

**NORMA MANGALIAG AND NARCISO SOLANO, PETITIONERS, VS.
HON. EDELWINA CATUBIG-PASTORAL, JUDGE OF THE REGIONAL
TRIAL COURT, 1ST JUDICIAL REGION, SAN CARLOS CITY,
(PANGASINAN), BRANC...**

G.R. NO. 143951. October 25, 2005

Ponente: AUSTRIA-MARTINEZ, J.

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AUSTRIA-MARTINEZ, J.:

Before us is a petition for certiorari, with a prayer for the issuance of a temporary restraining order, to set aside the Order dated April 17, 2000 of the Regional Trial Court (RTC), Branch 56, San Carlos City in Civil Case No. SCC-2240, which denied petitioners' motion to dismiss; and the Order dated June 13, 2000, which denied petitioners' motion for reconsideration.

The factual background of the case is as follows:

On May 10, 1999, private respondent Apolinario Serquina, Jr. filed before the RTC a complaint for damages against petitioners Norma Mangaliag and Narciso Solano. The complaint alleges that: on January 21, 1999, from 9:00 to 10:00 a.m., private respondent, together with Marco de Leon, Abner Mandapat and Manuel de Guzman, was on board a tricycle driven by Jayson Laforte; while in Pagal, San Carlos City, a dump truck owned by petitioner Mangaliag and driven by her employee, petitioner Solano, coming from the opposite direction, tried to overtake and bypass a tricycle in front of it and thereby encroached the left lane and sideswiped the tricycle ridden by private respondent; due to the gross negligence, carelessness and imprudence of petitioner Solano in driving the truck, private respondent and his co-passengers sustained serious injuries and permanent deformities; petitioner Mangaliag failed to exercise due diligence required by law in the selection and supervision of her employee; private respondent was hospitalized and spent P71,392.00 as medical expenses; private respondent sustained a permanent facial deformity due to a fractured nose and suffers from severe depression as a result thereof, for which he should be compensated in the amount of P500,000.00 by way of moral damages; as a further result of his hospitalization, private respondent lost income of P25,000.00; private respondent engaged the services of counsel on a contingent basis equal to 25% of the total award.[1]

On July 21, 1999, petitioners filed their answer with counterclaim denying that private respondent has a cause of action against them. They attributed fault or negligence in the vehicular accident on the tricycle driver, Jayson Laforte, who was allegedly driving without license.[2]

Following pre-trial conference, trial on the merits ensued. When private respondent rested his case, petitioner Solano testified in his defense.

Subsequently, on March 8, 2000, petitioners, assisted by a new counsel, filed a motion to dismiss on the ground of lack of jurisdiction over the subject matter of the claim, alleging that the Municipal Trial Court (MTC) has jurisdiction over the case since the principal amount prayed for, in the amount of P71,392.00, falls within its

jurisdiction.[3] Private respondent opposed petitioners' motion to dismiss.[4] On March 24, 2000, petitioners filed a supplement in support of their motion to dismiss.[5]

On April 17, 2000, the respondent RTC Judge, Edelwina Catubig-Pastoral, issued the first assailed Order denying petitioners' motion to dismiss,[6] relying upon the mandate of Administrative Circular No. 09-94, paragraph 2 of which reads:

2. The exclusion of the term "damages of whatever kind in determining the jurisdictional amount under Section 19 (8) and Section 33 (1) of B.P. Blg. 129, as amended by R.A. No. 7691, applied to cases where the damages are merely incidental to or a consequence of the main cause of action. However, in cases where the claim for damages is the main cause of action, or one of the causes of action, the amount of such claim shall be considered in determining the jurisdiction of the court.

The respondent RTC Judge also cited the 1999 case of *Ong vs. Court of Appeals*,[7] where an action for damages due to a vehicular accident, with prayer for actual damages of P10,000.00 and moral damages of P1,000,000.00, was tried in a RTC.

On May 19, 2000, petitioners filed a motion for reconsideration[8] but it was denied by the respondent RTC Judge in her second assailed Order, dated June 13, 2000.[9]

Hence, the present petition for certiorari, with prayer for the issuance of a temporary restraining order.[10]

On August 9, 2000, the Court resolved to issue the temporary restraining order prayed for by petitioners. Consequently, the respondent RTC Judge desisted from hearing further Civil Case No. SCC-2240.[11]

Petitioners propound this issue for consideration: In an action for recovery of damages, does the amount of actual damages prayed for in the complaint provide the sole test for determining the court's jurisdiction, or is the total amount of all the damages claimed, regardless of kind and nature, such as moral, exemplary, nominal damages, and attorney's fees, etc., to be computed collectively with the actual damages to determine what court - whether the MTC or the RTC - has jurisdiction over the action?

Petitioners maintain that the court's jurisdiction should be based exclusively on the amount of actual damages, excluding therefrom the amounts claimed as moral, exemplary, nominal damages and attorney's fee, etc. They submit that the specification in Administrative Circular No. 09-94 that "in cases where the claim for damages is the main cause of action. . . the amount of such claim shall be considered in determining the jurisdiction of the court" signifies that the court's jurisdiction must be tested solely by the amount of that damage which is principally and primarily demanded, and not the totality of all the damages sought to be recovered.

Petitioners insist that private respondent's claim for actual damages in the amount of P71,392.00 is the principal and primary demand, the same being the direct result of the alleged negligence of petitioners, while the moral damages for P500,000.00 and attorney's fee, being the consequent effects thereof, may prosper only upon a prior finding by the court of the existence of petitioners' negligence that caused the actual damages. Considering that the amount of actual damages claimed by private respondent in Civil Case No. SCC-2240 does not exceed P200,000.00, which was then the jurisdictional amount of the MTC, the jurisdiction over the case clearly pertains to the MTC, and not to the RTC. Therefore, the RTC should have dismissed the case for lack of jurisdiction. Petitioners cite as relevant the case of *Movers-Baseco Integrated Port Services, Inc. vs. Cyborg Leasing Corporation*[12] wherein the Court, in disposing of the jurisdictional issue, limited its consideration only to the actual or compensatory damages.

Furthermore, while admitting that the defense of lack of jurisdiction was only raised during the trial, petitioners nevertheless contend that jurisdiction may be raised anytime, even after judgment, but before it is barred by laches

or estoppel. They submit that they seasonably presented the objection to the RTC's lack of jurisdiction, i.e., during the trial stage where no decision had as yet been rendered, must less one unfavorable to them.

At any rate, they argue that when the jurisdictional flaw is evident from the record of the case, the court may, even without the urgings of the parties, take judicial notice of such fact, and thereupon dismiss the case *motu proprio*. Thus, even if lack of jurisdiction was not initially raised in a motion to dismiss or in the answer, no waiver may be imputed to them.

Private respondent, on the other hand, submits that in an action for recovery of damages arising from a tortious act, the claim of moral damages is not merely an incidental or consequential claim but must be considered in the amount of demand which will determine the court's jurisdiction. He argues that the position taken by petitioners is a misreading of paragraph 2 of Administrative Circular No. 09-94. The clear and explicit language of said circular leaves no room for doubt; hence, needs no interpretation.

He further submits that petitioners' reliance on Movers-Baseco Integrated Port Services, Inc. is misplaced since that case is for recovery of the value of vehicle and unpaid rentals on the lease of the same. He contends that Section 18, paragraph 8 of Batas Pambansa Blg. 129, as amended by Republic Act No. 7691, upon which petitioners anchor their stand, refers to all the demands involving collection of sums of money based on obligations arising from contract, express or implied, where the claim for damages is just incidental thereto and it does not apply to actions for damages based on obligations arising from quasi-delict where the claim for damages of whatever kind is the main action.

Private respondent also contends that, being incapable of pecuniary computation, the amount of moral damages that he may be awarded depends on the sound discretion of the trial court, not restrained by the limitation of the jurisdictional amount. Should the Court follow petitioners' line of reasoning, private respondent argues that it will result in an absurd situation where he can only be awarded moral damages of not more than P200,000.00 although he deserves more than this amount, taking into consideration his physical suffering, as well as social and financial standing, simply because his claim for actual damages does not exceed P200,000.00 which amount falls under the jurisdiction of the MTC.

Lastly, he asserts that it is too late in the day for petitioners to question the jurisdiction of the RTC since they are estopped from invoking this ground. He contends that after actively taking part in the trial proceedings and presenting a witness to seek exoneration, it would be unfair and legally improper for petitioners to seek the dismissal of the case.

At the outset, it is necessary to stress that generally a direct recourse to this Court is highly improper, for it violates the established policy of strict observance of the judicial hierarchy of courts. Although this Court, the RTCs and the Court of Appeals (CA) have concurrent jurisdiction to issue writs of certiorari, prohibition, mandamus, quo warranto, habeas corpus and injunction, such concurrence does not give the petitioner unrestricted freedom of choice of court forum. This Court is a court of last resort, and must so remain if it is to satisfactorily perform the functions assigned to it by the Constitution and immemorial tradition.[13]

Thus, this Court, as a rule, will not entertain direct resort to it unless the redress desired cannot be obtained in the appropriate courts, and exceptional and compelling circumstances, such as cases of national interest and of serious implications, justify the availing of the extraordinary remedy of writ of certiorari, calling for the exercise of its primary jurisdiction.[14] Such exceptional and compelling circumstances were present in the following cases: (a) Chavez vs. Romulo[15] on the citizens' right to bear arms; (b) Government of the United States of America vs. Purganan[16] on bail in extradition proceedings; (c) Commission on Elections vs. Quijano-Padilla[17] on a government contract on the modernization and computerization of the voters' registration list; (d) Buklod ng

Kawaning EIIB vs. Zamora[18] on the status and existence of a public office; and (e) Fortich vs. Corona[19] on the so-called "Win-Win Resolution" of the Office of the President which modified the approval of the conversion to agro-industrial area of a 144-hectare land.

Be that as it may, the judicial hierarchy of courts is not an iron-clad rule. It generally applies to cases involving warring factual allegations. For this reason, litigants are required to repair to the trial courts at the first instance to determine the truth or falsity of these contending allegations on the basis of the evidence of the parties. Cases which depend on disputed facts for decision cannot be brought immediately before appellate courts as they are not triers of facts.[20] Therefore, a strict application of the rule of hierarchy of courts is not necessary when the cases brought before the appellate courts do not involve factual but legal questions.

In the present case, petitioners submit a pure question of law involving the interpretation and application of paragraph 2 of Administrative Circular No. 09-94. This legal question and in order to avoid further delay are compelling enough reasons to allow petitioners' invocation of this Court's jurisdiction in the first instance.

Before resolving this issue, the Court shall deal first on the question of estoppel posed by private respondent. Private respondent argues that the defense of lack of jurisdiction may be waived by estoppel through active participation in the trial. Such, however, is not the general rule but an exception, best characterized by the peculiar circumstances in Tijam vs. Sibonghanoy.[21] In Sibonghanoy, the party invoking lack of jurisdiction did so only after fifteen years and at a stage when the proceedings had already been elevated to the CA. Sibonghanoy is an exceptional case because of the presence of laches, which was defined therein as failure or neglect for an unreasonable and unexplained length of time to do that which, by exercising due diligence, could or should have been done earlier; it is the negligence or omission to assert a right within a reasonable time, warranting a presumption that the party entitled to assert has abandoned it or declined to assert it.[22]

As enunciated in Calimlim vs. Ramirez,[23] this Court held:

A rule that had been settled by unquestioned acceptance and upheld in decisions so numerous to cite is that the jurisdiction of a court over the subject matter of the action is a matter of law and may not be conferred by consent or agreement of the parties. The lack of jurisdiction of a court may be raised at any stage of the proceedings, even on appeal. This doctrine has been qualified by recent pronouncements which stemmed principally from the ruling in the cited case of Sibonghanoy. It is to be regretted, however, that the holding in said case had been applied to situations which were obviously not contemplated therein. The exceptional circumstances involved in Sibonghanoy which justified the departure from the accepted concept of non-waivability of objection to jurisdiction has been ignored and, instead a blanket doctrine had been repeatedly upheld that rendered the supposed ruling in Sibonghanoy not as the exception, but rather the general rule, virtually overthrowing altogether the time honored principle that the issue of jurisdiction is not lost by waiver or by estoppel.

...

It is neither fair nor legal to bind a party by the result of a suit or proceeding which was taken cognizance of in a court which lacks jurisdiction over the same irrespective of the attendant circumstances. The equitable defense of estoppel requires knowledge or consciousness of the facts upon which it is based. The same thing is true with estoppel by conduct which may be asserted only when it is shown, among others, that the representation must have been made with knowledge of the facts and that the party to whom it was made is ignorant of the truth of the matter (De Castro vs. Gineta, 27 SCRA 623). The filing of an action or suit in a court that does not possess jurisdiction to entertain the same may not be presumed to be deliberate and intended to secure a ruling which could later be annulled if not favorable to the party who filed such suit or proceeding. Instituting such an action is not a one-sided affair. It can just as well be prejudicial to the one who file the action or suit in the event that he obtains a favorable judgment therein which could also be attacked for

having been rendered without jurisdiction. The determination of the correct jurisdiction of a court is not a simple matter. It can raise highly debatable issues of such importance that the highest tribunal of the land is given the exclusive appellate jurisdiction to entertain the same. The point simply is that when a party commits error in filing his suit or proceeding in a court that lacks jurisdiction to take cognizance of the same, such act may not at once be deemed sufficient basis of estoppel. It could have been the result of an honest mistake or of divergent interpretations of doubtful legal provisions. If any fault is to be imputed to a party taking such course of action, part of the blame should be placed on the court which shall entertain the suit, thereby lulling the parties into believing that they pursued their remedies in the correct forum. Under the rules, it is the duty of the court to dismiss an action "whenever it appears that court has no jurisdiction over the subject matter." (Section 2, Rule 9, Rules of Court) Should the Court render a judgment without jurisdiction, such judgment may be impeached or annulled for lack of jurisdiction (Sec. 30, Rule 132, Ibid), within ten (10) years from the finality of the same (Art. 1144, par. 3, Civil Code).[24]

In the present case, no judgment has yet been rendered by the RTC.[25] As a matter of fact, as soon as the petitioners discovered the alleged jurisdictional defect, they did not fail or neglect to file the appropriate motion to dismiss. Hence, finding the pivotal element of laches to be absent, the Sibonghanoy doctrine does not control the present controversy. Instead, the general rule that the question of jurisdiction of a court may be raised at any stage of the proceedings must apply. Therefore, petitioners are not estopped from questioning the jurisdiction of the RTC.

In any event, the petition for certiorari is bereft of merit.

Section 1 of Republic Act (R.A.) No. 7691, which took effect on April 15, 1994, provides inter alia that where the amount of the demand in civil cases exceeds P100,000.00,[26] exclusive of interest, damages of whatever kind, attorney's fees, litigation expenses, and costs, the exclusive jurisdiction thereof is lodged with in the RTC. Under Section 3 of the same law, where the amount of the demand in the complaint does not exceed P100,000.00, exclusive of interest, damages of whatever kind, attorney's fees, litigation expenses, and costs, the exclusive jurisdiction over the same is vested in the Metropolitan Trial Court, MTC and Municipal Circuit Trial Court. The jurisdictional amount was increased to P200,000.00,[27] effective March 20, 1999, pursuant to Section 5[28] of R.A. No. 7691 and Administrative Circular No. 21-99.

In Administrative Circular No. 09-94 dated March 14, 1994, the Court specified the guidelines in the implementation of R.A. No. 7691. Paragraph 2 of the Circular provides:

2. The exclusion of the term "damages of whatever kind in determining the jurisdictional amount under Section 19 (8) and Section 33 (1) of B.P. Blg. 129, as amended by R.A. No. 7691, applied to cases where the damages are merely incidental to or a consequence of the main cause of action. However, in cases where the claim for damages is the main cause of action, or one of the causes of action, the amount of such claim shall be considered in determining the jurisdiction of the court. (Emphasis supplied)

The well-entrenched principle is that the jurisdiction of the court over the subject matter of the action is determined by the material allegations of the complaint and the law, irrespective of whether or not the plaintiff is entitled to recover all or some of the claims or reliefs sought therein.[29] In the present case, the allegations in the complaint plainly show that private respondent seeks to recover not only his medical expenses, lost income but also damages for physical suffering and mental anguish due to permanent facial deformity from injuries sustained in the vehicular accident. Viewed as an action for quasi-delict, the present case falls squarely within the purview of Article 2219 (2),[30] which provides for the payment of moral damages in cases of quasi-delict causing physical injuries.

Private respondent's claim for moral damages of P500,000.00 cannot be considered as merely incidental to or a

consequence of the claim for actual damages. It is a separate and distinct cause of action or an independent actionable tort. It springs from the right of a person to the physical integrity of his or her body, and if that integrity is violated, damages are due and assessable.[31] Hence, the demand for moral damages must be considered as a separate cause of action, independent of the claim for actual damages and must be included in determining the jurisdictional amount, in clear consonance with paragraph 2 of Administrative Circular No. 09-94.

If the rule were otherwise, i.e., the court's jurisdiction in a case of quasi-delict causing physical injuries would only be based on the claim for actual damages and the complaint is filed in the MTC, it can only award moral damages in an amount within its jurisdictional limitations, a situation not intended by the framers of the law.

It must be remembered that moral damages, though incapable of pecuniary estimation, are designed to compensate and alleviate in some way the physical suffering, mental anguish, fright, serious anxiety, besmirched reputation, wounded feelings, moral shock, social humiliation, and similar injury unjustly caused a person.[32] Moral damages are awarded to enable the injured party to obtain means, diversions or amusements that will serve to alleviate the moral suffering he/she has undergone, by reason of the defendant's culpable action. Its award is aimed at restoration, as much as possible, of the spiritual status quo ante; thus, it must be proportionate to the suffering inflicted. Since each case must be governed by its own peculiar circumstances, there is no hard and fast rule in determining the proper amount.[33]

The petitioners' reliance in the case of *Movers-Baseco Integrated Port Services, Inc. vs. Cyborg Leasing Corporation*[34] is misplaced. The claim for damages therein was based on a breach of a contract of lease, not a quasi-delict causing physical injuries, as in this case. Besides, there was no claim therein for moral damages. Furthermore, moral damages are generally not recoverable in damage actions predicated on a breach of contract in view of the provisions of Article 2220[35] of the Civil Code.

In view of the foregoing, the Court is convinced that the respondent RTC Judge committed no grave abuse of discretion in issuing the assailed Orders dated April 17, 2000 and June 13, 2000.

WHEREFORE, the instant petition for certiorari is **DISMISSED** for lack of merit. The temporary restraining order issued by this Court on August 9, 2000 is **LIFTED**.

The Regional Trial Court, Branch 56, San Carlos City is **DIRECTED** to continue with the trial proceedings in Civil Case No. SCC-2240 and resolve the case with dispatch.

Costs against petitioners.

SO ORDERED.

Puno, Callejo, Sr., and Tinga, JJ., concur.
Chico-Nazario, J., on leave.

[1] Records, pp. 3-4.

[2] *Id.*, p. 25.

[3] *Id.*, p. 219.

[4] *Id.*, p. 232.

[5] *Id.*, p. 237.

[6] *Id.*, p. 251.

[7]G.R. No. 117103, January 21, 1999, 301 SCRA 387.

[8] Id., p. 199.

[9]Id., p. 214.

[10]Rollo, p. 3.

[11] Id., p. 63.

[12] G.R. No. 131755, October 25, 1999, 317 SCRA 327.

[13] Ouano vs. PGTT International Investment Corporation, G.R. No. 134230, July 17, 2002, 384 SCRA 589, 593; Vergara, Sr. vs. Suelto, G.R. No. L-74766, December 21, 1987, 156 SCRA 753, 766.

[14]Zamboanga Barter Goods Retailers Association, Inc. vs. Lobregat, G.R. No. 145466, July 7, 2004, 433 SCRA 624, 629; Yared vs. Ilarde, G.R. No. 114732, August 1, 2000, 337 SCRA 53, 61; People vs. Court of Appeals, G.R. No. 128297, January 21, 1999, 301 SCRA 566, 569-570; Aleria, Jr. vs. Velez, G.R. No. 127400, November 16, 1998, 298 SCRA 611, 618-619; Tano vs. Socrates, G.R. No. 110249, August 21, 1997, 278 SCRA 154, 172-174.

[15] G.R. No. 157036, June 9, 2004, 431 SCRA 534.

[16] G.R. No. 148571, September 24, 2002, 389 SCRA 623.

[17] G.R. No. 151992, September 18, 2002, 389 SCRA 353.

[18]G.R. Nos. 142801-802, July 10, 2001, 360 SCRA 718.

[19] G.R. No. 131457, April 24, 1998, 289 SCRA 624.

[20] Agan, Jr. vs. Philippine International Air Terminals Co., Inc., G.R. Nos. 155001, 155547 and 155661, January 21, 2004, 420 SCRA 575, 584. Cf. Liga ng mga Barangay National vs. Atienza, Jr., G.R. No. 154599, January 21, 2004, 420 SCRA 562, 573; Santiago vs. Vasquez, G.R. Nos. 99289-90, January 27, 1993, 217 SCRA 633, 652.

[21] G.R. No. L-21450, April 15, 1968, 23 SCRA 29. See Metromedia Times Corporation, et al. vs. Pastorin, G.R. No. 154295, July 29, 2005.

[22]Id., p. 35.

[23]G.R. No. L-34362, November 19, 1982, 118 SCRA 399.

[24] Id., pp. 406-408.

[25] See Binay vs. Sandiganbayan, G.R. Nos. 120681-83 and G.R. No. 128136, October 1, 1999, 316 SCRA 65, 100; Uy vs. Court of Appeals, G.R. No. 119000, July 28, 1997, 276 SCRA 367, 379.

[26] P200,000.00 in Metro Manila.

[27] P400,000.00 in Metro Manila.

[28] SEC. 5. After five (5) years from the effectivity of this Act, the jurisdictional amounts mentioned in Sec. 19 (3), (4), and (8); and Sec. 33 (1) of Batas Pambansa Blg. 129 as amended by this Act, shall be adjusted to Two hundred thousand pesos (P200,000.00). Five (5) years thereafter, such jurisdictional amounts shall be adjusted further to Three hundred thousand pesos (P300,000.00): Provided, however, that in case of Metro Manila, the

abovementioned jurisdictional amounts shall be adjusted after five (5) years from the effectivity of this Act to Four hundred thousand pesos (P400,000.00).

[29]Laresma vs. Abellana, G.R. No. 140973, November 11, 2004, 442 SCRA 156, 169; Hilado vs. Chavez, G.R. No. 134742, September 22, 2004, 438 SCRA 623, 641; Cruz vs. Torres, G.R. No. 121939, October 4, 1999, 316 SCRA 193.

[30] Art. 2219. Moral damages may be recovered in the following and analogous cases:

...

(2) Quasi-delicts causing physical injuries; ...

[31]Ong vs. Court of Appeals, *supra*, Note No. 7, p. 402.

[32]Article 2217 of the Civil Code.

[33]Pleyto vs. Lomboy, G.R. No. 148737, June 16, 2004, 432 SCRA 329, 342; Samson, Jr. vs. Bank of the Philippine Islands, G.R. No. 150487, July 10, 2003, 405 SCRA 607, 612; Kierulf vs. Court of Appeals, G.R. Nos. 99301 & 99343, March 13, 1997, 269 SCRA 433, 448-449.

[34] G.R. No. 131755, October 25, 1999, 317 SCRA 327.

[35]Art. 2220. Willful injury to property may be a legal ground for awarding moral damages if the court should find that, under the circumstances, such damages are justly due. The same rule applies to breaches of contract where the defendant acted fraudulently or in bad faith.

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