports of abusive community quarantine implementers assault human dignity in punishing violators are a dime a dozen. – the three LGBTQ+ persons who were ordered by a *barangay* chairperson to kiss each other and dance provocatively and Winston Ragos, a retired soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was shot dead by a police officer at a quarantine checkpoint following a heated exchange; Michael Rubuia, a fish vendor who was dragged and beaten by authorities from the Quezon City Mayor's Office Task Force Disiplina for not wearing a face mask while hawking fish; and Ronnel Mas, a public

school teacher, who was arrested without a warrant for an alleged “seditious” tweet, to mention a few.

And while ordinary people are beaten and forced to debase themselves for violations like not wearing a mask and violating curfew hours, public authorities who violate quarantine protocols seem to be untouchable.

On 08 May 2020, NCR Police Chief Debold Sinas welcomed his “mañanita” or early morning serenaders to celebrate his birthday. They partied without face masks and no social distancing but they were never reprimanded by PNP Chief Archie Gamboa or President Duterte who even affirmed his trust on the errant Sinas after the public uproar over his partying.

The repressiveness by which protocols are enforced is also encouraged by no less than the President’s fierce rhetoric when he said he will not tolerate lockdown violators and ordered the police and military to shoot them dead.

The President exclaimed: "My orders to the police and military ... if there is trouble and there's an occasion that they fight back and your lives are in danger, shoot them dead."

Recently, in another decision further militarizing the government's pandemic response, the IATF resolved to use the police in contact tracing of suspected COVID-19 cases. Justifying the questionable scheme, PNP Chief General Archie Gamboa reasoned out that, "Contact tracing is akin to hunting criminals that once you have found the felon, you will look for his/her accomplices. And here lie the skills of the PNP investigators." The PNP must have lost sight of the fact that containing the COVID-19 contagion is a public health problem and not a public order issue much less a crime investigation function.

It is lamentable that this administration, instead of focusing on the pandemic, squandered time, energy, and indeed money on other things like the long-drawn-out hearings on ABS-CBN's bid for a franchise renewal which was subsequently denied arbitrarily, and the passage of the Anti-Terror Law which is now being challenged for its unconstitutionality, vagueness and assault on civil liberties

by a record 20 petitions filed before the Supreme Court, including the one filed by this Representation.

Those of us opposing the Anti-Terror Act are not against the suppression of terrorism. What we are protesting against is using the fear of terrorism as a pretext to curtail civil liberties.

Promotion of national security and the protection of basic rights are dual obligations of the State which are not antagonistic because national security and fundamental freedoms are mutually reinforcing. Considering that the "Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020" is replete with unconstitutional provisions, it must be jettisoned in its entirety.

## **DEFAULT TO DISCLOSE ROADMAP**

The foregoing catastrophic setting wrought by the viral pandemic is not squarely addressed by the President's SONA. The President has failed the people's anticipation. He is in gross default.

After the President's drumbeaters announced that he would disclose and discuss his administration's roadmap in response to

the COVID-19 pandemic, the President's SONA miserably failed to even outline the purported masterplan.

The much-ballyhooed roadmap meandered into the roadside of trite generalities and a plea for Filipinos to "trust in government" without actually telling them what the government's plans are.

The only statement marginally related to the anticipated roadmap was the President's endorsement for the enactment of the "Bayanihan Act Part II", reportedly crafted by the Department of Finance (DoF) and the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA), which he did not elaborate on.

Unfortunately, the "Bayanihan Act Part II" is only P140 billion as proposed in the Senate version upon the reported insistence of Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez. The House version has appropriated P162 billion in deference to the insignificant budgetary allocation proposed by the DoF.

However, whether it be the Senate or House version, the stimulus package under the "Bayanihan Act Part II" is tragically miniscule. It cannot positively address the health emergency which

is still raging, the social amelioration of affected families, wage subsidies to displaced workers, and financial relief and credit accommodation to distressed businesses.

Moreover, based on a report of the ADB, as of June/July 2020, the aforesaid expenditure outlay pales in comparison to our ASEAN neighbors' COVID-related spending, as follows:

**Comparative COVID-Related ASEAN Spending**  
(ADB, as of June/July 2020)

<b>Country</b>	<b>US \$ (Billion)</b>	<b>% of GDP</b>	<b>\$ Per Capita</b>
Indonesia	63.4	6.0	237.0
Malaysia	78.4	22.1	2,488.2
<b>Philippines</b>	<b>21.1</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>197.3</b>
Singapore	92.1	26.2	16,331.8
Thailand	84.1	15.9	1,211.2
Vietnam	26.5	10.1	277.4

The \$21.1 billion smallest expenditure of the Philippines among ASEAN nations, appears to be a collation of the following funding sources: multilateral loans and grants from ADB, the World Bank (WB), and Asian Investment Infrastructure Bank (AIIB); domestic borrowings; budgetary support from the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP); and budgetary releases from the General Appropriations Acts of 2019 and 2020.



In fact, the “Bayanihan Act Part II” is even alarmingly smaller than the stimulus package approved by the House of Representatives on 04 June 2020 under H.B. No. 6815 or the Accelerated Recovery and Investments Stimulus for the Economy (ARISE) in the amount of P1.3 trillion.

The President did not disclose that there are funds available to support a bigger stimulus package like the grants and loans of multilateral institutions like ADB, WB, and AIIB which have already been committed and some even actually released; domestic borrowings where P250 billion alone had been recently raised in the floating of Retail Treasury Bond (RTB); donations from other countries for COVID relief; budgetary assistance from the BSP pursuant to Section 89 of its Charter; and other funding sources.

The miniscule outlay favored by the President, as recommended by his economic advisers, is to prioritize the maintenance of the country’s favorable credit rating instead of giving premium to redressing the multitude of beleaguered Filipinos as well as countless besieged businesses.

The President also failed to mention that the militaristic approach in the implementation of COVID-related policies must be minimized, if not abandoned, so that repression is not the guidepost in enforcement.

The President likewise failed to mention that the role of medical experts and seasoned economists must be recognized and intensified because the overriding problems are health issues and economic concerns.

Although the President recommended the enactment of many proposed laws, some of which he already mentioned in previous SONA, these proposed legislations can be threshed out in the Legislative Executive Development Advisory Council (LEDAC) which the President has not convened for a long time.

The President squandered his time by reviving his favorite topic on the drug menace, his inutility in reclaiming from China vast areas of the West Philippine Sea awarded to the Philippines by international arbitration, and resorting to his signature threatening rhetoric against perceived oligarchies in the telecommunications industry as well as in power and water utilities.

He even prefaced and virtually concluded his SONA with a personal assault on a sitting Senator for talking about the dismantling of political oligarchies or dynasties for which he accused Sen. Franklin Drilon for being a hypocrite knowing that the anti-dynasty bill will not pass Congress.

All of these extraneous meanderings cannot cover up for the President's default in informing the nation on what exactly is his administration's roadmap in positively and adequately responding to the novel coronavirus pandemic which still plagues the country.

Like the novel coronavirus which afflicts the country, the President's default in laying out a concrete and comprehensive roadmap aggravates the pandemic.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker and distinguished colleagues.