

## **Making the Island a “Fortress”: Government’s Measures and People’s Mentality against COVID-19 in Bohol**

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### **Abstract**

While the COVID-19 infection has spread throughout the Philippines, the province of Bohol has maintained zero new confirmed cases as of the end of April. The provincial government's quarantine measures, particularly the rigorous border controls, have prevented the entrance of infected cases but, at the same time, resulted in thousands of Boholanos being stranded in other provinces. When Governor Art Yap announced the “Oplan Exodus,” a plan to return them home, many residents expressed strong opposition. People have opposed the repatriation because they have a clear dichotomy in their mind between a “clean and secured inside” and a “contaminated and hazardous outside,” which evokes fear of outsiders. However, given reports of experts that it takes more than a year to develop a vaccine, it is unrealistic to seal off the provincial borders until the end of the pandemic to maintain a COVID-free “fortress”. Despite the opposition, the province actually accepted the first group of returnees on April 28. Toward the repatriation of remaining off-shore Boholanos, it is necessary for the government and people in Bohol to discuss about how to alleviate the fear of residents and establish appropriate border control measures to accept returnees based on epidemiological evidence.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Border Controls, Fortress Mentality, Repatriation of Stranded Boholanos

## Introduction

The province of Bohol, an island province with a population of 1,313,560 and located in Central Visayas in the Philippines, has prevented the spread of COVID-19 infection in the area and maintained zero new confirmed cases (as of the end of April, 2020) since February, though cases of the infection are rapidly increasing throughout the Philippines. Governor Art Yap has posted daily on Facebook an “Updated COVID-19 report” including the number of new confirmed cases, persons under monitoring, severe acute respiratory infection, and influenza-like illness. The comments section is filled with responses thanking Governor Yap and God for ensuring no new cases in Bohol. Although the government’s measures against COVID-19 seem to be succeeding in the province, it remains a big problem that approximately 9,000 Boholanos are stranded in various localities outside the province.<sup>1</sup>

These stranded Boholanos are crying bitterly. In the comments section of posts by the governor, they explain how they live with hardships, for example, “My niece left behind in Manila with her three children because her husband went back to Bohol earlier. She has a hard time going out even to buy food.” “I don’t know how to live without work being stranded in the place far from home.”<sup>2</sup> Many other people sympathize with their difficulties by saying “*kalooy*” (pitiful). However, when the governor announced the “Oplan Exodus,” a plan to let stranded Boholanos return home, on April 14, it drew flak from various sectors that heavily protested the move to open Bohol to off-

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<sup>1</sup> Bohol Chronicle (April 17, 2020) “Yap: ‘Oplan Exodus’ to bring home stranded Boholanos when ‘time is right’”

(<https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/04/17/yap-oplan-exodus-to-bring-home-stranded-boholanos-when-time-is-right/> accessed on April 20, 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Facebook page of Governor Art Yap, (<https://web.facebook.com/artcyap/posts/2668264263459197> accessed on April 20, 2020)

island Boholanos. A number of residents in Bohol claimed that the government should not risk accepting people from outside because Bohol is "COVID-free."<sup>3</sup> Their negative reactions are likely much stronger than those in other provinces.

Why are people in Bohol vehemently opposed to open the provincial borders even for the pitiful compatriots? This paper first explains that the government's quarantine measures resulted in a huge number of stranded Boholanos and a clear spatial dichotomy between a "clean and secured inside" and a "contaminated and hazardous outside." Second, it argues that the dichotomy evokes fear of outsiders and causes opposition to the "Oplan Exodus." In conclusion, this paper proposes that it is necessary to accept the repatriation through appropriate processes based on epidemiological evidence because it is not reasonable to keep the provincial borders closed to maintain a "clean fortress."

The main sources of data provided in this paper are the author's observations during quarantine life in Tagbilaran City, the capital of the province of Bohol, and information from local newspapers and Facebook posts by both official and unofficial agencies.

## **1. Measures against the Spread of COVID-19 Infection in the Philippines and Bohol**

As of April 29, 8,212 COVID-19 cases (558 deaths) were confirmed in the Philippines. Strict community quarantine has been implemented nationwide under President Rodrigo Duterte. After the Philippines government confirmed the first case from Wuhan, China, on January 30, travel restrictions from mainland China were introduced and then extended to some parts of South Korea on February 26. On March 12, when 52 cases of the infection were recorded, the national government announced

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<sup>3</sup> Facebook page of Governor Art Yap, (<https://web.facebook.com/artcyap/posts/2674211252864498> accessed on April 24, 2020)

implementing a “community quarantine” from March 15 to April 14 in Metro Manila.

The quarantine measures include the prohibition of conducting classes in schools, the prohibition of mass gatherings, the suspension of public transportation, the prohibition of entering and leaving Metro Manila in principle, and the temporary closure of nonessential shops and businesses. There is a curfew between 8 pm and 5 am. On March 16, the president declared a “state of calamity,” and by “enhanced community quarantine (ECQ),” the measures were extended to the whole of Luzon. Despite the drastic policy, the spread of infection did not stop, and the quarantine period was extended until April 30. On April 24, President Duterte approved the recommendation of the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) to extend the ECQ in high-risk areas, including Metro Manila and Central Luzon until May 15. Some other provinces in Visayas and Mindanao were also bound to extend the ECQ.

When the national government decided to implement the community quarantine in Metro Manila, local governments followed. In the Visayan region, most provinces and cities initiated community quarantine between March 15 and 17. In Bohol, there was only one COVID-19 confirmed case who visited the province from China in February 2020. There were no new cases when the local government announced on March 13 that it would implement the community quarantine measures, which were mainly suspension of ships and airplanes bound to the island and curfew at night, for five days from March 16 to 20. This means that while Metro Manila initiated the quarantine to contain the COVID-19-affected area and prevent the spread of infection, Bohol decided on closing provincial borders to make the province a “fortress.”

The Bohol provincial government announced on March 20, which was the scheduled date to end the quarantine, that it would extend the period until April 12. It was then extended again until April 30. After March 23, the government ordered a 24-hour curfew for all young (under 18 years) and senior (60 years and above) citizens, as well as the temporary closure of

nonessential business establishments. Since March 30, all residents must carry a quarantine pass when they go out. Many other quarantine measures including the liquor ban, the mandatory use of masks, and the prohibition of motorcycle back rides were initiated at the same time.

## 2. Everyday Quarantine Life in Bohol

In Tagbilaran City, although there was some confusion when the Executive Order, which mandated the detailed quarantine rules, became effective, it did not cause a major disruption in daily necessities. For example, it was initially unclear which establishments were included in the temporary suspension of businesses. One day, I took our clothes to a laundry shop, but it was closed. They reopened the business after the exception was clearly publicized.

Unlike in Manila when the community quarantine just started, we do not need to stand in line for hours at the entrance of a supermarket or at a cash register. Customers are lined up, holding their quarantine passes, properly wearing masks, and following the directions of a security guard [Image 1]. Grocery items are not in short supply, but there have been some price increases for perishables. According to the Office of the Provincial Agriculture, vegetable prices are not rising significantly, and shipments from other provinces are normal.<sup>4</sup> Masks were sold out around late March, but after a few weeks, we were able to choose from a wide selection of sizes and patterns. That is partly because the provincial government supported local tailors to produce masks before their mandatory use was initiated.

Despite various inconveniences, residents in Bohol seem to follow the rules quietly. Everyone walking outside wears a mask. Jeeps have fewer passengers, and each tricycle has only

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<sup>4</sup> Bohol Chronicle (April 6, 2020) "Bohol has enough vegetable supply: OPA" (<https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/04/06/bohol-has-enough-vegetable-supply-opa/> accessed on April 20, 2020)

one passenger to keep social distance. However, the prohibition of motorcycle back rides is not strictly enforced, because the rule banning this even for married couples is too impractical.



[Image 1] Customers' line at the entrance of a shopping mall in Tagbilaran City  
(Photo taken by the author)

When the community quarantine was introduced, we were concerned that security would deteriorate due to an increase in displaced workers who lost their sources of income. However, the crime rate is declining, according to the Bohol Provincial Police Office. The number of crimes fell from 430 between March 1 and 15 to 268 between March 16 and 31, and it was 34

percent lower compared with the record for the same period in 2019.<sup>5</sup>

In the aspect of spiritual life, Catholics, the majority of residents, have had a difficult time, especially during Holy Week, because mass gatherings were prohibited even for religious purposes. Accommodating the restrictions, the Mass was televised several times and carried live on Facebook throughout the Philippines. In Barangay Poblacion III of Tagbilaran City where the author lives, San Antonio de Pauda Parish has been making a unique attempt, which is a car procession with the images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and St. Anthony of Pauda. The car drives around the neighborhood streets, and people with candles welcome it [Image 2]. This special procession has been running for more than two weeks, even after Holy Week. According to a member of the parish, some other parishes in Bohol are doing the same thing. This practice not only fulfills the faith, but also provides opportunities to share a space for praying, communicate with neighbors, and foster a sense of solidarity, even if it is for only five or ten minutes a day.




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<sup>5</sup> Bohol Chronicle (April 3, 2020) "Crime incidents in Bohol down since community quarantine" (<https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/04/03/crime-incidents-in-bohol-down-since-community-quarantine/> accessed on April 22, 2020)

[Image 2] Procession by a car with the image of Jesus Christ. Reciters of devotion are riding on the back. (Photo taken by Wataru Kusaka)

In the current situation, the biggest problem facing residents is damage to the economy. Securing the livelihoods of those who have lost income is a life-threatening issue to solve immediately. The national government instituted a P200 billion social amelioration program which distributes the emergency subsidies to indigent families. The Local Government Units (LGUs) and the Department of Social Welfare and Development have provided relief goods. The provincial government also announced the allocation of P150 million in food aid as part of a P700 million stimulus package to feed those affected by the government's measures and maintain their livelihoods. Governor Yap said that P200 million will be allocated for small and medium enterprises, P110 million for the barangay projects, and P150 million for agriculture and fishery projects.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is still insufficient to address the compelling needs for food and cash.

For business establishments, there are financial obligations including bank loans and interest, insurance, rent, property taxes, and salary for administration and security, regardless of the size of the business. The Bohol Chamber of Commerce is pushing bailouts for these business owners.<sup>7</sup> Against a backdrop of such an economic crisis, there are opinions calling for a gradual resumption of economic activities in Bohol,<sup>8</sup> but it is possible only under certain conditions by

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<sup>6</sup> Bohol Chronicle (April 9, 2020) "Capitol allots P150 million for social amelioration program" ([https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/04/09/bohol-allots-p150-million-for-social-amelioration-program/?fbclid=IwAR2H2keOEFhb-W\\_Vr0JGkoMuWKOiftQok0xSMjilOAW71qBZkMkWc-P-yN4](https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/04/09/bohol-allots-p150-million-for-social-amelioration-program/?fbclid=IwAR2H2keOEFhb-W_Vr0JGkoMuWKOiftQok0xSMjilOAW71qBZkMkWc-P-yN4) accessed on April 20, 2020)

<sup>7</sup> Bohol Chronicle (March 30, 2020) "Bohol Chamber of Commerce pushes wage subsidy, waiving of bank interest" (<https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/03/30/bohol-chamber-of-commerce-pushes-wage-subsidy-waiving-of-bank-interest/> accessed on April 20, 2020)

<sup>8</sup> For example, Lucell Larawan. 2020. "Post-lockdown Decision." *Daily Guardian* (April 21, 2020) (<https://dailyguardian.com.ph/post-lockdown-decision/> accessed on April 22, 2020)



which Bohol has succeeded in preventing the spread of COVID-19.<sup>9</sup>

### **3. The dichotomy between a "Clean and Secured Fortress" and a "Contaminated and Hazardous Outside"**

Despite the economic damages, residents in Bohol have been protected from at least a direct risk of infection. However, the relatively peaceful life comes at the expense of thousands of stranded Boholanos. The provincial government's quarantine measures, particularly the rigorous border controls, have prevented the entrance of infected cases but, at the same time, resulted in a huge number of Boholanos being stranded in other provinces. The situation stands out from other Visayan areas that have also restricted access to the provinces. This is because Bohol has strictly prohibited even the return of residents by suspending airplanes and ships. In addition, the travel ban was originally scheduled as a "dry run" for five days, but an extension was announced on the scheduled end date.

As a result, for example, 130 travelers from Manila who were supposed to board a boat from Bato in Leyte in anticipation of the end of the travel ban could not enter Bohol and are stranded in an evacuation center in Bato. The Bohol provincial government sent P300,000 to the LGU for their expenses, but it is surely insufficient for long-term shelter living.<sup>10</sup> The stranded Boholanos in various places created groups on Facebook such as "BOHOLANO STRANDED IN CEBU" and "BOHOLANOS Stranded," which have 4,016 and 1,489 members, respectively. They complain about their predicament and exchange information on assistance by the government for cash needs and repatriation.

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<sup>9</sup> The provincial government has allowed some business establishments to open since May 1.

<sup>10</sup> Bohol Chronicle (March 20, 2020) "Stranded Boholanos in Bato, Leyte get P300k aid" (<https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/03/20/stranded-boholanos-in-bato-leyte-get-p300k-aid/> accessed on April 20, 2020)

Governor Yap said he could not abandon such compatriots. The provincial government organized the Offshore Boholanos Coordinating Team to provide financial support mainly to students and displaced workers. After soliciting online applications, 21,125 requests were logged by April 17. As of April 23, 1,977 stranded Boholanos were assisted with P2,000 each.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the repatriation, the governor announced the “Oplan Exodus” to return them to the province, but soon after, he emphasized that the project was still in a preparatory process between the provincial government and LGUs. On April 28, at the urging of the national government, Bohol finally accepted 65 Boholano overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who had been stranded in Cebu and Manila.<sup>12</sup> This is a more inactive attitude than in the provinces of Iloilo and Negros Oriental, which had accepted the repatriation of stranded residents to their home province earlier.

One reason for the government’s guardedness is that residents in Bohol strongly disapprove of the repatriation of stranded Boholanos. The Bohol Medical Society (BMS) officially opposes the “Oplan Exodus,” stating that “Bohol is not adequately prepared for a full-blown outbreak of COVID-19 which is something we have to expect when allowing people from hot zones such as the NCR and Cebu to come into the province.”<sup>13</sup> Some barangays are also reportedly offering opposition to the plan. A number of negative comments using #Notooplanexodus can be seen in the comments section of the governor’s Facebook posts and news articles.

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<sup>11</sup> Facebook page of the Offshore Boholanos Coordinating Team (<https://web.facebook.com/notes/offshore-boholanos-coordinating-team-obct/latest-update-as-of-april-23-2020/129799448669099/> accessed on April 25)

<sup>12</sup> Bohol Chronicle (April 28, 2020) “Yap: granting entry to OFWs is Bohol’s ‘small sacrifice’ in fight vs COVID-19” (<https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/04/28/yap-granting-entry-to-ofws-is-bohols-small-sacrifice-in-fight-vs-covid-19/> accessed on April 28, 2020)

<sup>13</sup> Bohol Chronicle (April 18, 2020) “Bohol Medical Society ‘strongly opposes’ Oplan Exodus” (<https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/04/18/bohol-medical-society-strongly-opposes-oplan-exodus/> accessed on April 21, 2020)

The vehement opposition of the residents in Bohol can be explained by three reasons. First, because Bohol remains free from new confirmed COVID-19 cases, people share a strong image of a dichotomy between a "clean inside" and "contaminated outside." Thus, they tend to think that maintaining the current situation by containing the infection outside is the only and best solution. As Joy Hendry (1999), an anthropologist on Japanese society, described the "Soto and Uchi (outside and inside)" classification, a system of thoughts based on dual symbolic classification is not novel.<sup>14</sup> According to Michael C. Ennis-McMillan and Kristin Hedges (2020), the human tendency to divide society into "us" and "others" when fear strikes becomes especially prevalent during infectious disease epidemics and leads people to physically distance themselves from perceived sources of transmission.<sup>15</sup>

An increase in the number of infected cases in the neighboring Cebu province (522 cases as of April 27, 1,047 cases as of May 5) has further reinforced the recognition of a "contaminated outside." This "external threat" is attempting to come into Bohol even as it seals off the provincial borders. Rumors of "people illegally arriving in coastal villages from nearby islands by small boats" have been around since the introduction of the quarantine.

The provincial government also took the issue seriously and announced on April 15 that it would offer a bounty of P20,000 per boat for information about boats illegally entering the province. Several days later, it was reported that two police officers who came to Bohol from Cebu were being quarantined in Tagbilaran City and would be charged for violating quarantine

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<sup>14</sup> Joy Hendry. 1999. *An Introduction to Social Anthropology: Other People's Worlds*. London: Macmillan.

<sup>15</sup> Michael C. Ennis-McMillan and Kristin Hedges. 2020. "Pandemic Perspectives: Responding to COVID-19." *Open Anthropology*. 8(1). (<https://www.americananthro.org/StayInformed/OAArticleDetail.aspx?ItemNumber=25631> accessed on April 21, 2020)

rules prohibiting inbound travel.<sup>16</sup> After this incident, the local government further increased provincial border vigilance. For example, a new policy was crafted that gives Governor Yap the sole authority to issue a travel pass to those who will be entering the province. The Philippine National Police also decided to tighten security at sea. The extent of the fear of outsiders is represented in comments concerned about the spread of infection even on an air flight with staff carrying medical equipment from Manila.<sup>17</sup>

Studies on previous infectious disease epidemics have reported people's psychological tendency similar to the current situation in Bohol. For instance, during the H5N1 avian influenza epidemic, the U.S. policy on the increase in human cases of this virus in Asia and the Middle East showed a "fortress mentality," which falsely assures a home country can escape from the pandemic disease by containing the cluster of human infections overseas, monitoring points of "entry to and egress from affected areas," and imposing geographic quarantines at home.<sup>18</sup> This kind of mentality is the basis of the opposition to repatriation of stranded Boholans.

The second reason for the opposition is that there may be no assurance that returning people will adhere to quarantine measures. The provincial government mandates people arriving from other provinces to be quarantined for 14 days. However, the measure is not credible, as people are afraid that it may not function properly because there are many people of "*gahi og ulo*" or "*badlongon*" (hardheaded, disobedient).<sup>19</sup> The most

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<sup>16</sup> Bohol Chronicle (April 20, 2020) "2 cops from Cebu quarantined at Tagbilaran facility" (<https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/04/20/2-cops-from-cebu-quarantined-at-tagbilaran-facility/> accessed on April 26)

<sup>17</sup> Facebook page of The Bohol Chronicle (<https://web.facebook.com/theboholchronicle/posts/2839728879478924> accessed on April 24, 2020)

<sup>18</sup> Monica Schoch-Spana. 2006. "Post-Katrina, Pre-Pandemic America." *Anthropology News*. January 2006. p.36.

<sup>19</sup> In national discourses, a Tagalog term "pasaway" (disobedient ones) is more generally used. Lasco (2020) points out that politicians and "good citizens" have labeled the "pasaway" as a dangerous other and made them a scapegoat of the

famous example of quarantine violation in Bohol is by former officials. Eleven people, including a former barangay captain in Tagbilaran City and a former municipality mayor, joined a cockfight in Davao City, where its promoter and two bet takers died of COVID-19. During their self-quarantine upon arrival on March 13, the city barangay captain posted on his Facebook a picture of when he was visited by a former city mayor and former town mayor.<sup>21</sup> As seen in this example, people often witness quarantine violators; therefore, they have doubts about whether arrivers will comply with the quarantine rules.

In contrast to "*gahi og ulo*," Boholanos who hold back returning for the security of their home province despite the difficulty of being stranded are praised by others. Those who are stranded in Cebu and other areas commented on Facebook posts that they decided to stay where they are for the sake of their families living in Bohol. They called such behavior "*sakripisyo*" (sacrifice). Others acclaimed their decisions. Meanwhile, some residents in Bohol commented, "We are also sacrificing ourselves every day. Let's sacrifice together."<sup>22</sup>

As seen above, there is not only a dichotomy between a "clean and secured inside" and "contaminated and hazardous outside" but also a moral dichotomy between "*gahi og ulo*" who do not follow the rules and people with "*sakripisyo*" who bear

functional failure of quarantine measures. See Gideon Lasco. 2020. "The 'pasaway' as scapegoat." *Inquirer* (April 30, 2020) (<https://opinion.inquirer.net/129356/the-pasaway-as-scapegoat> accessed on May 2, 2020)

<sup>20</sup> Facebook page of Art Yap (<https://web.facebook.com/artcyap/posts/2674211252864498> accessed on April 24, 2020)

<sup>21</sup> Bohol Chronicle (March 31, 2020) "11 "sabungeros" in Bohol under tight watch amid COVID-19 fears" (<https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/03/31/11-sabungeros-in-bohol-under-tight-watch-due-to-COVID-19/> accessed on April 20, 2020)

<sup>22</sup> Facebook page of The Bohol Chronicle (<https://web.facebook.com/theboholchronicle/posts/2832826690169143> accessed on April 24, 2020, <https://web.facebook.com/theboholchronicle/posts/2826087757509703> accessed on April 24, 2020)

hardship and follow the rules.<sup>23</sup> Even if people are in the “contaminated outside,” they can be acclaimed and emotionally accepted as members of society, as long as they stay outside with “*sakripisyo*.” However, the residents in Bohol would be reluctant to welcome their compatriots from outside to the province because it is impossible to determine who has an obedient personality at the border crossings. This anxiety based on uncertainty is the same as the anxiety that the test for COVID-19 cannot completely determine who is and is not infected.<sup>24</sup>

The third reason, as the BMS warned, is the limited medical infrastructure. The provincial government has been working on expanding the medical capacity in preparation for the future spread of COVID-19 in Bohol. Although Governor Yap appealed that the province rapidly enhanced its medical system and infrastructure, including isolation facilities and beds for patients with severe symptoms, people were not relieved by the explanation because it is hard to increase the number of medical specialists and ventilators in a few months.

The insufficient test system, in particular, causes mistrust. Since last February, Bohol has implemented testing for limited cases, such as people who have had contact with the confirmed case. On April 21, 200 test kits were reportedly made available in Bohol to test patients with flu-like illness or severe acute respiratory infection, but few are reassured that the government can test everyone who needs it. The “external fear” is further strengthened by speculation that once an infected person enters

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<sup>23</sup> Kusaka (2020) argues that the quarantine measure in the Philippines emphasizes disciplining those who do not follow the rules. Such a “disciplinary quarantine” morally divides the people into “good citizens” and “evil others.” See Wataru Kusaka. 2020. “[OPINION] Can we beat the coronavirus with ‘discipline?’” *Rappler* (April 06, 2020) (<https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/256939-can-we-beat-coronavirus-with-discipline> accessed on April 15, 2020)

<sup>24</sup> It was reported that two of the OFWs who returned to Bohol on April 28 tested positive in the Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test, but the regional director of the Department of Health (DOH) explained it was still inconclusive whether they were active infections. Because the information changed several times, people’s anxiety increased. For more details, see the conclusion and note 36.

and the infection spreads, the government will not be able to control the epidemic anymore.

#### 4. Pitfalls of Border Control Measures

Regarding the people and society's reaction to "returnees from outside," an opposition to the repatriation of OFWs is not conspicuous in the Philippines as a whole.<sup>25</sup> According to the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), the agency has assisted approximately 13,000 workers as of April 20 by providing transportation for the returning from abroad as well as food and accommodation after arrival at international airports in Manila and Cebu. On April 24, more than five hundred OFWs arrived at Manila from mainly France and Saudi Arabia. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs, another 35,000 OFWs are expected to return.<sup>26</sup>

On May 3, all commercial flights to and from the Philippines was temporally suspended by the request of the government's task force spearheading the response to the COVID-19 crisis. This is because the capacity for quarantine facilities for the returning OFWs has reached its limit. According to the Department of Transportation, the government has already accommodated around 20,000 repatriates who are quarantined in Metro Manila, with an arrival rate of 2,000 per day.<sup>27</sup>

One reason that the accommodating capacity became so tight is that their home LGUs are wary of accepting returnees. If not as deeply as Bohol has been, other provinces are also concerned that these people may bring the infection into their

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<sup>25</sup> Foreigners are principally prohibited to enter the country because of the suspension of issuing visas (spouses of Filipinos and their children are exempted). Filipinos are not allowed to travel abroad except for OFWs.

<sup>26</sup> ABS-CBN news (Apr 23, 2020) "DFA brings home 574 OFWs from France, Saudi Arabia" (<https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/04/23/20/dfa-brings-home-574-ofws-from-france-saudi-arabia> accessed on April 24, 2020)

<sup>27</sup> Facebook page of the Department of Transportation (<https://web.facebook.com/DOTrPH/posts/1687604174712045> accessed on May 3)

local communities. For example, the province of Iloilo accepted the OFWs who had been stranded in Manila, but one of them tested positive after arrival. The governor strongly criticized the OWWA for violating the protocol and refused to accept further scheduled OFW repatriations in mid-April.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, returnees are also frustrated with the quarantine measures after their arrival at home LGUs. In a post on Facebook on April 17, a returning nurse complained that the local government mandated an additional 14-day quarantine even though the nurse completed a 14-day quarantine twice, instructed by the IATF. The post also criticized the facility for being shoddy and not having a private room.<sup>29</sup>

As a worldwide trend, a number of national and local governments have closed their borders and tightened quarantine inspections at border crossings to protect against the influx of “external threat.” However, these measures are in danger of undermining a rational assessment because they are visible to everyone and attract public concerns. In order to epitomize the pitfalls of border controls, this paper explains an experience of Japan, where the author was from.

In Japan, several news stories about how infected returnees spread the infection after coming back to the country began to circulate in the headlines in March. It was a time when an outbreak in Europe and North America was frequently reported. People criticized the returnees, saying that “if they had followed the quarantine rule properly or if they had not traveled abroad in such pandemic time, the spread would have been prevented.” Like Boholanos who fear the “Oplan Exodus,” they feared that the infection brought by returnees would spread inside Japan. At that time, however, there were already a

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<sup>28</sup> Manila Bulletin (April 14, 2020) “Iloilo halts return of 100 stranded OFWs after COVID-19 positive case” (<https://news.mb.com.ph/2020/04/14/iloilo-halts-return-of-100-stranded-ofws-after-COVID-19-positive-case/> accessed on April 24, 2020)

<sup>29</sup> Facebook page of Philippine Registered Nurses (<https://web.facebook.com/groups/206947569331342/permalink/4366857350006989/> accessed on April 22, 2020)



substantial number of cases with unknown routes of infection in Japan, especially in the capital city of Tokyo. Even taking into account that the returnees contributed to the spread of infection, it seems that the visible returnees became good scapegoats over the invisible threat of infection locally transmitted through unknown routes.

After the border control measures in Japan became intense on April 3, the areas subject to speculation significantly expanded, and all arrivers from 73 countries and regions must undergo the PCR test at the airport. Moreover, they are prohibited from taking any public transportation to go home from the airport. Those who can return home either by being picked up by family members or by renting a car are allowed to go home before the test results are available and stay in the 14-day self-quarantine. On the other hand, those who will implement self-quarantine in a hotel must stay in the airport for one or two nights until the test results become available.

It is hard for those from remote areas to go home without using public transportation. They necessarily undergo self-quarantine in a hotel, paying for the 14-day stay themselves. Some people reportedly stayed only a few nights in a hotel and returned home by public transportation due to a lack of funds. Additionally, the procedure to leave the airport is lengthy. Many were shocked, and what became a hot topic on the Internet was a "cardboard box bed [Image 3]." Returnees in the main international airports in Tokyo and its vicinity stayed at this temporary "hotel" until the test results came out.<sup>30</sup> They could maintain social distance, but there was a risk that users would have to share a lavatory.

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<sup>30</sup> According to my friend who went back to Japan on April 15, the Narita airport had reserved hotel rooms outside airport, but the capacity for incoming arrivers was not enough at all.



[Image 3] Cardboard box beds in Narita Airport  
(Photo retrieved by Asahi Shinbun<sup>31</sup>)

These measures do not seem truly “necessary and appropriate.” In order for border controls to be effective in Japan, it was necessary to restrict the entry into and exit out of COVID-19-affected countries as early as possible, and to establish a reasonable process to enable the arrivers to return home without using public transportation and to undergo self-quarantine at an appropriate cost. However, the Japanese government introduced wide-area travel restrictions much later than in the Philippines. In addition, the quarantine measures in the airport were long limited to thermography, symptomatic screening, and unenforceable requests for self-quarantine. Once the stricter measures were initiated, “confining arrivers in the airport until the test results are available” and “prohibiting them from using public transportation” became their objectives. As a result, both staff and arrivers were stuck in an irrational process to achieve the objectives.

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<sup>31</sup> Asahi Shinbun (April 14, 2020) “Cardboard box beds in Narita Airport” (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASN4G3RBNB4FUDCB01Y.html> accessed on April 24, 2020)

As seen in the example of Japan, border control measures that prevent an "external threat" from entering "here" tend to attract significant public concern. These measures are surely effective in preventing the spread of infection to no small extent. However, medical resources, including test kits and manpower, are limited. It is questionable whether the limited resources in the urban areas around Tokyo, where the outbreak of community-acquired cases has spread explosively since April, have been properly allocated. Regarding the rate of tested positive in Tokyo, it was 0-7% between February to mid-March. But it rose to 32% in the week starting March 22 and 63% in the week starting April 12.<sup>32</sup> Given the high positive rate, a number of community-acquired cases who need testing may have been overlooked. Meanwhile, the positive rate in the airports from April 12 to 18 was 0.5% (38 positive results/7375 tests).<sup>33</sup>

Local governments in the Philippines will also put returnees under the quarantine protocol with extra care, such as the quarantine on the OFWs mentioned above. In doing so, the cost-effectiveness and epidemiological evidence of such measures need to be carefully examined. Otherwise, not only will it impose an excessive burden on both the personnel who implement the measures and those who follow them, but the distribution of medical resources in the area will also be skewed. Measures in provincial border controls should be determined based on reasonable sense and should not be determined to alleviate public fears.

## Conclusion

This paper points out that the relatively peaceful life in Bohol rests on thousands of stranded Boholanos. In response to

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<sup>32</sup> Tokyo Shinbun (April 25, 2020) "New Coronavirus: Positive rate rapidly increased in Tokyo" (<https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/national/list/202004/CK2020042502000247.html> accessed on April 27, 2020)

<sup>33</sup> The author calculated the rate from the reported data of Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. ([https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/houdou\\_list\\_202004.html](https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/houdou_list_202004.html) accessed on April 27, 2020)

the “Oplan Exodus,” a plan to return them home, many residents expressed strong opposition because of the fear of outsiders based on the clear dichotomy between a “clean inside” and “contaminated outside,” the possibility of returnees being “*gahi og ulo*” and not following the rules, and the vulnerable medical capacity in the province. This paper also noted that border control measures to protect against intrusion of an “external threat” have tended to be sensitive to public opinions, and it is necessary to calmly assess the appropriate resource distribution and cost-effectiveness.

Historically, human beings have experiences of “containing” patients of infectious diseases such as Hansen’s disease and plague. It is a general mentality of people to try to stop the diseases for which there is no magic bullet “there” before coming “here.” Such containment can be effective under certain circumstances. However, making the COVID-free area a “fortress” by closing borders, as Bohol has done, is the opposite idea. This strategy is not sustainable in a situation where COVID-19 infection is already expanding throughout the country and affected areas are becoming the majority.

We should be aware that the dichotomy of a “clean and secured inside” and “contaminated and hazardous outside” rooted in people’s consciousness can fluctuate in reality. This is because once COVID-19 infection spreads in Bohol, we can expect that a “secured fortress” will quickly turn into a “hazardous cage” due to the vulnerable medical infrastructure. If the scenario becomes real and the provincial border is still closed, the “exodus” from the “contaminated and hazardous cage” to a “safer outside” will not be available. Residents in Bohol have such a scenario in mind; therefore, they are desperate to preserve the existing dichotomy.

Can we avoid the worst scenario by keeping provincial borders closed? According to the World Health Organization, if official border crossings are closed, travelers will find unofficial paths to enter, making it impossible for the government to track people through testing and information acquisition. This may

increase the risk of uncontrolled spread of infection.<sup>34</sup> In other words, there is a silver lining to having infected cases that can be tracked and managed, and it is better than falling into a pandemic without knowing where and how much the infection has spread.

As Governor Yap said at a press briefing on April 27, it is unrealistic to seal off the provincial borders until the end of the pandemic. The development of a safe and effective vaccine is a long and complex process, and it takes much longer for many people to be injected. The longer the travel ban remains, the more difficulty the stranded Boholanos will experience in other provinces, and the more people will try to return home even if they violate the quarantine rules. Thus, it is necessary to establish a safe route and accept returnees, as well as provide financial support and crack down on illegal entry, in line with the current policy.

On April 28, Bohol granted entry to the first group of stranded OFWs. This is a small step toward the return of the estimated 9,000 stranded Boholanos. Governor Yap said it is a "small sacrifice" of Bohol to accept the repatriation.<sup>35</sup> In the comments section of the news story, there were many more positive reactions welcoming the governor's decision than before. However, it was reported after a few days that two repatriates were tested positive in the PCR test after arriving.<sup>36</sup> The governor announced that it would carry out additional PCR

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<sup>34</sup> Agence France-Presse. 2020. "Closing borders could allow novel coronavirus to spread faster – WHO" *Rappler* (January 31, 2020)

(<https://www.rappler.com/world/global-affairs/250707-closing-borders-could-allow-novel-coronavirus-spread-faster-who> accessed on April 27, 2020)

<sup>35</sup> Bohol Chronicle (April 28, 2020) "Yap: granting entry to OFWs is Bohol's 'small sacrifice' in fight vs COVID-19"

<sup>36</sup> The regional director of DOH explained to Governor Yap that a PCR test could show a positive result even in a recovered case according to the previous case reports and the Rapid Antibody Test conducted for these OFWs determined that they were not under active infectious diseases. See Bohol Chronicle (May 3, 2020) "COVID-19 tests on 2 OFWs in Bohol inconclusive" (<https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/05/03/covid-19-tests-on-2-ofws-in-bohol-inconclusive/> accessed on May 3, 2020)

tests in all the OFWs, including two “probable” cases and he appealed to national authorities for the suspension of entry of repatriates into the province while the PCR tests are still awaited.<sup>37</sup>

If the province will continue accepting OFWs and other stranded residents, further cases tested positive may be detected. Even so, it is compelled to accept these people because of the pressure from the national government by the limits of accommodating capacity and from the people being forced to wait to return for a long time. It is not surprising that the residents in Bohol, who have enjoyed COVID-free in the past, to be panicked by having the infectious risk. However, taking measures with precautions to the internal risk also reduces the possibility of the unnoticed spread of infection, as noted above. For us, residents in the “clean fortress,” now is the time to discuss this controversial issue more constructively, not to be obsessed with fear.

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<sup>37</sup> Bohol Chronicle (May 5, 2020) “65 OFWs in Bohol to be tested for COVID-19 anew after 2 found positive in PCR tests”,

(<https://www.boholchronicle.com.ph/2020/05/05/65-ofws-in-bohol-to-be-tested-for-covid-19-anew-after-2-found-positive-in-pcr-tests> accessed on May 5, 2020)

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