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making calls to any parties-litigant and/or counsel with cases pending in his *sala* and sternly warned that a repetition of the same will be dealt with more severely.

**SO ORDERED.**

*Davide, Jr., C.J. (Chairman), Puno, Kapunan,* and *Pardo, JJ.*, concur

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**THIRD DIVISION**

[Adm. Matter No. 00-1572. August 3, 2000]
(Formerly OCA IPI No. 99-706-RTJ)

**JUAN S. LUZARRAGA,** *complainant, vs.* **HON. AMARO M. METEORO, As Presiding Judge of Branch 64, Regional Trial Court of Camarines Norte, Labo, Camarines Norte,** *respondent.*

**SYNOPSIS**

Juan S. Luzarraga filed a case for quieting of title which was originally raffled to Branch 41 of the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Daet, Camarines Norte where he presented his evidence and rested his case. On June 22, 1996, the case was transferred to the newly created RTC Branch 64, presided over by Judge Amaro M. Meteoro. It was after only eight months or on January 8, 1997 that Judge Meteoro proceeded to hear defendants' evidence. However, on that date, defendants' counsel filed a Demurrer to Evidence. The said Demurrer to Evidence was resolved only after a period of one year as per Order dated January 13, 1998. Finally, the trial court, in its Order dated July 20, 1998 considered the case submitted for decision. After seven months, the case remained undecided. Hence, Luzarraga filed the instant administrative case against Judge Meteoro for serious misconduct, gross inefficiency, neglect of duty and violation of Section 15(1), Article VIII of the 1987 Constitution. In his comment, Judge Meteoro admitted his failure to decide the subject case within the reglementary period but he asked for this Court's compassion and understanding. He attributed his failure to decide

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the case, among others, to the heavy docket of his court and his failing health since he suffered a stroke.

The Court ruled that this conduct of respondent blatantly manifested his incompetence and ineptitude in discharging his functions. Not only did he violate the constitutional and statutory requirements that cases be decided within the period fixed therefor, he likewise contravened Section 16, Article III of the Constitution which provides that "all persons shall have the right to a speedy disposition of their cases before all judicial, quasi-judicial, or administrative bodies." The public trust character of a judge's office imposes upon him the highest degree of responsibility in the discharge of his obligation to promptly administer justice. Needless to say, any delay in the determination or resolution of a case, no matter how insignificant the case may seem to a judge, is, at bottom, delay in the administration of justice in general. The suffering endured by just one person — whether plaintiff, defendant, or accused — while awaiting a judgment that may affect his life, honor, liberty, or property, tainted the entire judiciary's performance in its solemn task of administering justice. Taking into account his failing health and his advanced age (66 years old), the Court agreed with the recommendation of the Office of the Court Administrator that respondent be fined, in a greater amount than that recommended, and that ₱20,000.00 would be more appropriate under the circumstances.

## SYLLABUS

1. **LEGAL AND JUDICIAL ETHICS; JUDGES; FAILURE TO RENDER DECISION WITHIN THE 90-DAY REGLEMENTARY PERIOD; CONSTITUTES SERIOUS MISCONDUCT.**— After carefully evaluating the facts, the Court finds Judge Meteoro administratively liable for failing to decide Civil Case No. 96-0013 within the 90-day reglementary period mandated by Section 15(1), Article VIII of the 1987 Constitution. The Court has consistently impressed upon members of the judiciary the need to decide cases promptly and expeditiously under the time-honored precept that justice delayed is justice denied. (*Re: Judge Luis B. Bello, Jr.,* 247 SCRA 519 [1995]). Rule 3.05 of Canon 3 of the Code of Judicial Conduct admonishes all judges to dispose of the court's business promptly and to decide cases within the periods fixed by law. The failure to render a decision within 90-day period

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constitutes serious misconduct in derogation of the speedy administration of justice (*Re: Report of Justice Felipe B. Kalalo,* 282 SCRA 61 [1997]).

2. **ID.; ID.; ID.; VIOLATION OF SECTION 16, ARTICLE III OF THE 1987 CONSTITUTION.—** Not only did he violate the constitutional and statutory requirements that cases be decided within the period fixed therefor, he likewise contravened Section 16, Article III of the Constitution which provides that "all persons shall have the right to a speedy disposition of their cases before all judicial, quasi-judicial, or administrative bodies." The public trust character of a judge's office imposes upon him the highest degree of responsibility in the discharge of his obligation to promptly administer justice (*Office of the Court Administrator vs. Benedicto,* 296 SCRA 62 [1998]).

3. **ID.; ID.; ID.; TAINTS THE ENTIRE JUDICIARY IN ITS SOLEMN TASK OF ADMINISTERING JUSTICE.—** Needless to say, any delay in the determination or resolution of a case, no matter how insignificant the case may seem to a judge, is, at bottom, delay in the administration of justice in general. The suffering endured by just one person — whether plaintiff, defendant, or accused— while awaiting a judgment that may affect his life, honor, liberty, or property, taints the entire judiciary's performance in its solemn task of administering justice (*Re: Report on the Judicial Audit, RTC Brs. 4 and 23, Manila, and MeTC, Br. 14, Manila,* 291 SCRA 10 [1998]).

4. **ID.; ID.; ID.; A JUDGE MUST HAVE TO FILE AN APPLICATION FOR EXTENSION OF TIME WITHIN WHICH TO RESOLVE THE CASE BEFORE THE SUPREME COURT; NOT COMPLIED IN CASE AT BAR.—** When circumstances arise that would prevent the judge from disposing a case within the reglementary period, all that he has to do is to file an application with the Court asking for a reasonable extension of time within which to resolve the case (*Report on the Judicial Audit, Municipal Trial Court, Sibulan, Negros Oriental,* 282 SCRA 463 [1997]). However, the record of this administrative matter does not show that respondent made an attempt to make such a request. Instead, he preferred to keep the case pending, thereby inviting suspicion that something sinister or corrupt is afoot. That he was burdened with a heavy case load and is a stroke victim, serve only to mitigate the penalty, not to exonerate him.

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5. **ID.; CHARGES AGAINST JUDGES; GROSS INEFFICIENCY; PRESENT IN CASE AT BAR.—** [R]espondent was evidently remiss in the performance of his duty to decide Civil Case No. 96-0013 promptly and expeditiously. First, it was on May 22, 1996 that said case was transferred to the RTC Branch presided by respondent, but it was only on January 8, 1997 that he proceeded to receive the defendants' evidence, or after eight months. Second, the defendants' demurrer to evidence which was filed on January 8, 1997 was resolved only after a period of one year as per Order dated January 13, 1998. And lastly, on July 20, 1998, respondent issued an order submitting the subject case for decision, but as borne out by the records, the case has remained undisposed even as of the promulgation hereof. This conduct of respondent blatantly manifests his incompetence and ineptitude in discharging his functions.

6. **ID.; ID.; ID.; PENALTY IMPOSED.—** Taking into account his failing health and his advanced age (66 years old), we agree with the recommendation of the Office of the Court Administrator that respondent be fined, in a greater amount than that recommended. We believe that ₱20,000.00 would be more appropriate under the circumstances.

7. **ID.; JUDGES; CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE IS AN INSTRUMENT BY WHICH THE COURT CAN FULFILL THE CONSTITUTIONAL MANDATE OF THE PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO A SPEEDY DISPOSITION OF CASES. —** We also note that respondent has been continually collecting his salaries upon certification that he had no pending case for decision, when in fact, he has Civil Case No. 96-0013 still awaiting decision. Said act seriously undermines and reflects on the honesty and integrity expected of an officer of the court. Judges must be reminded, lest they have already conveniently forgotten, that a certificate of service is not merely a means to obtain one's paycheck but is an instrument by which the Court can fulfill the constitutional mandate of the people's right to a speedy disposition of cases (*Bolalin vs. Occiano,* 266 SCRA 203 [1997]; *Re: Judge Fernando P. Agdamag,* 254 SCRA 644 [1996]).

## RESOLUTION

**MELO, *J.*:**

This has reference to the administrative complaint filed by Retired Assistant Provincial Fiscal Juan S. Luzarraga against Judge

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Amaro M. Meteoro of Branch 64 of the Regional Trial Court stationed in Labo, Camarines Norte, for serious misconduct, gross inefficiency, neglect of duty, and violation of Section 15(1), Article VIII of the 1987 Constitution in connection with Judge Meteoro's handling of Civil Case No. 5784 (now docketed as No. 96-0013), entitled *"Juan Luzarraga vs. Pedro Venida and Marie Venida"* for quieting of title.

Complainant filed the aforecited case for quieting of title on January 10, 1990. The case was initially assigned to Branch 41 of the Regional Trial Court of Daet, Camarines Norte. On February 22, 1990, the defendants in said case filed a Petition for *Certiorari* and Prohibition with the Court of Appeals (CA-G.R. No. 20093) which was dismissed on February 28, 1990. Thereafter, trial ensued, and on June 5, 1995, complainant rested his case by filing a formal offer of documentary evidence which the trial court admitted in its order dated July 25, 1995. On May 22, 1996, the case was transferred to Branch 64 of Regional Trial Court, Labo, Camarines Norte, a newly-created branch and presided over by herein respondent judge. Complainant claims that it was only on January 8, 1997 that respondent proceeded with the presentation of defendants' evidence. On the same date, defendants' counsel filed a Demurrer to Evidence, which was resolved and denied by the court only on January 13, 1998. Finally, the trial court, in its order dated July 20, 1998, considered the case submitted for decision. After the elapse of more than seven months without the case being decided, complainant was prompted to file his administrative complaint on March 1, 1999 (OCA Memorandum, pp. 1-2).

In his comment dated August 2, 1999, respondent admitted his failure to decide the subject case within the reglementary period but asked for this Court's compassion and understanding. He invoked the heavy docket of his court, totalling more than 300 cases, as reason for his failure to decide Civil Case No. 96-0013 (the new docket number of Civil Case No. 5784) on time. He also explained that Branch 64 is a newly-created branch and as such, he had problems recruiting personnel, and these being neophytes, he had to train them on their respective functions. Respondent further contended that at the time said civil case was submitted for decision, his clerk of court had transferred to the Office of the Reporter of

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the Supreme Court, while his legal researcher took a leave of absence in preparation for the Bar examinations. He also pointed out that he suffered a stroke as shown by a Medical Certificate issued by Dr. Keith Atutubo (Annex 2-C), and had to be confined at the Aquinas University Hospital in Legaspi City (Annex 2, *Rollo*, pp. 45-46).

In its Memorandum to this Court, the Office of the Court Administrator, through Senior Deputy Court Administrator Reynaldo L. Suarez, recommends that Judge Meteoro be fined in the amount of ₱5,000.00 and ordered to decide the subject case within an unextendible period of thirty (30) days from receipt of resolution. The recommendation is justified in this wise:

> The case was deemed submitted for decision on 20 July 1998 as per order of the respondent Judge. Therefore, more than one year had already elapsed since the submission of the case and respondent Judge has not decided the same despite the Motion for Early decision filed by herein complainant.
>
> This Court has consistently held that the failure of a judge to decide a case within the required period is not excusable and constitutes gross inefficiency and non-observance of said rule is a ground for administrative sanction against the defaulting judge (*In re: Judge F. Madara,* 104 SCRA 245 [1981]; *Longboan vs. Polig*, 186 SCRA 557 [1990]) x x x)
>
> (OCA Memorandum, p. 3.)

After carefully evaluating the facts, the Court finds Judge Meteoro administratively liable for failing to decide Civil Case No. 96-0013 within the 90-day reglementary period mandated by Section 15(1), Article VIII of the 1987 Constitution.

The Court has consistently impressed upon members of the judiciary the need to decide cases promptly and expeditiously under the time-honored precept that justice delayed is justice denied (*Re: Judge Luis B. Bello, Jr.,* 247 SCRA 519 [1995]). Rule 3.05 of Canon 3 of the Code of Judicial Conduct admonishes all judges to dispose of the court's business promptly and to decide cases within the periods fixed by law. The failure to render a decision within the 90-day period constitutes serious misconduct in derogation of the speedy administration of justice *(Re: Report of Justice Felipe B. Kalalo*, 282 SCRA 61 [1997]).

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In this instance, respondent was evidently remiss in the performance of his duty to decide Civil Case No. 96-0013 promptly and expeditiously. First, it was on May 22, 1996 that said case was transferred to the RTC Branch presided by respondent, but it was only on January 8, 1997 that he proceeded to receive the defendants' evidence, or after eight months. Second, the defendants' demurrer to evidence which was filed on January 8, 1997 was resolved only after a period of one year as per Order dated January 13, 1998. And lastly, on July 20, 1998, respondent issued an order submitting the subject case for decision, but as borne out by the records, the case has remained undisposed even as of the promulgation hereof.

This conduct of respondent blatantly manifests his incompetence and ineptitude in discharging his functions. Not only did he violate the constitutional and statutory requirements that cases be decided within the period fixed therefor, he likewise contravened Section 16, Article III of the Constitution which provides that "all persons shall have the right to a speedy disposition of their cases before all judicial, quasi-judicial, or administrative bodies." The public trust character of a judge's office imposes upon him the highest degree of responsibility in the discharge of his obligation to promptly administer justice (*Office of the Court Administrator vs. Benedicto*, 296 SCRA 62 [1998]). Needless to say, any delay in the determination or resolution of a case, no matter how insignificant the case may seem to a judge, is, at bottom, delay in the administration of justice in general. The suffering endured by just one person — whether plaintiff, defendant, or accused — while awaiting a judgment that may affect his life, honor, liberty, or property, taints the entire judiciary's performance in its solemn task of administering justice (*Re: Report on the Judicial Audit, RTC Brs. 4 and 23, Manila, and MeTC, Br. 14, Manila,* 291 SCRA 10 [1998]).

When circumstances arise that would prevent the judge from disposing a case within the reglementary period, all that he has to do is to file an application with the Court asking for a reasonable extension of time within which to resolve the case (*Report on the Judicial Audit, Municipal Trial Court, Sibulan, Negros Oriental,* 282 SCRA 463 [1997]). However, the record of this administrative matter does not show that respondent made an attempt to make

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such a request. Instead, he preferred to keep the case pending, thereby inviting suspicion that something sinister or corrupt is afoot. That he was burdened with a heavy case load and is a stroke victim, serve only to mitigate the penalty, not to exonerate him.

We also note that respondent has been continually collecting his salaries upon certification that he had no pending case for decision, when in fact, he has Civil Case No. 96-0013 still awaiting decision. Said act seriously undermines and reflects on the honesty and integrity expected of an officer of the court. Judges must be reminded, lest they have already conveniently forgotten, that a certificate of service is not merely a means to obtain one's paycheck but is an instrument by which the Court can fulfill the constitutional mandate of the people's right to a speedy disposition of cases (*Bolalin vs. Occiano,* 266 SCRA 203 [1997]; *Re: Judge Fernando P. Agdamag,* 254 SCRA 644 [1996]).

Taking into account his failing health and his advanced age (66 years old per Annex 2-C, *Rollo*, p. 53), we agree with the recommendation of the Office of the Court Administrator that respondent be fined, in a greater amount than that recommended. We believe that ₱20,000.00 would be more appropriate under the circumstances.

**WHEREFORE**, Judge Amaro Meteoro is hereby found guilty of gross inefficiency and serious misconduct and is fined in the amount of Twenty Thousand Pesos (₱20,000.00), payable immediately to the Court, with the warning that a repetition of the same shall be dealt with more severely. He is further directed to decide the subject case within an non-extendible period of thirty (30) days from receipt of resolution, and to submit to the Office of the Court Administrator a copy of his decision within ten (10) days from promulgation thereof.

**SO ORDERED.**

*Vitug, Panganiban, Purisima,* and *Gonzaga-Reyes, JJ.*, concur.