

Ampatuan verdict out soon

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The long wait for justice may come a decade after the murder of 58 people in the gruesome crime known as the Maguindanao massacre as a verdict is expected to be handed down on 19 December.

Quezon City Regional Trial

Court Judge Jocelyn Solis-Reyes, presiding judge of Branch 221, yesterday announced that judgment for the multiple murder charges will be on 9 a.m. on that date

The proceedings will be held at the Quezon City Jail-Annex inside Camp Bagong Diwa in Taguig.

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Earlier, the Supreme Court gave Solis-Reyes until 20 December to promulgate a decision, granting a 30-day extension she had asked for due to the sheer volume of case records she has to review.

At least 15 people surnamed Ampatuan, including brothers Andal Jr., Zaldy and Sajid, are among the 197 individuals accused of conspiring to murder 58 people on a hill in Ampatuan town, Maguindanao on 23 November 2009.

It was also the single deadliest attack on members of the media since detailed records were kept.

The attack, allegedly politically motivated, was carried out by gunmen with high-powered firearms.

The wife, sisters and supporters of then Buluan town vice mayor and now Congressman Esmael "Toto" Mangudadatu, 32 journalists and six passers-by were killed in that attack.

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Around 80 of the people charged by the court with murder remain at large, though.

Many of them have been cleared of the charges due to insufficient evidence. Eight of them have died, including clan patriarch Andal Ampatuan Sr., who succumbed to liver cancer in 2015.

Ampatuan Jr. is the primary suspect in the case.

He was mayor of Datu Unsay town when he and his family's private armed group allegedly shot and decapitated the victims' bodies with chainsaws.

Only 116 of the 197 original suspects facing multiple murder charges have been arrested.

Of this number, 107 were put on trial while five were dismissed. They include Ampatuan's brother, former Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao Governor Zaldy Ampatuan.

Ampatuan Jr.'s memorandum to the case, despite being filed months after trial ended, was accepted by the judge wrapping up the facts of the case and arguments raised during the trial.

Judge Solis-Reyes still decided to accept the document as part of the case records in the higher interest of justice.