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How are we doing, relative to the rest of the world, that is?

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TO be frank, for a second or so, the news reported yesterday afternoon that we had 272 new Covid-19 cases, bringing the total to 1,075, sent a shiver down my spine. That's the highest increase in a day so far, although, as a health department official explained, the rise in the past several days may have been due to the increase in tests being undertaken and results coming in only recently. But no epidemiologist can really be certain whether we've reached the peak or are just starting on the curve. The statement of a United States health official has become classic: "It is the virus that makes the timeline."

What gives some comfort though is how we stand compared to other countries.

The US and Italy appear to be in the worst situation: from just 959 cases on March 10, the US has an astonishing 124,464 now. Italy was hit by a tidal wave of Covid-19 cases in the same period, from 10,000 to 92,472. Ours is just 1,075 yesterday. But the more rational way of comparing our situation to other countries is to adjust the figures based on population; that is, the number of cases (and deaths) per 1 million. Using this measure, we're not doing bad at all. We're ranked 131st (No. 1 being the worst) among 200 countries in terms of having the biggest Covid-19 cases per 1 million population. Spain and Italy each have about 1,500 cases per 1 million of their population. We are much, much better with only 10 cases per 1 million population. The US situation is still comparatively low, at just 369, because of its huge population.

In fact, as shown in the table, we are better off than Japan (13 cases per 1 million), Thailand (18), Malaysia (72), and Hong Kong (75).

It's the same picture for deaths per million population. So far, Covid-19 has killed 85 humans per million people of the planet. In our case it has been only 0.6 per million.

Horseman

As I pointed out at the outset, it is way too early to celebrate that we have eluded what one ultra-religious columnist claims in his end-of-days visions as the biblical Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse. (I'm certain he would have attributed our relatively better position to the fact that we are a Catholic country — but then three of the most Catholic nations in Europe, namely Italy, where even the Pope lives; Spain; and France have had the biggest number of Covid-19 cases.)

But we are lucky President Duterte demonstrated political will when he ordered a lockdown of the entire Luzon, especially the metropolis, two weeks ago. I myself had thought — and written in a column — that this couldn't be done as workers and materials for the metropolis factories and offices come from outside it. Still, Duterte ordered such a lockdown, directing people in Luzon to strictly stay at home — which, as China has proven, is the best way to stop the epidemic as the virus practically is not given a chance to migrate to another victim.

The timing of the lockdown, I think, was perfect as those infected last March 16 was past 100, which confirmed that the choice had become one between stoppage of economic activity in Luzon or an exponential surge in the number of people being infected, which would have stopped economic activity down the line anyway.

Compared to this government's political will and organized implementation, the US is proving to be an incompetent, bungling and weak state. There isn't even, so far, any real ban on inter-city and inter-state travel in the US, giving the virus all the freedom to migrate from the epicenters of the epidemic — Washington state and New York City — to the entire country.

A Yale University professor interviewed in CNN even pointed out the gradual closure of American universities and colleges starting early was likely one reason why the virus spread exponentially in the last weeks of the month. The students who were likely already carriers by that time carried the virus to their residences all over the country, not just to their parents but grandparents, who are the most vulnerable to die of the virus. How could nobody in the US — with all the vaunted expertise of its universities and especially its Center for Disease Control — not have seen that?

In contrast to the US, we appear to have settled by last week to an orderly, strictly followed quarantine, with our barangay (village) system proving to be an excellent structure for getting citizens to follow the quarantine and to receive the food they need. The biggest obstacle to our defeating Covid-19 is contagion from foreigners and Filipinos traveling abroad and returning. Two friends who traveled to Paris early in the month got the virus there, not here. Many posts in Facebook report a relative or a friend infected as he or she socialized with a balikbayan. There also seems to have been, in early March, a surge in Filipino women married to foreigners traveling back home, probably thinking this country was safer than Europe or planning to spend their summer here, expecting no tourists from China.

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