



Supreme Court of the Philippines

Session 9: UPDATE BY ASEAN JUDICIARIES ON COVID-19 EFFECTS AND SOLUTIONS SINCE THE 8TH CACJ MEETING

Once again, a pleasant day to everyone.

I assumed the position of Chief Justice of the Philippines only in April of 2021. By then, the whole world has already been in the deadly grip of the COVID 19 pandemic for more than a year.

Admittedly, the Philippine Judiciary was ill prepared to face the pandemic technologically. Very few of our systems were automated prior to 2020. This meant that our judges and court personnel had to bravely continue face-to-face court operations because the systems in place are manual. This prompted the issuance by my predecessor Chief Justice Diosdado Peralta of various administrative orders adopting different work schemes and alternative work arrangements to minimize the danger of exposure, not just for our court people, but also for the court users. Special emphasis was placed on urgent matters, such as bail applications to secure the liberty of detained individuals, to maximize the reduced workforce arrangements.

In April, the Supreme Court approved under OCA Circular No. 51-2021 the grant of financial assistance to judges and court personnel of the lower courts hospitalized due to Covid-19 infection.

In May of this year, one month into my term as Chief Justice, the Supreme Court issued A.M. No. 21-04-10-SC approving the reimbursement of cost of Covid-19 testing for judges and court personnel of the trial courts. We set up an Emergency Care Unit (ECU) at the Supreme Court Compound as an alternative quarantine facility for court officials and employees afflicted with COVID 19 to insure that their health needs are well addressed. The Emergency Care Unit is fully equipped with the basic first aid medical care equipment and supplies for COVID 19 cases and is manned by licensed health care professionals. A complementary vaccination drive spearheaded by Supreme Court Senior Associate Justice Estela Perlas-Bernabe has achieved 95% completion of vaccinations for all Supreme Court employees. The effort will be continued to target the vaccination of lower court judges and personnel.

This year saw the Delta Variant cast an even deadlier shadow on our region. Philippine courts were again forced to physically close in August 2021 and until this date, physical operations are at a significantly reduced rate. Nevertheless, as I pointed out just last week at the National Convention of the Philippine Judges Association, the pandemic has not suspended the rights and obligations of the Filipino people and so must our courts continue to adjudicate such rights and obligations, in obeisance to our Constitutional mandate. I warned our judges of the inevitable backlog of cases that our courts will surely be facing as an effect of the lockdowns and reduced workforce arrangements. I thus urged them, this early on, to already adopt mitigation measures to keep their dockets at manageable levels.

The first intervention I enjoined our judges to adopt is prioritization. I cautioned them to manage their time effectively and give primacy to cases involving women and children; prerogative writs, like the writ of *habeas corpus*; economic-impact cases; cases that involve priority government infrastructure projects; and, case

incidents that affect the liberty of the accused in criminal cases, and the integrity and dignity of human life in all cases.

I also exhorted our judges to optimize alternative dispute resolution. We have mandatory Court-Annexed Mediation and Judicial Dispute Resolution embedded in both our civil and criminal cases. I have instructed our Philippine Mediation Center Office (PMCO) and our Management Information Service Office (MISO) to ensure that both Court-Annexed Mediation and Judicial Dispute Resolution are made available through videoconferencing facilities in all our 13 judicial regions. I call this the “wiser road to case disposition” at this time because it entails less time and effort on the part of our judges, less expense for the litigants, and, most important of all, less risk of infection for everyone.

One thing has become vividly clear in all our efforts to adapt and meet the challenges of this pandemic: technology is the driver, technology is the platform on which our processes must run. The development and establishment of an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure for the Philippine Judiciary is therefore the Supreme Court’s priority.

The Supreme Court has deployed the Philippine Judiciary 365 accounts in all our courts nationwide, so that court-bound papers and court-issued papers could be securely received and transmitted electronically. Using the same 365 accounts, the trial courts all over the country now have the alternative capacity to conduct remote videoconferencing hearings, meetings and conferences, guaranteeing continuous case progress with the least risk to all concerned.

Likewise, in place is the E-warrant, that provides electronic transmissions of arrest warrants issued by the Courts to law enforcement agencies.

Similarly technology-driven is the just launched **Judiciary ePayment System**, which allows the litigants to pay court fees online instead of through the traditional face-to-face manual transaction.

Further, as I have mentioned during the September *ASEAN Judicial Dialogue Webinar*, for the very first time in the 120 years of existence of the Philippine Supreme Court, we will be conducting the annual Bar Examinations, the screening test for admission to the Philippine Bar, through an online platform. We have started accepting the online filing of Bar Examination applications, as well as the electronic payment of the examination fees.

Lastly, our justices, judges and court personnel continue to receive online capacity-building trainings through the Philippine Judicial Academy, the training arm of the Philippine Supreme Court. Judicial education programs continue to be administered by the Academy using a combination of asynchronous and synchronous learning methodologies to implement an outcomes-based curriculum. With the pandemic, cost has been effectively trimmed down and the reach of the programs, both in terms of number of participants and availability of subject experts, have widened. As you may have heard earlier, our Academy will lead a Judicial Education and Training Working Group Webinar slated in March 2022 to showcase our Prejudicature Program, a screening mechanism for applicants to judicial posts, which is a showcase of adaptation.

We are not out of the woods yet; the pandemic is far from over, according to the medical experts. But as far as our judicial duties are concerned, despite the gravity of the situation, I am proud to say that the Philippine Judiciary has met the challenge squarely and has held its own valiantly. At this point in our history, I lead a strong and united Court that is firmly committed to protect the rule of law,

to guarantee the rights of our people, and to honor our obligations to the larger community of nations. The Philippine Supreme Court stands in unity with our ASEAN neighbors in our common quest for the best possible future for our region.

Thank you.