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Gov't charting 'safe course' for PH while fighting COVID-19; gains in social welfare, labor, agriculture, environment cited

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by [Genalyn Kabiling](#)

The government is working to chart a "safe course" for the Philippines through these uncertain times and recover its gains disrupted by severe impact of the coronavirus pandemic, Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles announced Wednesday.



Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles
(MANILA BULLETIN FILE PHOTO)

According to Nograles, the government's measures to uplift the plight of the people affected by the health emergency will be included in President Duterte's State of the Nation Address (SONA) on Monday.

The President's upcoming annual address will be different from past SONAs since he will deliver it in front of a limited audience at the House of Representatives in Quezon City, but will be "more important more than ever," he said.

"Malamang marami sa atin ay maninibago—kasama na dito si Presidente—pero hindi magbabago o mababawasan ang kahalagahan ng talumpating ito: ang pag-ulat ng estado sa ating bayan, at pagbalangkas ng mga hakbang na gagawin ng gobyerno para i-angat ang buhay ng bawat Pilipino (Maybe many will feel change, including the President, but it does not change or diminish the importance of this speech: The report to the nation, the crafting of measures the government to take to uplift the lives of every Filipino)," Nograles said during a virtual pre-SONA forum Wednesday.

"Such a report is more important now, more than ever, as government works to chart a safe course for our country as it navigates through unfamiliar and uncertain times, as it works to recoup the gains we have made in the President's first three and a half years," he added.

As the pandemic left more than a thousand people dead and thousands infected in the country, Nograles recognized that the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on the nation has been "matindi, malawak, at masakit (severe, widespread, and painful).

The pandemic has resulted in job losses, involuntary hunger among families, and a drop in enrollment in both public and private schools, according to the Palace official.

"May mga pamilyang di makakain. May mga pamilyang di makakapag-paaral (There are families who have nothing to eat. There are families who can't send their kids to school). As in any natural disaster, it is society's most vulnerable sectors that have borne the brunt of this pandemic: our farmers, our youth, our poor," he said.

Nograles said there has been a slowdown in businesses that resulted in unemployment and lower tax collection. More than 70,000 overseas Filipino workers are expected to return home after being displaced by the pandemic abroad, he added.

A recent survey also showed that 20.9 percent of Filipinos or 5.2 million families experienced involuntary hunger at least once in the past three months, Nograles said.

Education authorities have also recorded a drop in enrollment in schools due to the economic impact of the pandemic on the families.

“Only 27% of those enrolled in private institutions of learning have returned to their schools, as many private schools students have been transferred by their parents to public schools with families feeling the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, according to Secretary Briones, the number of enrollees in both private and public schools has so far reached only 77% of DepEd’s enrollment target of 27 million,” Nograles said.

Amid the adverse impact of the pandemic, Nograles assured the nation that the government has implemented assistance packages worth billions to help ease the suffering of people.

Citing information from Social Welfare Secretary Rolando Bautista, he said that more than P106 billion of the social amelioration program was distributed to benefit more than 19 million beneficiaries during the pandemic.

The government also provided assistance to workers, farmers and students.

“The Department of Labor and Employment, for its part, has extended financial aid totaling P6.4 billion to over 1.18 million displaced employees in the formal and informal sectors of the economy, including returning OFWs,” he said.

“The Department of Agriculture released cash subsidies to over a million affected farmers and fisherfolk amounting to P6 billion,” he added.

At the third and final pre-SONA forum, the President’s security, justice and peace cabinet cluster led by Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana reported on efforts to protect and safeguard the interest of the people and the nation.

The cabinet group also cited government’s efforts to protect national territories and to safeguard territorial integrity, sovereignty and sovereign rights, ensure welfare of overseas Filipinos, strengthen rule of law, institutionalize an efficient and impartial justice system, advance and protect human rights and attain just and lasting peace, according to Nograles.

The Cabinet cluster likewise highlighted how the country has increased its defense and security engagements with the international community in areas of logistics and defense support as well as how the government shifted from a military-centric to a civilian-led approach in confronting the armed communist movement and ending armed communist insurgency. The group also reported on concerted efforts in orchestrating COVID-19 containment and recovery efforts.

At the same forum, the cabinet cluster on climate change adaptation and mitigation and disaster risk reduction led by Environment Secretary Roy Cimatu also reported on the government's programs to build stronger and safer communities amidst tropical cyclones, strong earthquakes and other natural disasters.

The Cabinet report included government's efforts to respond to disasters through assistance for search, rescue and retrieval operations; cash for work; loan assistance for agricultural production, processing facilities; and farm improvement for typhoon, earthquake victims, and the recent Taal Volcano eruption.

Nograles said the report also highlighted improved natural systems, which include the rehabilitation of Boracay and Manila Bay; enhanced climate-resilient communities, reforestation through the Enhanced National Greening Program, and better management of hazardous wastes, particularly medical wastes due to COVID-19.

The Palace earlier announced the President has decided to deliver his speech at the Batasan instead of doing it via video conference from the Palace. The Presidential Security Group has promised to implement additional security and health measures to provide "a 360-degree shield" for the President when he delivers his SONA.

Nograles said the President's fifth SONA will be markedly different from his first four addresses, as well as those that preceded his tenure as Chief Executive, due to the existing health precautions.

"He will be addressing the nation from the same podium, but for the safety of all the members of Congress and the employees of the House, he will deliver his SONA in a chamber that will not be filled by the legislators, officials, and dignitaries that usually attend this function," he said.

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