

Philippines reports record virus infections as lockdown eased

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The Philippines reported Friday its highest daily number of coronavirus infections, as authorities eased a lockdown in the capital to allow more businesses to operate and reduce the financial pain of poor families.

More than 13 million people in the national capital region went into lockdown on August 6 as the hyper-contagious Delta variant helped drive a resurgence in infections that has strained hospitals.

A COVID-19 task force agreed Thursday to allow more businesses to open their doors from Saturday. But a stay-at-home order for non-essential workers would remain in place and restaurant dining banned.

The decision to ease restrictions came as the number of new infections hit a record 17,231 on Friday, pushing the country's caseload to more than 1.8 million since the start of the pandemic, health department figures show.

"Over the coming days, the number of our COVID-19 cases may rise further," it warned.

Health officials, fearing the Delta strain could tear through the country like it has in neighbouring nations, have been ramping up vaccinations to try to head off the spread of the virus.

About half of the targeted population in the national capital region was expected to be fully vaccinated by next week, presidential spokesman Harry Roque said Thursday. Nationwide, the figure is just under 17 percent.

Official data show hospitals in the capital are under growing pressure, with 74 percent of intensive care beds and 70 percent of ward beds allocated for COVID-19 cases occupied.

But President Rodrigo Duterte said recently the country could not afford more lockdowns, after coronavirus measures shattered the economy and threw millions out of work.

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