

GMA orders flu alert level raised

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo yesterday ordered the Department of Health (DOH) to raise the country's A(H1N1) alert level and to deploy "quick reaction" medical teams to critical areas to contain the spread of the flu virus.

Mrs. Arroyo issued the directives from Hong Kong where she

stopped over for various meetings prior to returning to Manila from her state visit to Brazil.

There are now nearly 900 cases of A(H1N1) infections in the country, but the DOH said most of the patients have recovered.

According to Press
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Secretary Cerge Remonde, who is part of the presidential delegation, the President has been closely monitoring developments in the country even while she was in Japan and Brazil.

Mrs. Arroyo also gave a separate order to Agriculture Secretary Arthur Yap to protect the hog industry from negative and false reports on viral infections.

"These directives are to further strengthen and speed up our response to the A(H1N1) influenza problem," Remonde said.

She said the Department of Agriculture (DA) should assure consumers that there is no swine flu infestation in local hog farms.

"Local pork is safe to eat. There is no single case of swine flu reported by the Bureau of Animal Industry and the National Meat Inspection Service," the President said.

On top of properly informing the public, the DA should carry out preparations to prevent swine flu from infecting local hog farms,

she said.

DOH stockpiles medicine

As the number of cases continues to soar, the DOH is scouting for new sources abroad of medicine and testing kits to ensure that the country's stockpiles will not be depleted.

Health Secretary Francisco Duque III said they have already placed an order for 10,000 testing kits from the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) but they want to establish contacts with other suppliers.

"I think China is developing testing kits so we are checking that out," he said in an interview. CDC is the primary source of the testing kits being used by the Philippines and other nations.

The DOH is also studying where it could buy Osetamivir to make sure that the country will not run out of anti-A(H1N1) drugs in case the pandemic drags on.

Duque, however, clarified that at present the DOH still has enough supply.

"We still have 120,000 capsules in our warehouse and they are good for 120,000 patients," he said. United Laboratories (Unilab) donated supplies to the DOH.

Duque said Unilab also sells Osetamivir to the DOH at its manufacturing price of 750 per capsule, which is significantly lower than the P136 commercial price of a giant pharmaceutical company.

The health secretary said he would coordinate with the Department of Trade and Industry to prevent unscrupulous traders from jacking up the prices of medicine and medical supplies needed to fight A(H1N1), like facemasks.

The prices of Osetamivir and facemasks have reportedly increased up to three times their normal prices.

Even the cost of vaccines for seasonal flu has already risen since the pandemic broke out.

In a separate interview over Vice President Noli de Castro's radio program "Para Sa 'Yo Bayan'" on deMAM, Duque said the DOH is closely monitoring the manufacture of vaccines for

A(H1N1) abroad.

"We don't want to be left behind in case the vaccine becomes available, so we are really monitoring this. We are prepared to place an order when it is available already," he added.

There are reports that vaccines might be manufactured before November this year and the distribution will be supervised by the World Health Organization (WHO) to ensure that priorities are given to countries most affected by the pandemic.

At the Senate, Sen. Manuel Roxas II called yesterday for a tight watch on the supply and prices of the anti-flu drug Tamiflu as he called on President Arroyo to place the drug under price control as provided under the Universal Accessible Cheaper and Quality Medicine Act of 2008.

Roxas also urged the DOH to exercise balance between transparency in data and statistics and making clear public statements on the extent of coverage of the flu virus.

"We need to keep a tight watch on the price of Tamiflu in view of reports that the price of this drug has tripled in the past few days as demand rose amid public concern over the spread of the A(H1N1) flu," he said.

Roxas likewise reiterated the need to include anti-flu drugs like Tamiflu, with the generic name Osetamivir, in the Maximum Retail Price (MRP) list of the DOH now awaiting the approval of President Arroyo.

More Pinoy cases abroad

Meanwhile, several Filipinos have contracted the infection in Singapore, bringing to nine the confirmed cases of Filipinos affected by the flu outbreak.

The Philippine embassy in Singapore, in a report to the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), said there are 22 confirmed cases in Singapore, nine of which are Filipino nationals.

The DFA, in its June 24 A(H1N1) virus update, said the embassy reported that the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that 54 Filipinos were quarantined there, with four confirmed cases, including a member of the Philippine football delegation to the Asian Youth Games.

The Philippine Embassy in Amman also reported that a Filipina household worker tested positive for the flu two days after her arrival in Jordan.

The embassy will continue to monitor developments on this matter.

The Malaysian Ministry of Health announced that students returning to Malaysia from their travels to the United States, Britain, Australia and the Philippines are obliged to quarantine themselves for seven days, following the confirmed cases of students at the Klang Valley.

The Philippine Embassy in Malaysia said local news reported five new cases, including one Filipino as its 13th case, raising the total to 23 cases.

The Malaysian government has announced that all visitors and Malaysians returning from abroad will be required to fill out the health declaration form following the pandemic.

On Wednesday, six new confirmed cases of Filipinos abroad were recorded.

DFA spokesman Eduardo Malaya said the six Filipinos who reportedly contracted the flu virus were from Macau, Malaysia, Qatar, Singapore and Hong Kong.

The Philippine Consulate General in Macau said the first confirmed case was a Filipino.

In Qatar, the Philippine embassy in Doha said 14 confirmed cases were reported, two of which were Filipino nationals.

The patients were given antiviral medicine and are now in good condition.

The Philippine Consulate General in Hong Kong said authorities confirmed that a Filipina, who was there on a social visit, had the virus.

The consulate continues to remind Filipinos to take care of their health and follow precautionary measures suggested by the Hong Kong government.

The Arab News, a Jeddah-based online news site, reported that two more Filipino nurses were among the latest confirmed cases in Saudi Arabia.

But the DFA could not immediately confirm the report.

"The DFA has requested the Philippine embassy in Riyadh to look into this report," Malaya said.

The two nurses, aged 51 and 52, were included in the six new cases identified in Saudi Arabia, bringing the total number of reported cases there to 45.

Saudi Arabia's health officials said five of the six new cases contracted the virus from patients in various hospitals in Riyadh.

The sixth case is a 25-year-old Saudi man who arrived from New Delhi Tuesday. Saudi Arabia's first A(H1N1) flu case was also a Filipino nurse who works at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center in Riyadh.

Although there have been no cases involving Filipinos, the Philippine embassy in Caracas is monitoring developments of a Spanish cruise ship, which has detected the flu virus on some passengers.

Two passengers showed flu-like symptoms and were placed under medical supervision.

Three crewmembers were diagnosed positive by the Dutch laboratory in Aruba, where the ship originated. With Sheila Cristostomo, Pia Lee-Brago and Aurea Calica