

‘Never before seen’: PHL braces for pandemic

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A 48-YEAR-OLD Filipino worker at the Philippine office of accounting firm Deloitte was confirmed to have been infected with a novel coronavirus on March 5 after traveling to Japan in the previous month. He was the fourth case in the Philippines.

In the next three days, Philippine health authorities confirmed six more infections, including the first local transmission of the virus between a Filipino couple from San Juan City near the capital.

By March 9, the Department of Health had identified 468 people who may have been exposed to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) from cases No. 4 to 10. Six people had been isolated by then, according to the agency.

Jaime A. Almora, president of the Philippine Hospital Association, thinks the government has been doing an admirable job in trying to contain the virus.

“We’ve seen their circulars and their orders, and they’re pretty fast in their response,” he said in an interview. Authorities have also imposed travel bans and quarantine procedures in a timely manner, Mr. Almora said.

On March 9, the government reported 14 new cases of the virus in the Philippines, prompting President Rodrigo R. Duterte to suspend classes in Metro Manila for five days to prevent an outbreak in schools.

To date, at least 49 people have been infected in the Philippines, 46 of them just this month.

The DoH raised the country’s alert level to code red sublevel 1 — the fourth in a five-level alert system — on March 7 after the first local transmission was reported and as health authorities “prepare for a possible increase in suspected and confirmed cases.” Mr. Duterte declared a public health emergency a day later.

The last and most severe alert level — code red sublevel 2 — will only be raised if there is evidence of widespread “community transmission” that is more than what the government can handle.

The COVID-19 pandemic — so declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 12 — was first reported in December in the city of Wuhan in central China’s Hubei



Province. The coronavirus strain has since spread to at least 121 countries and territories, killing more than 4,000 people and sickening about 118,000 more, mostly in China.

“We have never before seen a pandemic sparked by a coronavirus,” WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Wednesday. “And we have never before seen a pandemic that can be controlled at the same time.”

The novel coronavirus may be less deadly than the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome-related coronavirus (MERS-CoV) at the