

International

Masterminds of Philippines' worst political massacre jailed

Relatives of victims, rights groups give mixed response to verdicts

MANILA: The masterminds of the Philippines' worst political massacre were found guilty yesterday of murder a decade after they led the killings of 58 people, rare convictions of powerful figures in a country notorious for its culture of impunity. However with dozens of other accused gunmen acquitted, and 80 suspects never having been caught, relatives of the victims as well as rights groups gave a mixed response to the verdicts.

Leaders of the powerful Ampatuan family dynasty orchestrated the November 23, 2009, killings in a remote part of the conflict-plagued south of the Philippines in a bid to quash an election challenge from a rival clan. Thirty-two journalists, travelling in a convoy to report on the filing of an Ampatuan rival's election candidacy, were among those murdered, making the killings one of the worst ever globally of media workers. A Manila court yesterday found 43 people guilty as principals or accessories to 57 of the murders.

They were found not guilty of the 58th murder because the body of the final victim was never recovered. Andal Ampatuan Jnr, who had been planning to succeed his namesake father by running for governor of Maguindanao province, was among those found guilty of murder. As principal suspects, Ampatuan Jnr and 27 others—including seven of his relatives—were each sentenced to at least 30 years in jail without parole. “Their acts were deliberate and obviously in pursuance of their plan to kill,” the court ruling read.

Fourteen members of the local police and a member of the Ampatuan family's armed militia

force were sentenced to between eight and 10 years in prison as accessories. However two clan leaders and more than 50 other police officers and alleged members of the Ampatuan militia were acquitted. The cases against them had not been proved beyond a reasonable doubt, according to the court ruling.

Eighty suspects also remain at large. “This makes us sad and happy at the same time, because (only) some of the major suspects were convicted,” Esmael Mangudadatu, the Ampatuans' rival, told reporters outside the courtroom.

The massacre unfolded when Mangudadatu sent his wife and two sisters to file his candidacy for governor of Maguindanao province in an open challenge to the Ampatuans.

Gunmen blocked the convoy, which included the journalists, and herded them to a nearby hill where they were killed in a hail of gunfire and buried in mass graves, along with their vehicles, prosecutors said. The Ampatuans had until then ruled Maguindanao and were allowed to build a heavily armed militia by then-president Gloria Arroyo to serve as a buffer against a long-running Muslim insurgency in the region.

The murders had cast a spotlight on the Philippines' notorious culture of impunity, in which powerful and wealthy politicians and businessmen often operate above the law. Human Rights Watch Philippines researcher Carlos Conde described yesterday's events as “partial justice”, citing the acquittal of more than 50 suspects and others remaining at large as the main concerns.

“The broader significance, however, of the



MANILA: Relatives and supporters of victims of the 2009 Maguindanao massacre hold pictures of the victims during a press conference after the verdict in the case in Taguig, Manila yesterday. — AFP

guilty verdict of the principal Ampatuan suspects clearly indicate a victory for justice. This signifies to Filipino politicians that they will pay a price for abusing the rights of constituents.” The Philippines' main media union offered a similar response.

“These people have won a great victory today, but they remain in danger,” National Union of Journalists of the Philippines chairman Jose Espina told reporters in Manila. Amnesty International regional director Nicholas Bequelin called the verdict “a critical step towards

justice for victims of one of the worst killings of journalists in history,” but called on Manila to find and prosecute the other suspects. During the case's years of delays, patriarch Andal Ampatuan Snr and seven other defendants died, while some witnesses were murdered. The Ampatuans remain a political force in the south. Ampatuan family members won 25 local seats in May elections including Sajid Ampatuan, who was among those acquitted yesterday but did not show up in court. Sajid is one of Ampatuan Jnr's brothers. — AFP

Homeward bound? Deadline looms for North Korea's overseas workers

SEOUL: The waitress at the North Korean restaurant in Beijing has no concerns about a deadline this weekend for Pyongyang's overseas workers to be returned. “I'll go home for the holidays,” she says. “But I'll come back.”

Nuclear-armed North Korea has long made a fortune from the army of citizens it sends abroad to work, mostly in neighboring China and Russia but also as far afield as Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

Two years ago, the UN Security Council ordered the countries where they work to send them back as part of the efforts to press Pyongyang over its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, with complete compliance required by this Sunday. But analysts say Beijing and Moscow are circumventing the measure by issuing North Korean workers with alternative visas to ensure a continued supply of cheap labor. Longstanding

allies of Pyongyang, the two called this week for several sanctions—including the ban—to be eased, with nuclear negotiations between the United States and North Korea at a deadlock.

China was estimated to have 50,000 North Korean workers when the resolution was passed, and witnesses and reports say North Koreans continue to enter the country to work in border-region factories.

At Unban, a North Korean restaurant near Pyongyang's sprawling embassy in Beijing, a waitress told AFP she had worked there for four years and expected to continue.

“No one has told us that the restaurant will close,” she added. “We had two new colleagues who came last month.” Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said last week that China “earnestly” implements all UN resolutions, but declined to say how many North Koreans were working in the country. Moscow's ambassador to Pyongyang Alexander Matsegora said in September that the number working in Russia had already been cut from more than 30,000 to less than 10,000.

“After December 22, there will not be a single North Korean in Russia with a work visa,” he told the RIA Novosti news agency. But the key sanctions text—paragraph 8 of resolution 2397 — does not specify visa types, referring more broadly to “all DPRK nationals earning income”.

And Kang Dong-wan, a professor at South Korea's Donga University, told AFP: “Since Russia can't issue new work visas due to sanctions, the North Korean workers are going there on tourist visas.” Figures from Russia's interior ministry show that in the January-September period, Moscow issued six times as many tourist visas to North Koreans as it did in the whole of 2018, and three times as many student visas. Across the two categories, Russia granted nearly 20,000 visas in nine months of 2019. For all of last year, it was below 5,000.

The workers deadline comes with tensions rising again: it will soon be followed by a year-end limit Pyongyang has set Washington to offer it fresh concessions.

‘Free money’

According to estimates by the US mission to the UN, the overseas workers—many employed in construction, factories and forestry—are worth more than \$500 million a year to Pyongyang. Former North Korean workers say they received only a fraction of the sums charged for their services.

Ro Hui-chang, a defector who supervised workers in the Middle East and Russia for nearly a decade before fleeing to South Korea, said firms paid \$1,500 per month per person on average — 90 percent of which went straight to the Pyongyang government. “It was free money that



SEOUL: This picture taken on December 4, 2019 shows Ro Hui-chang, a North Korean defector who supervised workers in the Middle East and Russia for nearly a decade before fleeing to South Korea in 2014, sitting at his desk during an interview with AFP at his office in Seoul. — AFP

came in without fail when they sent their people overseas,” Ro told AFP. Living and working conditions were dismal, he added, with the shortest shifts lasting around 12 hours. “There was a fixed hour for waking up, but no set time for the day's end,” he said. Even so, overseas work has long been sought-after in the impoverished North, where incomes are a fraction of those in the democratic and capitalist South.—AFP