

SC grants 1-month extension in Maguindanao massacre case

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The Supreme Court (SC) has granted the request of Judge Jocelyn Solis-Reyes for a month's extension before handing down a decision on the 10-year-old Maguindanao massacre case.

Chief Justice Diosdado Peralta said the Quezon City Regional Trial Court judge has until Dec. 20 to decide on the fate of 197 suspects, including members of the Ampatuan clan, who are being held accountable for the killing of 58 people in 2009.

The chief magistrate pointed out that while the rules provide that all trial courts should promulgate decisions within 90 days from submission, they also understand Reyes' predicament.

"In the case of Judge Jocelyn Solis Reyes, you know very well that there are so many accused and there are so many victims in that case. We also allow meritorious motions for extension and we understand her predicament. We allowed her to have an extension of one month," Peralta said.

However, he also warned that the SC would not grant a second extension.

"As I said, motions for extension are the exception rather than the rule and we understand her plight. I hope that she will no longer ask for another extension so that before the end of the year those cases will finally be decided."

Joel Sy Egco, Presidential Task Force on Media Security (PTFoMS) executive director, said they respect the SC decision as he hopes for a positive ruling.

"Without pre-empting the outcome, (I am) optimistic that the families of the victims will finally get the justice that they have been waiting for the last decade. It took the political will of a Duterte administration to finally see this through its logical conclusion," he said.

Communications Sec. Martin Andanar, who co-chairs the PTFoMS, said they "expect that justice will ultimately prevail for the victims and their families."

"We cannot help but be amazed at the dedication of the men and women of the law enforcement units, prosecutors and most especially, the Presidential Task Force on Media Security, whose passion for their work is exceeded only by their desire to see this case through its conclusion," he said.

Egco expressed confidence that the decision will be handed down before yearend after almost a decade of waiting. "It is worth the wait. What is one month compared to ten years? Lower courts usually go on Christmas break in mid-December. So the decision may be out by Dec. 14."

The Ampatuan Massacre has been regarded as the deadliest single-day attack on journalists in the world and the worst election-related case of violence in recent Philippine history.

Of the 58 people who were killed, 32 were journalists who joined the convoy of then-Buluan Vice Mayor Esmael Mangudadatu, who had sent his wife and supporters to file his candidacy against Andal Ampatuan Jr.

The Chief Justice praised Judge Reyes for working on the case, saying she “did her best in order to give justice to the victims and also in order to afford the accused the required due process of law under the Constitution.”

According to Reyes, she needed the extra time to sift through the case’s voluminous records, which consists of 165 volumes in proceedings, 65 volumes in transcripts of stenographic notes and eight volumes of the prosecution’s documentary evidence. Judge Reyes submitted the case for decision last August and originally had until Nov. 20 to promulgate the case.