

COVID-19: Palauan leader in Taiwan to boost ties

Written by Taipei Times

Monday, 29 March 2021 06:09 -



Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu, right, welcomes Palauan President Surangel Whipps Jr at Taiwan Taoyuan International airport yesterday.

Photo: Ritchie B. Tongo, EPA-EFE

Palauan President Surangel Whipps Jr arrived in Taiwan yesterday afternoon for a five-day visit to promote tourism to his country, becoming the first head of state to visit the nation since the COVID-19 pandemic began last year.

The visit also came as a COVID-19 “travel bubble” is to form between Taiwan and Palau, with the first tour group to depart from Taipei on Thursday.

Whipps and his delegation arrived at Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport at 3:50pm and were greeted by Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu (吳敦義) at the boarding gate.

US Ambassador to Palau John Hennessey-Niland is a member of the delegation.

In a brief speech at the airport, Whipps said they are excited and ready to launch the “travel corridor,” or “sterile corridor,” between Palau and Taiwan — which he believes would be the first between a “COVID-19-free” and a “COVID-19-safe” country.

The link is only possible because of the incredible work that the Taiwanese government has done over the past year in containing the virus, keeping its people safe from COVID-19, he said, adding the Palauan Ministry of Health has also been diligent, and a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) team determined that Palau was truly COVID-19-free when it visited the country.

“We trust what Taiwan has done is an example of a successful country in combating COVID-19. We feel now that we can work together and feel safe,” he said. “We trust each other, and I think this is the basis of this sterile corridor.”

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Whipps would travel with the first Taiwanese tour groups to visit Palau under the “travel bubble.”

Separately yesterday, asked about the disease prevention measures prepared for the Palauan delegation in Taiwan, CDC Deputy Director-General Chuang Jen-hsiang (莊建勳), who is the spokesman of the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC), said the delegation provided negative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test results from within three days of boarding their flight, so they did not need testing after landing.

Whipps and his delegation would use a separate door, elevator and dining area in the hotel where they are staying, and thermometers and alcohol-based hand sanitizers have been prepared for them, he added.

The CECC has also suggested that they wear masks at all times, practice social distancing, record all their close contacts, and avoid contact with local residents, he said, adding that their traffic routes have been planned out in advance and Ministry of Foreign Affairs staff would accompany them throughout the visit.

They would receive a PCR test before leaving Taiwan, Chuang added.

In related news, the CECC yesterday reported two imported cases of COVID-19, both Philippine migrant workers.

Additional reporting by Lu Yi-hsuan and Lin Hui-chin

Source: [Taipei Times - 2021/03/29](#)