

RE: REPORT ON THE MONITORING OF CASES IN THE RTC, BRANCH 64, LABO, CAMARINES NORTE

A.M. No. 02-9-580-RTC. January 23, 2003

Ponente: AUSTRIA-MARTINEZ, J.

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AUSTRIA-MARTINEZ, J.:

On May 10, 2000, judicial audit and physical inventory was conducted in Branch 64, Regional Trial Court of Labo, Camarines Norte, presided over by Judge Amaro M. Meteoro.

In a Resolution dated July 1, 2002, the Court through the Third Division in A.M. No. 10858-Ret., resolved to approve, effective February 5, 2002, the application of Judge Meteoro for disability retirement under R.A. 910 but ordered the setting aside of the amount of Twenty Thousand Pesos (P20,000.00) pending resolution of IPI-99-866-RTJ and IPI 02-1410-RTJ.[1]

On September 24, 2002, the Court received the Memorandum dated September 17, 2002 of Deputy Court Administrator Jose P. Perez with the endorsement of Court Administrator Presbitero J. Velasco, Jr. recommending approval thereof.

Based on the findings of the audit team, DCA Perez reports that there were:

- Forty-five cases submitted for decision (twenty-five criminal cases and twenty civil cases) and fifteen cases with motions for resolutions. The subsequent monitoring showed that Judge Meteoro had decided only five cases (one criminal case and four civil cases) and three of the motions which resulted to their dismissal. The rest of the cases and motions have remained undecided and unresolved as of the end of the monitoring.
- One hundred sixty-seven cases on trial (one hundred thirty-one criminal cases and thirty-one civil cases). At the end of the monitoring, seventeen criminal cases and seven civil cases were either dismissed or archived.
- Seventeen cases for pre-trial conference, fifteen criminal cases and two civil cases. One criminal case was disposed at the end of monitoring.
- Ninety-two[2] criminal cases set for arraignment. One was archived and two were dismissed.
- Six cases with court orders for compliance by the parties. One criminal case was decided while two civil cases were dismissed.
- Nine cases with proceedings held in abeyance. In one of these cases, Judge Meteoro voluntarily inhibited himself for the reason that the accused is the Clerk of Court of MCTC, Capalonga-Sta. Elena, Camarines Norte;
- Twenty-five cases which were not further acted upon or without further setting despite the lapse of a considerable length of time. Two criminal cases and two civil cases were dismissed;
- Fifty cases with warrants of arrest and five civil cases with summons. Prior to his retirement, Judge Meteoro and his OIC Clerk of Court were advised that these cases may be acted upon in accordance with Administrative

Circular No. 7-A-92 dated June 21, 1993, regarding Guidelines in the Archiving of Cases. The monitoring disclosed that thirty-seven criminal cases were already archived. Two of these criminal cases were ordered dismissed instead of archiving the same.

DCA Perez further reports that he found it difficult to finalize his report because of the failure of OIC Clerk of Court Ireneo Ricardo D. Aytona, Jr. to immediately submit a list of cases that were left undecided by Judge Meteoro as of his retirement on February 5, 2002; that it was only on August 30, 2002 that the OIC submitted the list, as follows:

CASE NO. DATE SUBMITTED FOR DECISION

Criminal Cases

1. 97-0226 to 97-0230 01-10-2000
2. 96-0010 01-11-2000
3. 96-0125- to 96-0126 02-13-2000
4. 96-0011 02-21-2000
5. 96-0150 02-21-2000
6. 96-0013 05-02-2000
7. 98-0269 05-15-2000
8. 96-0016 06-27-2000
9. 98-0257 09-04-2000
10. 96-0074 09-04-2000
11. 98-0278 09-25-2000
12. 96-0087 10-26-2000
13. 98-0259 10-27-2000
14. 96-0247 01-30-2001
15. 96-0030 01-31-2001
16. 96-0089 05-13-2001
17. 98-0296 05-14-2001
18. 98-0288 05-24-2001
19. 97-0241 06-22-2001
20. 97-0236 06-22-2001
21. 96-0156 06-26-2001
22. 96-0008 06-27-2001
23. 96-0191 08-03-2001
24. 98-0258 08-16-2001

- 25. 98-0260 08-16-2001
- 26. 98-0270 08-16-2001
- 27. 97-0210 09-06-2001
- 28. 97-0211 09-06-2001
- 29. 96-0063 09-12-2001
- 30. 99-0372 10-14-2001
- 31. 96-0109 11-16-2001
- 32. 96-0061 12-21-2001

Civil Cases

- 33. 96-0049 12-08-1998
- 34. 96-0001 01-21-1999
- 35. 96-0009 04-24-1999
- 36. 96-0006 05-26-1999
- 37. 98-0009 07-30-1999
- 38. 98-0104 10-01-1999
- 39. 99-0138 12-06-1999
- 40. 00-0144 02-02-2000
- 41. 96-0014 03-13-2000
- 42. 96-0041 06-27-2000
- 43. 00-0156 02-14-2000
- 44. 00-0167 08-31-2000
- 45. 01-0169 03-22-2001
- 46. 00-0184 11-13-2001
- 47. 97-0004 10-11-2001
- 48. 01-0071 12-14-2001
- 49. 01-0060 09-13-2001
- 50. 99-0133 09-09-1999
- 51. 98-0089 05-20-1999
- 52. 01-0061 11-28-2001

- 53. 00-0051 Not provided
- 54. 96-0012 12-07-1999
- 55. 99-0119 08-23-2001
- 56. 01-0056 Not provided
- 57. 00-0151 -do-
- 58. 00-0152 -do-
- 59. 96-0001 05-16-2002
- 60. 01-0068 06-06-2002
- 61. 01-0070 05-15-2002

However, Criminal Cases Nos. 96-0109 and 96-0061 and Civil Cases Nos. 00-0184, 01-0071 and 01-0061 were still within the reglementary period to decide as of the retirement of Judge Meteoro; Civil Cases Nos. 96-0001, 01-0068 and 01-0070 were submitted for decision before Judge Leo L. Intia who was appointed acting presiding judge on April 4, 2002 after the retirement of Judge Meteoro; and, the dates when Civil Cases Nos. 00-0051, 01-0056, 00-0151 and 00-0152 were submitted for decision were not stated in the list. Thus, there were forty-nine[3] cases left undecided/unresolved beyond the reglementary period when Judge Meteoro retired.

According to DCA Perez, the Office of the Court Administrator had directed Judge Meteoro to decide first the cases submitted to him before he retires. However, Judge Meteoro informed the OCA that much as he wanted to dispose of these cases, due to his failing health condition, he could no longer decide them. Thus, Judge Meteoro stated that he was willing to accept whatever the Court may impose upon him for such infraction.

DCA Perez also reports that prior to this administrative case, the Court, in A.M. No. 00-1572 dated August 3, 2000, found Judge Meteoro guilty of gross insufficiency and serious misconduct and fined him in the amount of Twenty Thousand Pesos (P20,000.00) for failing to decide within the reglementary period Civil Case No. 5784. He was also warned that a repetition of the same shall be dealt with more severely.

Section 15(1), Article VIII of the Constitution mandates the lower courts to resolve cases within 3 months. Rule 3.05 of the Code of Judicial Conduct mandates judges to decide cases within the required period. Delay in the disposition of cases not only deprives litigants of their right to speedy disposition of their cases, but it also tarnishes the image of the judiciary. Failure to decide cases on time constitutes inefficiency that merits administrative sanction.[4]

Without doubt, Judge Meteoro violated this mandate. He failed to decide forty-nine cases within the required period. As reflected in the report of DCA Perez, Judge Meteoro likewise failed to resolve pending incidents: twelve motions, sixteen for pre-trial conference, eight criminal cases with settings for arraignment, three cases with court compliance, eight cases with proceedings held in abeyance, eleven cases with pending warrants of arrest, five cases with summons. There were also twenty one cases which were not acted upon or without further setting despite the lapse of considerable length of time.

Judges are constantly reminded to decide cases with dispatch. Whenever a judge cannot decide a case promptly, all he has to do is to ask this Court for a reasonable extension of time to resolve the case.[5] In this case, there is no showing that Judge Meteoro sought for extensions for any of the aforecited cases. Judge Meteoro did not even offer an explanation.

However, considering that Judge Meteoro retired by reason of disability, the Court can reasonably assume that Judge Meteoro's poor health condition partly contributed to his inability to perform his duties as judge, which therefore mitigates his liability.

WHEREFORE, we find Judge Amaro M. Meteoro, former presiding judge, Regional Trial Court of Labo, Camarines Norte, GUILTY of gross inefficiency, and fine him Fifty Thousand Pesos (P50,000.00).

The Office of the Court Administrator is ordered to set up a more effective system whereby compliance with the submission of the required inventory of cases is monitored clearly so that undue delay in the disposition of administrative matter is avoided. The report should be submitted within thirty (30) days from notice.

The Court Administrator is directed to require OIC Clerk of Court Ireneo Ricardo D. Aytona, Jr. to show cause why no disciplinary action should be taken against him for failure to immediately submit the required list of cases left by Judge Meteoro as of the date of his retirement on February 5, 2002, thus causing delay in the resolution of herein administrative matter.

Davide, Jr., C.J., Puno, Vitug, Mendoza, Panganiban, Quisumbing, Ynares-Santiago, Sandoval-Gutierrez, Carpio, Corona, Carpio-Morales, Callejo, Sr., and Azcuna, JJ., concur.
Bellosillo, J., on leave.

[1] Rollo, back of page 58.

[2] Counted as 11 because one case was consolidated with 34 other cases; one case with 36 other cases; another case with 8 other cases and one case with 6 other cases.

[3] The report states 54 cases but 1 case was consolidated with 4 others and another case with one other case.

[4] Re: Report of DCA Ponferrada Re: Judicial Audit conducted in Branch 21, RTC, Cebu City-Judge Genis B. Balbuena, Presiding, A.M. No. 00-4-08-SC, July 31, 2002.

[5] Report on the On the Spot Judicial Audit Conducted in the MCTC, Teresa-Baras, Rizal, A.M. No. MTJ-02-1397; September 17, 2002.

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