Enrile dares Villar to bring case to court

by CHRISTINA MENDEZ
Philstar.com

SENATE President Juan Ponce Enrile dared Sen. Manuel Villar Jr. last May 19 to question before the Supreme Court the jurisdiction of the Senate committee of the whole on the ethics case against him.

"I will encourage them to go to the Supreme Court, and if the SC will issue a temporary restraining order, we'll respect the SC," he said.

Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile

Enrile said the hearing might last for several months because the Senate has to give Villar the chance to submit his evidence.

"We'll give him a reasonable time to present his defense," he said.

Enrile said he does not see anything wrong with Villar's move to make an ocular inspection of the C5 Road extension.

"They are free to do anything they want," he said. "I don't know if they will present that as a defense."

Enrile said the Senate will also conduct its own ocular inspection if needed, although "we have not come to that point."

"We are just in the preliminaries," he said.

"Later on when there is a need to do that, if there is a doubt on the factual setting of the inquiry like whether there is realignment and where is the realignment. Let the committee make the decision."

Sen. Panfilo Lacson, who exposed the C5 Road "double insertion," said Villar can do as he pleases, and if he wants to conduct an ocular inspection, "that is his prerogative."

He also said that he'd rather Villar bring his case before the chamber instead of the media.

Lacson, chairman of the Senate ethics committee which initially handled the complaint filed by Sen. Jamby Madrigal, said Villar's site inspection would have no bearing on the case unless he participates in proceedings in the Senate.

"Any activity outside of the jurisdiction of the committee of the whole will not be recognized by the committee," he said.

"And the committee as proposed by the presiding officer will also conduct its own ocular inspection. There are controversies as regards Google maps."

The Senate conducted another hearing last May 20 to determine if there is substantial and credible evidence to pursue the ethics complaint against Villar.

At the House of Representatives, two lawmakers called on senators intending to run for president next year to inhibit themselves from participating in the Senate ethics investigation against Villar, who is also a presidential aspirant.

Rescuers continue search for missing in Compostela landslide

COTABATO—Rescuers continue to search today the missing gold-miners in a rain-immersed hilly zone in Compostela Valley after a landslide that killed 26.

Regional military spokesman Major Randolph Cabangbang told Xinhua by phone that 21 bodies have been recovered under tons of mud and debris by three platoons of soldiers who were helping local rescuers in the township of Pantukan.

"We have recovered 21 bodies and five remained missing. That's the latest and official data relayed to us by members of our Philippine Air Force," Cabangbang said. "It's raining now at the site. Our troops are still there looking for those missing."

Local officials earlier declared a state of calamity in Pantukan to facilitate the rescue operations, which was hampered a combination of blocked road access and unfavorable weather conditions in the mountainous region.

Wilfredo Montano, spokesman of state Mines and Geo-Sciences Bureau in the region, told a local radio station they have sent a team in Pantukan to probe the incident.

Authorities have blamed spawning unregulated mining for the rise in numbers of fatal mudslides in the province over the past few years.

In last summer, more than 20 people were killed when a landslide buried 28 houses at a mining village in the province. *(Philstar.com)*

Comelec upholds disqualification of automation bidder

by SHEILA CRISOSTOMO
Philstar.com

THE Commission on Elections-Special Bids and Awards Committee (Comelec-SBAC) upheld last May 19 the disqualification of the conglomerate of AMA Group Holdings and Election System and Software (ESS).

According to SBAC head Ferdinand Rafanan, the committee had deliberated on the motion for reconsideration filed by AMA and ESS, but found that the consortium had failed to give them enough reason to reverse the disqualification.

Last May 15, the consortium was disqualified for its "failure to sufficiently comply with the requirement to submit the Certificates of Acceptance pertaining to its contracts" with the states of Michigan and Minnesota in the United States.

While Rafanan was reading the decision, AMA representatives led by AMA vice president and project director Johnny Ramos walked out of the bidding.

SBAC failed to rule on the motions for reconsideration filed by the group of Sequoia Voting Systems and the Universal Storefront Services of the Philippines and the consortium of Gilat of Israel and F.F. Cruz and Company Inc.

Earlier, tension was high during the bidding process when Ramos said Comelec director for Education and Information Division James Jimenez had created an impression that the consortium of Smartmatic of Netherlands and Total Information Management Corp. (TIM) of the Philippines had won the bidding.

Ramos accused Jimenez of being partial to a consortium that is now ahead of the race to win the automation contract.

"The perception that they are creating is that Smartmatic had already won. That's not it. That's not good for us bidders here. We have been sitting here all day long waiting for SBAC to rule on our motion for reconsideration. We are very offended by that statement," he noted.

Smartmatic and TIM, on the other hand, have already hurdled the eligibility, technical and financial requirements of SBAC.

The conglomerate presented their precinct count optical scan (PCOS) machines before the SBAC yesterday just in case the committee rules in their favor.

Ramos' outburst came about when Jimenez and Smartmatic spokesman Luis Villa briefed the media about the possible demonstration that will be done by the Smartmatic group.

He invoked the gag order issued by SBAC against any media interview by the bidders.

An employee of the Comelec checks a counting machine. Philstar Photo by Jonjon Vicencio

But during the briefing, Jimenez had made it clear that "there has been no declaration yet as to who 'the lowest calculated bidder' is."

"The preparations that Smartmatic are undertaking are really just to make sure they are ready in case it turns out that way," he said.

Jimenez maintained that the "Comelec is not creating an impression," when asked about Ramos' accusation.

As a policy, the bidder with the lowest calculated bid will be the one to demonstrate the PCOS machines.

According to Villa, when given the go-signal by SBAC, they plan to demonstrate "end-to-end solution that we have proposed to the Comelec which means that we will demonstrate PCOS machines—from transmission, canvassing, etc."

Smartmatic already has experience handling Philippine elections when it supplied the direct recording electronics (DRE) machines used in Maguindanao during the regional election of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in August 2008.

"We are very experienced because we've done seven national elections, mostly in Venezuela. PCOS is not a totally new system. It has been used in Canada, New York but nationwide elections that we have done particularly in Venezuela, we used DRE and in ARMM also," Villa maintained.