

Crackdown instead of Lockdown: An overview of COVID-19 restrictions in the Philippines and the struggle of vulnerable groups

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Enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), a measure employed by the Philippine government to prevent the spread of Covid-19 infections in the Philippines, is supposed to protect the people, to provide safety and aid for endangered groups, and to lighten the pressure on the Philippine health care system. The first entire island-region to be placed under an enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) was Luzon, including the capital Manila, on March 16. A few days later, parts of Mindanao and Visayas followed with both quarantine and curfew measures. Checkpoints in all regions were implemented, preventing citizens and NGOs from moving into different settlement areas to provide aid to family members or oversee their projects. The ECQ has been extended in almost all areas in the Philippines until Mid-May.

A few days into the lockdown, the senate approved a law that grants extensive emergency powers to the president. The "[Bayanihan to Heal As One Act](#)" authorizes Duterte among other things to realign funds from the 2020 national budget. Even though the law is meant to be a tool for crisis management, its content gave cause for concern regarding the fact that it significantly increases the power of control of an erratic administration. The new law also includes a passage that declares spreading "false information regarding COVID-19" a criminal act, without legally defining the term "false information". The National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) perceives this as an actual threat to the freedom of expression and fears the criminalization of free speech.

After weeks of restrictions on movement, insufficient aid and arrests of thousands of quarantine violators, the Philippine lockdown has turned into a crackdown on human rights. The most heavily affected groups by the government's ECQ measures are women, children, [persons with disabilities \(PWDs\)](#), health workers, artists and cultural workers, informal workers, and the poor. Rights groups fear rising violence against women and children, while PWDs especially experience threats due to social distancing. Vulnerable groups such as children, women, and the poor face draconian measures in their search for food and shelter meanwhile the aid distribution is inefficient. Many [health workers](#) have no access to medical protective gear, and with rising numbers of infection and they experience even social stigma in the society. The supply of proper equipment is scarce and hospitals and clinics struggle with protecting their health care workers, and, similar to the general public, have to draw on makeshift measures to protect themselves: People were seen to use helmets, plastic bags and tablecloths, which do not provide sufficient protection against infection.

Government aid

Even though financial governmental support seems to reach more people than ever before, it remains widely inefficient due to selective and unjust allocation, which is, for example, only scarcely reach the poorer rural areas. Cash and food aid distributions prove to be insufficient and poor families have been waiting for weeks to receive relief – also because aid workers and NGOs are often restricted from entering their project areas. Large chunks of the population have been entirely overlooked in government aid relief

plans: Middle class workers who have lost their income experience immense pressures on feeding their families. The measure by the Department of Agriculture to put rice, pork and other goods under a Coronavirus price freeze has shown only little efficiency in the mitigation of hunger.

Artists and cultural workers who work with locals communities or indigenous groups had to cancel their projects or postpone them until 2021. With no income and no inclusion in government aid packages, they are left on their own during the pandemic. Informal workers experience a loss of their income. With often no home and no way to protect themselves in crowded informal settlement areas, the poor experience the most severe effects of the lockdown. Even if informal settlements and crowded makeshift communities remain unaffected by the virus, people experience a heavy crackdown on their human rights by the Filipino government and security forces. Reports of makeshift houses being teared down by police officers left people homeless and unable to abide to the ECQ rules to stay within one's own home. The newly implemented COVID-19 [Philhealth](#) package by the government's health insurance system won't be available to any of these vulnerable groups.

Since the lockdown started in Mid-March, the Joint Task Force Coronavirus Shield (JTF Covid Shield) has accosted nearly 105,000 violators, over 25,000 of whom were arrested, of the enhanced community quarantine nationwide. Most of the arrests are for violating curfew but some are for violating "social distancing" and quarantine regulations. Reports shared with Human Rights Watch by child rights groups in Manila show that children are among those facing unjust treatment for violating ECQ measures.

Civil Society

Media quoted the National Union of Peoples Lawyers (NUPL) Secretary General Ephraim B. Cortez who said that violating the ECQ protocols is not a criminal act. Whether there is a public health emergency or not, the general rule on arrest is still in place and a person can only be arrested if there is a warrant. "There is no specific law that criminalizes it (violating the ECQ protocols). The police can always tell the people to go home and then file charges but not arrest them." The Commission on Human Rights said the government should fight the COVID-19 pandemic using a public health approach instead of a military mindset, while Human Rights Watch Asia has urged the government to hold its law enforcers accountable for rights abuse.

Public Opinion

Although international and local human rights activist's voices against the mistreatment of affected groups during the Philippine lockdown are loud, a recent poll by consultancy firm EON Group and research firm Tangere showed that 90% of the Filipinos have trust in Duterte's government during the crisis.

The Opposition

Vice President Leni Robredo from the liberal party has said that the lockdown extensions were a tough, but necessary decision to protect the people. While she promised to fight against political despotism and said that the enforcement of quarantine rules needs to be more compassionate, the palace's government Covid-19 task force has declared that it is the sole authority on all quarantine measures.

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