

Solons laud guilty verdict in Maguindanao massacre case

MANILA -- Lawmakers at the House of Representatives on Thursday welcomed the court's decision to convict several members of the Ampatuan clan for their involvement in the 2009 Maguindanao massacre, which claimed the lives of 58 people.

Maguindanao Rep. Esmael Mangudadatu, whose wife and other relatives were among the victims in the decade-old carnage, said the landmark ruling is proof that justice is alive and well in the country.

"Bagama't hindi lahat ng akusado ay nahatulan ng pagkakakulong, kami ay nagagalak pa rin dahil ang mga dapat masakdal ay nakatakda ng makulong pang habang-buhay... Ang sampung taong paghihin-tay ay naging makabuluhan dahil tayo ang kinatigang ng hustisya (Although not all those accused were convicted, we are still pleased that most of them were sentenced to life in prison... The 10 years of waiting was worth it because justice is on our side)," Mangudadatu said.

"Ang pangyayaring ito ay patunay lamang na buhay na buhay ang hustisya sa ating bansa at hindi kailan man magiging mali ang pagpili sa tama at pagtiwala ng lubos sa Diyos at sa ating Saligang Batas (This event is proof that justice is very much alive in our country and it will never be wrong to choose what is right and to trust in God and our Constitution)," Mangudadatu added.

Kabayan Party-list Rep. Ron Salo said the guilty verdict in the Maguindanao massacre trial is a "triumph" of justice and the rule of law, as well as a "clear reminder" that no one is above the law.

Salo, who chairs the House Committee on Public Information, said Congress must pass laws to protect journalists in conflict zones, election hotspots, and battlegrounds of criminality, considering that the Maguindanao massacre was dubbed as the world's worst killings of journalists in history where at least 32

media workers were murdered.

"There is a need to enshrine in our laws global benchmarks and best practices on the protection of journalists and ensuring the security, as well as integrity, of elections," Salo said.

"We must strengthen voter education and continue to protect our elections against manipulation and violence from warlords, their goons, and their collaborators," he added.

Ako Bicol Party-list Rep. Alfredo Garbin, meanwhile, stressed the need for much stronger voter education laws and programs, the eradication of private armies, confiscation of all loose firearms, stoppage of all sources of funds of lawless elements, and bans on criminals from any post in government.

"We must find ways to bar criminal warlords from running for all public positions whether appointive or elective. We must weed out all corrupt and criminal elements from the ranks of the police, the military, and civilian officials," Garbin said.

"The country needs super strong protections for citizens and the news media covering conflict situations and election hotspots," Garbin added.

Garbin pushed for the measure declaring November 23 as Philippine Press Freedom Day to "honor the memory of those who died that fateful day and to remind future generations to never allow and prevent this kind of massacre and impunity from ever happening again."

Agusan del Norte Rep. Lawrence Fortun called on Congress to consider passing the anti-political dynasty measure, arguing that succession management in Philippine politics must not be based on powerful family ties and affiliations, but on principles of good governance, effective public service, and integrity.

"For the larger picture, the Maguindanao Massacre is a result of political warlordism which is true not only in Maguindanao but in other parts of the country and perpetrated by political

dynasties. This is a clear message to all voters to never again elect warlords to powerful positions in government from the barangay level up to all national posts," Fortun said.

"This case should serve as a challenge to all branches of government to wipe out all private armies, seize and destroy all illegal firearms, and prosecute all lawless elements wherever they may be," Fortun added.

On Thursday, 10 years since the massacre, the principal suspects in the case, including Datu Andal Ampatuan Jr. alias 'Unsay', were found guilty by Branch 221 Presiding Judge Jocelyn Solis-Reyes of the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Quezon City.

Fifty-eight people, including the wife, relatives, and supporters of then gubernatorial candidate Mangudadatu, were killed and

buried by armed men in Ampatuan, Maguindanao on Nov. 23, 2009.

The victims were on their way to Shariff Aguak in Maguindanao to witness the filing of a certificate of candidacy (COC) of Mangudadatu for the 2010 gubernatorial race when the crime was perpetrated.

Other victims include 32 journalists who were supposed to cover Mangudadatu's filing of COC in the local Commission on Elections office in the province.

Around 197 individuals, including 15 members of the controversial Ampatuan clan, were initially implicated in the decade-old Maguindanao massacre, but only 117 were arrested while 80 remained at large.

Out of the arrested, eight have died during the period of trial, including clan patriarch Andal Ampatuan Sr. who succumbed to liver cancer in 2015. (PNA)

Palace mum on Trump's impeachment

MANILA -- Malacañang on Thursday was tight-lipped when asked to react on the move of the US House of Representatives to impeach President Donald Trump for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.

"In the same way that we react on any intrusion into the processes of our government, we'd rather not make any comment on that," Presidential Spokesperson Salvador Panelo said in a Palace briefing.

"Other than saying that in the same way that impeachment in this country is decided on the basis of party affiliations, eh siguro ganun din sila (perhaps they are the same)," he added.

In September this year, Panelo said Duterte and Trump had the same leadership "style" which is why they share respect for each other.

"You know if you recall the style of the President was much earlier than Trump. Bago pa nagkaroon ng Trump may Duterte na eh (Before there was Trump, there was Duterte)," Panelo said.

Duterte was elected into office in June 2016 while Trump was elected in December 2016.

The two leaders met for the first time during the 31st Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Manila.

Reports showed that the Democratic-led House voted to pass both of its two articles of impeachment brought against Trump.

The first, charging Trump with abuse of his power by pressuring Ukraine to pursue investigations that could benefit his reelection campaign.

The second accuses him of obstructing Congress by directing administration officials and agencies not to comply with lawful House subpoenas for testimony and documents related to impeachment.

This is the third time a President has been impeached in US history.

ICAD cites strategic gains vs. illegal drugs in less than 3 years

MANILA -- The sustained implementation of the Philippine Anti-Drugs Strategy (PADS) focusing on enforcement, justice, rehabilitation and reintegration, and advocacy have been credited with the largely improved response against the illegal drug problem, according to the Inter-Agency Committee on Anti-Illegal Drugs (ICAD).

In its year-end report for 2019 released on Dec. 13, ICAD announced that 15,894 barangays nationwide have been declared as drug-cleared, alongside the 27,918 anti-drug operations conducted within the year that resulted in the arrest of 41,947 drug personalities.

Out of the drug personalities arrested, 2,422 are considered high-value targets, while 976 of the operations have been classified as high-impact in nature.

The committee cited that the coordinated efforts of its 45 member-agencies, adherence to the PADS and implementation of the Barangay Drug Clearing Program (BDCP) paved way for the stronger law enforcement activities on illegal drug proliferation and use.

In a press briefing in Malacañang on Dec. 12, PDEA Director General Aaron Aquino said the inter-agency committee is "still crossing our fingers by 2022 (so that) we can accomplish to clear all barangays of drugs."

Aquino said the PDEA's targets was "doable" but admitted that the challenges remain "so high".

"The remaining barangays are the most notorious barangays in terms of drug affectations," Aquino said.

Rehab efforts

Aside from conducting anti-illegal drug operations, ICAD has also enhanced its rehabilitation and advocacy efforts which include drug-free workplaces in government and private of-

fices, strengthening partnerships with local governments for monitoring Anti-Drug Abuse Councils (ADACs), and establishing more rehabilitation, reintegration, and reformation facilities and programs in all regions.

Highlighting the continued fight against illegal drugs are hallmark initiatives such as the launch of the 'Rehabinasyon' campaign, which advocates for a holistic approach through providing information on drug-related statistics, medical treatment of drug dependents, and reintegration through livelihood and employment programs.

Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) Assistant Secretary Ramon Cualoping detailed the activities of the campaign, noting that in 2019, the office staged the First Rehabinasyon National Anti-Drugs Summit, "which laid the premise of the gravity of the illegal drug problem, and how the government aims to achieve a drug-free nation through a holistic and harmonized strategy."

"In 2020, Rehabinasyon will continue to dismiss the disinformation spread by malicious parties, saying that the campaign against illegal drugs is a failure and that the government does not follow a strategy. Next year, we will reach out to more of our stakeholders, especially the academe, youth leaders, and faith-based organizations," he added.

Web-based info system

Another initiative that was launched is the Anti-Illegal Drugs Information System (AIDIS), which is a web-based centralized information system that consolidates data from agencies involved in tackling the illegal drug problem to formulate better strategies as well as generate statistics that can be provided to the public.