

BANGKOK (Net) — Traffic jams and crowds of commuters returned to the Philippine capital on Monday, as the metropolis relaxed antivirus measures in a high-stakes gamble to slowly reopen the economy while fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

Commuter trains, taxis, ride-sharing cars, special shuttle buses and motorcycles rumbled back on the road in metropolitan Manila but were only allowed to carry a fraction of their capacity as a safeguard.

Public transport was still limited by the relaxed rules and many commuters waited for hours to get a ride despite the government's deployment of buses.

A larger swarm of private cars also helped choke roads.

"Many people are now allowed to go out and many industries are reopening so you'll see a lot of vehicles ... but the situation remains abnormal," said police Lt. Gen. Guillermo Eleazar.

He warned that police will still go after violators who would not wear face masks and observe physical distancing.

Classes remain suspended for the next two weeks. Barber shops and beauty salons can open next week at a third of their capacity.

The Philippines remains a Southeast Asian hot spot for COVID-19, with more than 18,000 infections and 957 deaths.

In other developments in the Asia-Pacific region:

— **INDIA EASES AS DEATHS CLIMB:** India registered 230 coronavirus deaths in the last 24 hours, bringing its total to 5,394 as the country's phased plan to ease its lockdown kicked in from Monday. Authorities are moving forward with the easing even as experts say India is nowhere close to the peak of the outbreak. Railways will run 200 more special passenger trains from Monday and some states have reopened their borders, allowing vehicular traffic.

Maharashtra, the worse hit state, has allowed shops and offices to open outside containment zones.

— **SOUTH KOREA STRUGGLES TO TRACE CASES:** South Korea's top infectious disease expert is pleading for people over 65, pregnant women and other medically vulnerable individuals to stay at home as officials struggle to trace and stem the spread of the coronavirus amid increased public activity. Jeong Eun-kyeong, director of the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, made the comments Monday while addressing 24 new cases linked to a group of churches near Seoul, including the death of a man in his 70s. She also raised concern over hundreds of transmissions linked to workplaces, including call centers and a massive warehouse operated by local e-commerce giant Coupang, which officials say failed to properly enforce preventive measures. South Korea has reported 11,503 cases and 271 deaths.

— **CHINA REPORTS IMPORTED CASES:** China on Monday reported an increase in daily confirmed coronavirus cases to 16, all brought from outside the country. Eleven were recorded among travelers arriving in the southwestern province of Sichuan, three in the northern region of Inner Mongolia and two in the southeastern manufacturing heartland of Guangdong. With local transmissions having fallen to virtually zero, much of the country has re-opened for business and Monday saw the further restart of classes in middle and high schools that had previously only allowed those preparing for graduation exams to return to campus. Kindergartens, and fourth and fifth graders will be allowed back next week as part of a staggered opening to prevent the further spread of the virus.

— **BANGLADESH OPENS TRANSPORT:** Public transportation across Bangladesh reopened

Monday, though with restriction on the number of passengers. In, Dhaka, officials were checking if buses were following health guidelines. Domestic flights resumed on at least three routes, as did ferry services to the southern coastal region. The government says the gradual reopening is crucial to revive the economy, though there are concerns it could lead to a increase in infections when hospitals are already overwhelmed in the capital.