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GOVERNMENT LAUNCHES PUBLIC-PRIVATE TASK FORCE T3 (TEST, TRACE AND TREAT) TO SIGNIFICANTLY EXPAND RT-PCR TESTING CAPACITY

Press Release/ April 24, 2020

The Inter-Agency Task Force – National Task Force (IATF-NTF) and the Department of Health (DOH), with support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), convened the TASK FORCE T3 (for Test, Trace and Treat). This public-private task force will support the Government's efforts to swiftly expand RT-PCR (Reverse Transmission – Polymerase Chain Reaction) testing for COVID-19 from the current level of approximately 4,500 per day, to at least 30,000 tests per day by May 30, 2020.

The Government has invited hospital, clinic and pharmaceutical groups Unilab, AC Health/Qualimed, and MPIC Hospital Group, as well as the Philippine National Red Cross and Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation, to be the initial private sector members of TASK FORCE T3, with the hope that other private sector groups will subsequently participate.

This expansion of RT-PCR testing is critical in managing COVID and determining when the Enhanced Community Quarantine can be modified in selected locations and sectors.

RT-PCR tests are used as confirmatory tests for COVID-19 and are currently conducted in 18 public and private labs across the country. RT-PCR testing requires at least BioSafety Level 2 facilities, specialised machinery, testing kits and reagents, and trained medical personnel. All facilities need to be jointly certified by the DOH and the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM). The Philippine Health Insurance Corporation reimburses testing for individuals undergoing RT-PCR testing.

TASK FORCE T3 will identify the most urgent requirements for PCR machines, testing kits, and fixed and mobile labs, and install these in priority hotspots as soon as possible. The expanded capacity will be regionally dispersed so that test swabs can be delivered over the shortest distance to the nearest labs and results can be delivered in a timely manner.

According to Secretary Charlie Galvez, the NTF Chief Implementer of the National Action Plan against COVID19, "We can mitigate the effects of COVID19 on our economic wellbeing if we aggressively push for testing so that we can locate, isolate and care for COVID19 carriers and those who are sick in order to keep our communities safe enough to resume a level of economic activities. This is to further avoid a humanitarian crisis. In so doing, we strike a fine balance between ensuring public health and safeguarding livelihoods and our economic wellbeing."

"The Department commits to expediting the certification process for existing laboratories, and for new laboratories that will be built. The DOH welcomes the private sector's support and participation in aggressively expanding testing capacity in the country, as well as in efforts to ramp up isolation and treatment. The success of our response, after all, rests in ensuring that testing, isolation and treatment go hand-in-hand." Secretary Francisco Duque, Health Secretary

and Chair of the Interagency Task Force said.

The Philippine National Red Cross has recently set up a new laboratory in Mandaluyong City, and eyeing expansion in Batangas, Pampanga, Cebu, Negros, Zamboanga, Cagayan de Oro and General Santos. Meanwhile, the Asian Development Bank through its \$2.5million dollar grant assistance is setting up a Pandemic Sub-national Reference Laboratory (PSRL) in Jose B. Lingad Memorial General Hospital in San Fernando, Pampanga. The PSRL will have a daily output of 3,000 tests. These new laboratories will greatly accelerate the country's testing capacity.

Groups interested in participating in TASK FORCE T3 may contact DOH OIC-Undersecretary Ma. Rosario Singh-Vergeire at officeofasecrsv@gmail.com and IATF-NTF representative General Resty Padilla at Junpadi85@icloud.com. For groups interested to make donations to this effort, please contact Bill Luz at the Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation at gm.luz@competitive.org.ph.