

ARTURO G. RIMORIN SR., PETITIONER, VS. PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, RESPONDENT.

G.R. No. 146481. April 30, 2003

Ponente: PANGANIBAN, J.

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PANGANIBAN, J.:

Corpus delicti in its legal sense refers to the fact of the commission of the crime, not to the physical body of the deceased or to the ashes of a burned building or -- as in the present case -- to the smuggled cigarettes. The corpus delicti may be proven by the credible testimony of a sole witness, not necessarily by physical evidence such as those aforementioned.

The Case

Before the Court is a Petition for Review[1] under Rule 45 of the Rules of Court, seeking to reverse the December 22, 2002 Decision[2] of the Court of Appeals (CA) in CA-GR CR No. 17388. The assailed Decision modified the February 18, 1994 Judgment[3] of the Regional Trial Court (RTC)[4] of Manila (Branch 46) in Criminal Case Nos. CCC-VI-137 (79) and CCC-VI-138 (79), finding Arturo Rimorin Sr. guilty of smuggling under the Tariff and Customs Code. The dispositive portion of assailed CA Decision reads as follows:

“WHEREFORE, the assailed Decision is hereby MODIFIED as follows:

(a)

The Court AFFIRMS the decision of the trial court finding Felicisimo Rieta, Arturo Rimorin, Pacifico Teruel and Carmelo Manaois GUILTY BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT of the crime charged.

(b)

Appellants Ernesto Miaco, Guillermo Ferrer, Fidel Balita, Robartolo Alincastre and Ernesto de Castro are ACQUITTED as recommended by the Solicitor General.”[5]

@In an Information docketed as CCC-VI-137 (79), petitioner and his co-accused Felicisimo Rieta, Fidel Balita, Gonzalo Vargas, Robartolo Alincastre, Guillermo Ferrer and Ernesto Miaco were charged in these words:

“That on or about October 15, 1979, in the City of Manila, Philippines, the said accused, conspiring and confederating together and helping one another with the evident intent to defraud the government of the Republic of the Philippines of the legitimate duties accruing to it from merchandise imported into this country, did then and there [willfully,] unlawfully [and] fraudulently import or bring into the Philippines or assist in so doing contrary to law, three hundred five (305) cases of assorted brands of blue seal cigarettes which are foreign articles valued at P513,663.47 including duties and taxes, and/or buy, sell transport or assist and facilitate the buying, selling and transporting of the above-named foreign articles after importation knowing the same to have been imported contrary to law which was found in the possession of said accused and under their control which articles said accused fully well knew have not been properly declared and that the duties and specific taxes thereon have not been paid to the proper authorities in violation of said Sec. 3601 of the Tariff and Customs Code of the Philippines, as amended by Presidential Decree No. 34, in relation to Sec.

3602 of said Code and Sec. 184 of the National Internal Revenue Code.”[6]

With the assistance of his counsel de parte,[7] petitioner pleaded not guilty when arraigned on May 5, 1980.[8] After trial in due course, the latter was found guilty of smuggling under the Tariff and Customs Code.

The Facts

The Office of the Solicitor General (OSG)[9] presents the prosecution’s version of the facts thus:

“On October 12, 1979, Col. Panfilo Lacson, then Chief of the Police Intelligence Branch of the Metrocom Intelligence and Security Group (MISG for brevity), received information that certain syndicated groups were engaged in smuggling activities somewhere in Port Area, Manila. It was further revealed that the activities [were being] done at nighttime and the smuggled goods in a delivery panel and delivery truck [were] being escorted by some police and military personnel. He fielded three surveillance stake-out teams the following night along Roxas Boulevard and Bonifacio Drive near Del Pan Bridge, whereby they were to watch out for a cargo truck with Plate No. T-SY-167 bound for Malabon. Nothing came out of it. On the basis of his investigation, [it was discovered that] the truck was registered in the name of Teresita Estacio of Pasay City.

“At around 9:00 o’clock in the evening of October 14, 1979, Col. Lacson and his men returned to the same area, with Col. Lacson posting himself at the immediate vicinity of the 2nd COSAC Detachment in Port Area, Manila, because as per information given to him, the said cargo truck will come out from the premises of the 2nd COSAC Detachment in said place. COSAC stands for Constabulary Off-Shore Anti-Crime Battalion. The night watch lasted till the wee hours of the following morning. About 3:00 a.m. an Isuzu panel came out from the place of the 2nd COSAC Detachment. It returned before 4:00 a.m. of same day.

“At around 5 minutes before 4:00 o’clock that morning, a green cargo truck with Plate No. T-SY-167 came out from the 2nd COSAC Detachment followed and escorted closely by a light brown Toyota Corona car with Plate No. GR-433 and with 4 men on board. At that time, Lt. Col. Panfilo Lacson had no information whatsoever about the car, so he gave an order by radio to his men to intercept only the cargo truck. The cargo truck was intercepted. Col. Lacson noticed that the Toyota car following the cargo truck suddenly made a sharp U-turn towards the North, unlike the cargo truck which was going south. Almost by impulse, Col. Lacson’s car also made a U-turn and gave chase to the speeding Toyota car, which was running between 100 KPH to 120 KPH. Col. Lacson sounded his siren. The chase lasted for less than 5 minutes, until said car made a stop along Bonifacio Drive, at the foot of Del Pan Bridge. Col. Lacson and his men searched the car and they found several firearms, particularly: three (3) .45 cal. Pistol and one (1) armalite M-16 rifle. He also discovered that T/Sgt. Ernesto Miaco was the driver of the Toyota car, and his companions inside the car were Sgt. Guillermo Ferrer, Sgt. Fidel Balita and Sgt. Robartolo Alincastre, the four of them all belonging to the 2nd COSAC Detachment. They were found not to be equipped with mission orders.

“When the cargo truck with Plate No. T-SY-167 was searched, 305 cases of blue seal or untaxed cigarettes were found inside said truck. The cargo truck driver known only as ‘Boy’ was able to escape while the other passengers or riders of said truck were apprehended, namely: Police Sgt. Arturo Rimorin of Pasay City Police Force, Pat. Felicisimo Rieta of Kawit Police Force, and Gonzalo Vargas, a civilian.”[10]

On the other hand, petitioner’s version of the facts is summarized by the CA[11] as follows:

“Accused Pasay City Policeman Arturo Rimorin, was assigned at Manila International Airport (MIA for brevity) Detachment, Pasay City. He tried to show that in the [latter] part of 1978 during the wake of a fellow police officer, he met a man named Leonardo [a.k.a.] Boy. After that occasion, Boy would see him at Pasay City Police Station asking for some assistance. Once Boy told him he will get rice at Sta. Maria, Bulacan and he asked him to just follow him. He consented. A truckload of rice was brought from Sta. Maria to Quezon City. Boy gave him a sack of rice for providing company.

“In the afternoon of October 14, 1979 while he was at his Station at MIA, Boy came and requested that he

[accompany] him to Divisoria to haul household fixtures. By arrangement, they met at the gasoline station near Cartimar in Pasay City not later than 2:30 a.m. of October 15. At the gasoline station, Boy introduced him to Gonzalo Vargas, a mechanic and who is his co-accused herein. After boarding the truck, they went to the other gasoline station where he was introduced to Felicísimo Rieta [a.k.a.] Sonny, who also boarded the truck. When he came to know that Rieta is a policeman from Kawit, he started entertaining the thought that Leonardo had plenty of policemen friends.

“They passed Roxas Boulevard on their way to Divisoria. But he [noted] something unusual. Boy, who was on the wheels, turned right before reaching Del Pan Bridge and proceeded to pass under the bridge, a route that will take them to Port Area and not Divisoria. So he commented that it [was] not the route to Divisoria. Boy replied that there [would] be some cargo to be loaded. At a small carinderia fronting the Delgado Bros., Boy pulled over after Rieta commented that he was hungry. So Rieta alighted and Rimorin joined him. Rimorin asked Rieta what [would] be loaded in the truck but Rieta professed ignorance. After about an hour, the truck arrived. Rimorin and Rieta boarded the truck and they drove towards Roxas Boulevard-Bonifacio Drive. Rimorin noted one more unusual thing. He expected Boy to have driven towards Rotonda so they can go back to Divisoria but Boy drove straight ahead at the corner of Aduana to Roxas Boulevard. So he asked why they x x x [weren’t] going to Divisoria, but Boy replied ‘that there’s no more space in the truck’ and they’ll just go the next day. But then, they were ordered to pull over by men in a vehicle who upon alighting[,] poked guns at them. They introduced themselves as Metrocom [agents]. He noticed some back-up vehicles. They were made to alight, lie on their belly x x x on the road and they were frisked. They were ordered to board a Land Cruiser, one of the vehicles used by the Metrocom [agents] and they drove towards Bonifacio Drive. The Metrocom [agents] intercepted another vehicle.

“Rimorin claims that he did not see the Metrocom men open their truck. They were hauled later to Camp Crame. There he asked: ‘What’s this?’ But a certain Barrameda, while pointing to a truck different from what they used, told them ‘that’s the reason why you’ll be jailed.’ So he thought they were being framed up. It was only two to three days later that he saw the alleged smuggled cigarettes at the office of the MISG when it was presented by the investigator. They were not present when these alleged smuggled cigarettes were taken from the truck they rode in. On inquiry from the Metrocom men where their driver Boy [was], the Metrocom men said he escaped. He thought there [was] something fishy in that claim. He also thought there was something fishy in their apprehension. He wondered that they were the only persons during the apprehension, so how could have Boy escaped? There was no possibility for escape when they were intercepted. Yet, out of the four, only three of them were apprehended.”[12]

Ruling of the Court of Appeals

In affirming the RTC, the CA ruled that the defense of denial interposed by petitioner paled in comparison with the overwhelming testimonial and documentary evidence against him. In particular, it noted that while he and his co-accused raised questions of fact in their appeal, they failed to show that the trial court had significantly erred in assessing the credibility of the testimonies of witnesses for respondent.

Moreover, the CA held that the non-presentation in court of the seized blue seal cigarettes was not fatal to respondent’s cause, because the crime was established by other competent evidence.

The appellate court, however, found no sufficient evidence against the other co-accused who, unlike petitioner, were not found to be in possession of any blue seal cigarettes.

Hence, this Petition.[13]

Issues

Petitioner raises the following issues for our consideration:

“I

That the Court of Appeals has decided a question of substance not yet determined by the Supreme Court.

“II

That the Court of Appeals gravely erred when it misapprehended and sanctioned the following glaring and fatal errors committed by the lower court[:]

(a)

In not dismissing the charge for the prosecution’s failure to produce the corpus delicti of the crime;

(b)

In concluding, even without evidence, that the petitioner knew that what was loaded in the intercepted truck were contraband cigarettes;

(c)

In including in its appreciation with inculpatory effects the notice of sale and the results of the auction sale which were made without the benefit of court order, much less, notice to the accused;

(d)

In merely relying on the photographs of the contraband as a substitute for the seized goods;

(e)

In not acquitting the petitioner on ground of reasonable doubt.”[14]

In sum, the issues boil down to the following: (1) whether it was necessary to present the seized goods to prove the corpus delicti; (2) whether petitioner knew that the cargo being transported was illegal; and (3) whether, in the sale of the seized cargo, a notice to petitioner was required.

The Court’s Ruling

The Petition has no merit.

First Issue:

Corpus Delicti Established by Other Evidence

Petitioner argues that he cannot be convicted of smuggling under the Tariff and Customs Code, because respondent failed to present the seized contraband cigarettes in court. Equating the actual physical evidence -- the 305 cases of blue seal cigarettes -- with the corpus delicti, he urges this Court to rule that the failure to present it was fatal to respondent’s cause.

We disagree. The Court, on several occasions, has explained that corpus delicti refers to the fact of the commission of the crime charged[15] or to the body or substance of the crime.[16] In its legal sense, it does not refer to the ransom money in the crime of kidnapping for ransom[17] or to the body of the person murdered.[18] Hence, to prove the corpus delicti, it is sufficient for the prosecution to be able show that (1) a certain fact has been proven -- say, a person has died or a building has been burned; and (2) a particular person is criminally responsible for the act.[19]

Since the corpus delicti is the fact of the commission of the crime, this Court has ruled that even a single witness’ uncorroborated testimony, if credible, may suffice to prove it and warrant a conviction therefor.[20] Corpus delicti may even be established by circumstantial evidence.[21]

Both the RTC and the CA ruled that the corpus delicti had been competently established by respondent’s evidence, which consisted of the testimonies of credible witnesses and the Custody Receipt[22] issued by the

Bureau of Customs for the confiscated goods.

Col. Panfilo Lacson's testimony on the apprehension of petitioner and on the seizure of the blue seal cigarettes was clear and straightforward. He categorically testified as follows:

“Q

Let us go back to the truck after you apprehended the COSAC soldiers on board the [C]orona car, what did you do thereafter?

A

We told them to the place where the cargo truck was intercepted, Sir.

Q

What did you notice thereat?

A

Inside the truck were hundreds of cases of blue seal cigarettes, and I also found out that my men were able to apprehend the occupants of the cargo truck although they reported to me that the driver managed to make good escape, Sir.

Q

Now you stated that a search was made on the truck and you found how many cases of blue seal cigarettes?

A

Three hundred five (305) cases, Sir.

Q

Blue seal cigarettes?

A

Yes, Sir.

Q

What do you mean by blue seal cigarettes?

A

Blue seal cigarettes are untaxed cigarettes, Sir.

Q

Did you find out how many were there on board the truck which was intercepted by your men per your order?

A

Yes, Sir, [there] were three.

Q

Who?

A

They were P/Sgt. Arturo Rimorin, Sir.

Q

P/Sgt. of what department?

A

Of Pasay City Police Force, Sir, and Pat. Felicisimo Rieta.

Q

Of what police department?

A

Of Kawit, Cavite Police Force, and Gonzalo Vargas, Sir.

Q

Who is this Gonzalo Vargas?

A

Civilian, Sir.[23]

x x x x x x x x

Fiscal Macaraeg:

I am showing to you a Custody Receipt dated October 15, 1979, which states; Received from Lt. Col. Rolando N. Abadilla, AC of S, M2/CC, MISG. PC METROCOM (Thru S/Sgt. Rodolfo Bucao, PC) THREE HUNDRED SEVENTY ONE (371) cases of assorted brands of “Blue Seal” Cigarettes, which were intercepted and confiscated by elements of the MISG, PC METROCOM on or about 0400 15 October 79 along Bonifacio Drive, Manila, which for [purposes] of identification we respectfully request that it be marked [on] evidence as Exhibit ‘A’.

COURT:

Mark it Exhibit ‘A’.

Fiscal Macaraeg:

Q

Will you please do examine Exhibit 'A' and tell us whether this is the same receipt?

A

This is the same receipt, Sir.

Q

By the way, were photographs taken of the car as well as the vehicle involved in this case, together with the blue seal cigarettes that were confiscated?

A

Yes, Sir.

Q

Do you have copies of these photographs?

A

The copies are with our evidence custodian, Sir.

Q

Can you bring those pictures if required next time?

A

Yes, Sir.”[24]

So, too, did Gregorio Abrigo -- customs warehouse storekeeper of the Bureau -- categorically testify[25] that the MISG had turned over to him the seized blue seal cigarettes, for which he issued a Custody Receipt dated October 15, 1979.

We find no reason to depart from the oft repeated doctrine of giving credence to the narration of prosecution witnesses, especially when they are public officers who are presumed to have performed their duties in a regular manner.[26]

Moreover, it is well-settled that findings of fact of lower courts are binding on this Court, absent any showing that they overlooked or misinterpreted facts or circumstances of weight and substance.[27] This doctrine applies particularly to this case in which the RTC's findings, as far as petitioner is concerned, were affirmed by the appellate court.

Second Issue:

Knowledge of the Illegal Nature of the Goods

According to petitioner, the CA erred in concluding that he knew of the nature of the contraband cargo. However, he conveniently overlooks the fact that the burden of proving knowledge that the seized goods were smuggled was no longer incumbent upon respondent, as it had sufficiently established the fact of possession. This point is clear from Section 3601 of the Tariff and Customs Code, as amended, which reads:

“SEC. 3601 - Unlawful Importation. - Any person who shall fraudulently import or bring into the Philippines, or assist in so doing, any article, contrary to law, or shall receive, conceal, buy, sell, or in any manner facilitate the transportation, concealment, or sale of such article after importation, knowing the same to have been imported contrary to law, shall be guilty of smuggling and shall be punished x x x[.]

x x x x x x x x

“When, upon trial for a violation of this section, the defendant is shown to have or to have had possession of the article in question, possession shall be deemed sufficient evidence to authorize conviction unless the defendant shall explain the possession to the satisfaction of the court; Provided, however that payment of the tax due after apprehension shall not constitute a valid defense in any prosecution under this section.” (Emphasis provided)

In his discussion of a similarly worded provision of Republic Act No. 455,[28] a criminal law authority explained thus:

“In order that a person may be deemed guilty of smuggling or illegal importation under the foregoing statute three requisites must concur: (1) that the merchandise must have been fraudulently or knowingly imported contrary to law; (2) that the defendant, if he is not the importer himself, must have received, concealed, bought, sold or in any manner facilitated the transportation, concealment or sale of the merchandise; and (3) that the defendant must be shown to have knowledge that the merchandise had been illegally imported. If the defendant, however, is shown to have had possession of the illegally imported merchandise, without satisfactory explanation, such possession shall be deemed sufficient to authorize conviction.”[29] (Emphasis supplied)

The prosecution competently established that (1) the 305 cases of untaxed blue seal cigarettes discovered inside the cargo truck were fraudulently imported; and (2) petitioner was in control of the truck when it transported the cargo on October 15, 1979. Petitioner was unable to satisfactorily explain his possession of the untaxed cigarettes, which the MISG agents seized from him and his co-accused. Rather, he feigns ignorance of the true nature of the cargo, a claim which the RTC and the CA found incredible:

“Now on the explanations of Police Sgt. Rimorin of Pasay City Police Force and Pat. Rieta of Kawit Police Force, riders in the loaded cargo truck driven by ‘Boy.’ Their claim that they did not have any knowledge about the cargo of blue seal cigarettes is not given credence by the court. They tried to show lack of knowledge by claiming that along the way, ‘Boy’ and Gonzalo Vargas left them behind at a certain point for snacks and picked them up later after the cargo had been loaded. The Court cannot see its way through how two policemen, joining ‘Boy’ in the dead of the night, explicitly to give him and his goods some protection, which service would be paid, yet would not know what they are out to protect. And neither could the Court see reason in ‘Boy’s’ leaving them behind when he was going to pick up and load the blue seal cigarettes. ‘Boy’ knew the risks. He wanted them for protection, so why will he discard them? How so unnatural and so contrary to reason.”[30]

Third Issue:

No Need for Notice to Petitioner

Petitioner questions the sale of the seized cigarettes without notice to him. However, the sale of the seized items, which were then already in the custody of the Bureau of Customs,[31] was authorized under the Tariff and Customs Code, Sections 2601 and 2602 of which provide as follows:

“SECTION 2601. Property Subject to Sale. - Property in customs custody shall be subject to sale under the conditions hereinafter provided:

- Abandoned articles;

- Bonded articles entered under warehousing entry not withdrawn nor the duties and taxes paid thereon within the period prescribed by law;
- Articles for which import entry has been filed but have not been claimed within fifteen days thereafter; Provided, that in justifiable cases, or when public interest so requires, the Collector may, in his discretion, grant an extension of not more than fifteen days;
- Seized property, other than contraband, after liability to sale shall have been established by proper administrative or judicial proceedings in conformity with the provisions of this Code.
- Any article subject to a valid lien for customs duties, taxes or other charges collectible by the Bureau of Customs, after the expiration of the period allowed for the satisfaction of the same.

“SECTION 2602. Place of Sale or Other Disposition of Property. - Property within the purview of this Part of this Code shall be sold, or otherwise disposed of, upon the order of the Collector of the port where the property in question is found, unless the Commissioner shall direct its conveyance for such purpose to some other port.”

Moreover, Section 2603 of the Code states that the seized goods shall be sold at public auction after the required ten-day notice. In the instant case, these were sold on November 15-16, 1979. Thus, absent any evidence to the contrary, the sale is presumed to have been conducted by public officers in the regular performance of their duties.

Petitioner did not raise any objection to the presentation of the Notice of Sale and the results of the auction as evidence for respondent.[32] Clearly, his belated protestation now comes as an afterthought.

WHEREFORE, the Petition is DENIED, and the assailed Decision AFFIRMED. Costs against petitioner.

SO ORDERED.

Puno, (Chairman), Sandoval-Gutierrez, Corona, and Carpio Morales, JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 8-18.

[2] Id., pp. 113-138. Ninth Division. Penned by Justice Eubulo G. Verzola (Division chairman) and concurred in by Justices Marina L. Buzon and Edgardo P. Cruz (members).

[3] CA rollo, pp. 7-30; rollo, pp. 37-60.

[4] Presided by Judge Teresita Dy-Liacco Flores.

[5] Ibid., p. 24; rollo, p. 137.

[6] Records, Vol. I, p. 1. Signed by Assistant Prosecutor Ramon O. Santiago.

[7] Atty. Jose B. Layug.

[8] Order dated May 5, 1980; records, Vol. 1, p. 119.

[9] In a Manifestation dated January 31, 2002 and filed on even date before this Court, the OSG adopted its May 18, 2001 Comment on the Petition for Review as its Memorandum. The Comment was signed by Assistant Solicitors General Carlos N. Ortega and Cecilio Estoesta and Solicitor Patria A. Manalastas-de Leon.

[10] Respondent's Comment, pp. 1-3; rollo, pp. 142-144; this narration was adopted by the OSG from the CA's Decision.

[11] Petitioner's two-page Memorandum did not contain any statement of facts.

- [12] Assailed CA Decision, pp. 11-13; rollo, pp. 124-126.
- [13] This case was deemed submitted for decision on March 12, 2002, upon the Court's receipt of petitioner's Memorandum signed by Atty. Virgilio E. Dulay.
- [14] Petition, pp. 3-4; rollo, pp. 10-11.
- [15] *People v. Mittu*, 333 SCRA 121, June 8, 2000.
- [16] *People v. Oliva*, 341 SCRA 78, September 26, 2000; citing *Tan v. People*, 313 SCRA 220, August 26, 1999.
- [17] *People v. Mittu*, *supra*.
- [18] *People v. Roluna*, 231 SCRA 446, March 24, 1994; citing *People v. Sasota*, 91 Phil. 111, April 18, 1952.
- [19] *People v. Boco*, 38 Phil. 341, June 23, 1999; citing *People v. Cabodoc*, 331 Phil. 491, October 15, 1996.
- [20] *People v. Oliva*, *supra*, p. 87; *People v. Gutierrez*, 258 SCRA 72, July 5, 1996.
- [21] *People v. Roluna*, *supra*; citing *People v. Sasota*, *supra*.
- [22] Records, Vol. II, p. 147.
- [23] TSN, May 14, 1981, pp. 42-44.
- [24] *Ibid.*, pp. 52-54.
- [25] TSN, July 5, 1982, pp. 4-5.
- [26] *People v. Alegro*, 275 SCRA 216, July 8, 1997.
- [27] *People v. Boco*, *supra*; *People v. Gaorana*, 289 SCRA 652, April 27, 1998; *People v. Oliano*, 287 SCRA 158, March 6, 1998; *People v. Bahatan*, 285 SCRA 282, January 28, 1998.
- [28] Republic Act No. 455 is entitled "An Act To Amend Sections Two Thousand Seven Hundred And Two, And Two Thousand Seven Hundred And Three Of The Revised Administrative Code."
- [29] Luis B. Reyes, *The Revised Penal Code*, Vol. II, (14th ed., 1998), p. 300.
- [30] CA Decision, pp. 18-19; rollo, pp. 131-132.
- [31] The Custody Receipt showed that 371 cases of assorted brands of blue seal cigarettes were turned over by the MISG to Gregorio Abrigo, storekeeper of Customs Warehouse No. 8. See records, Vol. II, p. 147.
- [32] TSN, July 5, 1982, pp. 5-6.

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