



increase supply to 4 million face masks a month from 1.6 million, according to Trade Secretary Ramon M. Lopez.

The bulk of the initial volume of 1.6 million had been allocated to health workers and people on the frontline including DoH and Red Cross personnel, he said. “There’s a need to increase allocation to the general public.”

On the other hand, there is enough inventory of alcohol and other types of hand sanitizers, Mr. Lopez said.

The Philippine International Trading Corp. has also found an Indian face mask supplier that can provide 2.5 million pieces more, he said.

Trade personnel are also monitoring supermarkets to ensure retailers don’t take advantage of the situation by unnecessarily raising the prices of basic goods.

“Because of the declaration of the public health emergency, under the Price Act, the prices of basic necessities are frozen,” Trade Undersecretary Ruth B. Castelo said by telephone.

The country’s major retailers including SM, Robinsons, PureGold and Metro Gaisano have assured the government that they have sufficient supply, she said.

Meanwhile, the National Water Resources Board (NWRB) said it would increase the allocation of the Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System from 42 cubic meters per second to 46 cubic meters per second from Angat Dam effective March 12.

“This is to ensure steady water supply for Metro Manila considering the declaration of the state of public health emergency and the importance of water in undertaking the preventive measures against COVID-19,” NWRB Executive Director Seville D. David, Jr. said in a text message yesterday.

“The NWRB is assuring that water will be sustainably available throughout the whole year. The public is similarly

asked to avoid wastage and to use water responsibly,” he said.

LOCKDOWN

Lawmakers have also been busy proposing solutions to contain the outbreak.

Quezon City Rep. Precious Hipolito Castelo has filed a bill that seeks to exempt face masks, sanitizers, antiseptics and other personal protective goods from taxes, duties and other charges.

“There is a need to flood the market with these goods so prices would go down and unscrupulous traders would be discouraged from hoarding them and selling them later at deleterious rates,” she said in the bill’s explanatory note.

Meanwhile, Albay Rep. Jose Maria Clemente S. Salceda wants a lockdown for Metro Manila “to isolate potentially undetected cases and to facilitate detection among those who will begin to demonstrate symptoms of the novel coronavirus once the lockdown ends.”

His proposal is for a seven-day lockdown of the capital and surrounding cities, suspending work, school, and other activities where people congregate.

Mr. Salceda estimates that the economy could lose 1.72% to 3.05% if a lockdown was not enforced and mass transmission occurred.

On the other hand, a lockdown now that could delay COVID-19 transmissions could lead to a loss of 0.21% of the gross domestic product, which can be recovered in six months, he said.

“So here’s the deal: Sure massive losses, or a small loss that you will regain anyway? The choice seems simple to me.”

Mr. Salceda is the author of a House bill that seeks to create a public health emergency framework and a local Center for Disease Control and Prevention that he said would have been capable of addressing an epidemic.

“The likelihood of an easy spread is limited from a geographical perspective,” WHO’s Mr. Abeyasinghe said, noting that the Philippines is an island-archipelago made up of more than 7,100 islands.

“We cannot 100% confirm that there is no disease outside the National Capital Region,” he said. “But many factors are favoring the fact that what we have is a localized outbreak.”

The Philippine Health secretary could only hope for the best. “We hope that it doesn’t deteriorate,” Mr. Duque said.

“We hope that the number of cases doesn’t escalate, especially if our current social distancing efforts will result in us hopefully blunting the epidemic peak and extending the epidemic period to another few months,” he added. — *with*

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