

Maguindanao massacre verdict: Judge needs more time

Justice may have to wait a little longer for victims of the 2009 Maguindanao massacre.

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The Quezon City judge handling the decade-long trial has sought an extension to rule on the multiple murder cases filed against over 100 suspects tagged in the Nov. 23, 2009 bloodshed, The STAR learned yesterday.

Sources confirmed that Regional Trial Court Branch 221 Judge Jocelyn Solis-Reyes has sent a letter to the Supreme Court (SC) asking for a 30-day extension on the period given to her to rule on the cases.

A copy of the letter has yet to be released. The SC has yet to respond to the request for extension.

Under existing guidelines, a judge has 90 days to decide on a case upon the termination of the trial.

Solis-Reyes submitted the case for decision last August and has until Nov. 22, a day before the 10th anniversary of the massacre, to promulgate judgment on the case.

If her request for an extension is granted, the judge will have until Dec. 22 to render her decision.

The request may have been due to the voluminous amount of records that the judge has to review in deciding the case.

Since the trial began in January 2010, the cases have already accumulated 165 volumes of pleadings and other documents, as well as hundreds of folders of stenographic notes from marathon court hearings.

Last week, Solis-Reyes denied the request of suspect Andal Ampatuan Jr. to reopen the trial after a prosecution witness denied in open court that he would recant his testimony.

Ampatuan grounded his request on supposed information that suspect-turned-state witness Sukarno Badal would retract the statements he made during the hearings.

Badal, who testified to seeing Ampatuan shooting some of the victims, personally appeared before the court to deny that he would recant his testimony.

Ampatuan is one of the 197 suspects initially charged for the massacre, which claimed the lives of 58 people, including 32 media practitioners.

A total of 117 suspects have been arrested, including some prominent members of the Ampatuan clan.

Seven have died in detention, including Ampatuan clan patriarch and former Maguindanao governor Andal Ampatuan Sr.

Charges against nine others have been dropped, including the three who were allowed to become state witnesses. Eleven are out on bail, while 80 of the suspects – including Datu Saudi Ampatuan Jr. – remain at large.