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# THIRD DIVISION

# [ G.R. No. 181276, November 11, 2013 ]

## THE COMMISSIONER OF INTERNAL REVENUE, PETITIONER, VS. VISAYAS GEOTHERMAL POWER COMPANY, INC., RESPONDENT.

## D E C I S I O N

**MENDOZA, J.:**

Before the Court is a Petition for Review on Certiorari under Rule 45 of the 1997 Revised Rules of Civil Procedure assailing the November 20, 2007 Decision[1] and the January 9, 2008 Resolution[2] of the Court of Tax Appeals *(CTA) En Banc* in C.T.A. EB No. 282 (C.T.A. Case Nos. 6790 and 6838) entitled *"Commissioner of Internal Revenue vs. Visayas Geothermal Power Company, Inc."*

### THE FACTS

Respondent Visayas Geothermal Power Company, Inc. *(VGPCI)*, a corporation authorized by the Department of Energy to own and operate a power plant facility in Malibog, Leyte, is engaged in the business of generation and sale of electricity. In the course of its business operations, VGPCI incurred input value added tax of P20,213,044.50 on its domestic purchase of goods and services and importation of goods used in its business for the third and fourth quarter of 2001 and for the entire year of 2002.[3] Due to the enactment of Republic Act *(R.A.)* No. 9136,[4] which became effective on June 26, 2001, VGPCI's sales of generated power became zero-rated and were no longer subject to VAT at 10%.[5]

On June 26, 2003, VGPCI filed before the Bureau of Internal Revenue (*BIR*) Revenue District No. 89 of Ormoc City a claim for refund of unutilized input VAT payment in the amount of P1,142,666.32 for the third quarter of 2001. On December 18, 2003, another claim was filed in the amount of P19,070,378.18 for the last quarter of 2001 and the four quarters of 2002. For failure of the BIR to act upon said claims, VGPCI filed separate petitions for review before the CTA on September 30, 2003 and December 19, 2003, praying for a refund on the issuance of a tax credit certificate in the amount of P1,142,666.32 covering the period from July to September 2001 and P19,070,378.18 for the period from October 2001 to December 2002, CTA Case Nos. 6790 and 6838, respectively.[6]

In its Decision[7] dated January 18, 2007, the First Division of the CTA partially granted the consolidated petitions for review and ordered petitioner Commissioner of Internal Revenue (*CIR*) to refund or to issue a tax credit certificate to VGPCI in the amount of P16,355,749.74 representing unutilized input VAT incurred from September 1, 2001 to December 31, 2002.[8]

Aggrieved, the CIR elevated the case to the CTA *En Banc* alleging that the First

Division erred in ruling in favor of VGPCI because: (1) VGPCI did not submit evidence of its compliance with the VAT registration requirements; (2) its purchases of goods and services were not undertaken in the course of its trade or business and were not duly substantiated by VAT invoices or receipts; (3) it failed to file an application for a VAT tax credit or refund before the Revenue District Office of the city or municipality where the principal place of business was located; (4) it did not file its administrative claim for refund prior to the filing of its petition before the CTA; and (5) it was unable to prove that its claimed input VAT payments were directly attributable to its zero-rated sales.[9]

On November 20, 2007, the CTA *En Banc* promulgated its Decision dismissing the petition and affirming the decision of the CTA First Division, the dispositive portion of which reads:

> WHEREFORE, premises considered, the Petition is hereby DISMISSED for lack of merit. The assailed Decision dated January 18, 2007 and the Resolution dated May 17, 2007 are AFFIRMED.
>
> SO ORDERED.[10]

The tax court ruled that: (1) the law does not require the submission by a taxpayer of its VAT registration documents in order to be able to claim for a refund of unutilized input VAT; (2) VGCPI was able to show, by submitting its VAT invoices and official receipts, that its purchases of goods and services were incurred in the course of its trade and business; (3) VGCPI sufficiently proved that its claimed input VAT was directly attributable to its zero-rated sales or sales of power generation services to PNOC-EDC; and (4) the petition was timely filed before the CTA because the taxpayer was not bound by the 120-day audit period but by the two-year prescriptive period. As explained by the tax court, when the two-year period is about to lapse, the taxpayer may, without awaiting the verdict of the CIR, file its claim for refund before the CTA.

The CIR subsequently filed its Motion for Reconsideration but the same was denied by the CTA *En Banc* in its Resolution dated January 9, 2008.[11]

Hence, this petition.

## THE ISSUES

The CIR raises only one ground for the allowance of the petition:

> **The Court of Tax Appeals erred in assuming jurisdiction and giving due course to VGPCI's petition despite the latter's failure to file an application for refund in due course before the BIR and observe the proper prescriptive period provided by law before filing an appeal before the CTA.**[12]

The pivotal question in this case then is whether VGPCI failed to observe the proper

prescriptive period required by law for the filing of an appeal before the CTA because it filed its petition before the end of the 120-day period granted to the CIR to decide its claim for refund under Section 112(D) of the National Internal Revenue Code (NIRC).

## THE COURT'S RULING

The CIR insists that VGPCI should have waited for the decision of the CIR or the lapse of the 120-day period from the date of submission of complete documents in support of the application for refund as provided in Section 112(D) of the NIRC.[13] The filing by VGPCI of its petition for review before the CTA almost immediately after filing its administrative claim for refund is premature.

On the other hand, VGPCI, in its Memorandum[14] defends the decision of the CTA *En Banc* and puts forth the following arguments: (1) Section 112(D) of the NIRC is not a limitation imposed on the taxpayer; rather, it is a mandate addressed to the CIR, requiring it to decide claims for refund within 120 days from submission by the taxpayer of complete documents in support thereof;[15] (2) Section 229 of the NIRC is the more specific provision with respect to the prescriptive period for the filing of an appeal because it expressly requires that no suit in court can be maintained for the recovery of taxes after two years from the date of payment of the taxes, while Section 112(D) deals only with VAT and the periods within which the CIR shall grant a refund or a tax credit and does not discuss the period within which a taxpayer can go to court;[16] (3) pursuant to the cases of *Gibbs v. Collector of Internal Revenue*[17] and *College of Oral & Dental Surgery v. Court of Tax Appeals*,[18] when the two-year prescriptive period is about to expire, the taxpayer need not wait for the decision of the BIR before filing a petition for review with the CTA because the filing of a judicial claim beyond the two-year period bars the recovery of the tax paid, and (4) the CIR has not been denied due process in evaluating VGPCI's claim for refund because the filing of the judicial claim does not preclude the CIR from continuing the processing of VGPCI administrative claim. The latter insists that it is imperative and jurisdictional that both the administrative and the judicial claims for refund be filed within the two-year prescriptive period, regardless of the length of time during which the administrative claim has been pending with the CIR. It concludes that had it waited for the end of the 120-day period, it would have lost its right to file a petition for review with the CTA.[19]

The petition is partly meritorious.

*Section 229 is not applicable*

VGPCI's reliance on *Gibbs* and *College of Oral & Dental Surgery* is misplaced. Of note is the fact that at the time of the promulgation by this Court of the said cases, there was no provision yet in the NIRC in force (Commonwealth Act No. 466,[20] as amended) similar to Section 112. Therefore, the said cases hold no sway over the case at bench.

VGPCI is also mistaken to argue that Section 229 is the more relevant provision of law. A simple reading of Section 229 reveals that it only pertains to taxes

erroneously or illegally collected:

> SEC. 229. Recovery of Tax Erroneously or Illegally Collected. - No suit or proceeding shall be maintained in any court for **the recovery of any national internal revenue tax hereafter alleged to have been erroneously or illegally assessed or collected**, or of any penalty claimed to have been collected without authority, or of any sum alleged to have been excessively or in any manner wrongfully collected, until a claim for refund or credit has been duly filed with the Commissioner; but such suit or proceeding may be maintained, whether or not such tax, penalty, or sum has been paid under protest or duress.
>
> In any case, **no such suit or proceeding shall be filed after the expiration of two (2) years from the date of payment of the tax or penalty** regardless of any supervening cause that may arise after payment: Provided, however, That the Commissioner may, even without a written claim therefor, refund or credit any tax, where on the face of the return upon which payment was made, such payment appears clearly to have been erroneously paid. [Emphases supplied]

The applicable provision of the NIRC is undoubtedly Section 112, which deals specifically with creditable input tax:

> SEC. 112. Refunds or Tax Credits of Input Tax.
>
> (A) Zero-rated or Effectively Zero-rated Sales. – **any VAT-registered person, whose sales are zero-rated or effectively zero-rated may, within two (2) years after the close of the taxable quarter when the sales were made, apply for the issuance of a tax credit certificate or refund of creditable input tax due or paid attributable to such sales**, except transitional input tax, to the extent that such input tax has not been applied against output tax: Provided, however, That in the case of zero-rated sales under Section 106(A)(2)(a)(1), (2) and (B) and Section 108 (B)(1) and (2), the acceptable foreign currency exchange proceeds thereof had been duly accounted for in accordance with the rules and regulations of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP): Provided, further, That where the taxpayer is engaged in zero-rated or effectively zero-rated sale and also in taxable or exempt sale of goods or properties or services, and the amount of creditable input tax due or paid cannot be directly and entirely attributed to any one of the transactions, it shall be allocated proportionately on the basis of the volume of sales.
>
> x x x x
>
> (D) Period Within Which Refund or Tax Credit of Input Taxes Shall be Made. - In proper cases, **the Commissioner shall grant a refund or issue the tax credit certificate for creditable input taxes within one hundred twenty (120) days from the date of submission of complete documents in support of the application** filed in

accordance with Subsections (A) and (B) hereof.

**In case of full or partial denial of the claim for tax refund or tax credit, or the failure on the part of the Commissioner to act on the application within the period prescribed above, the taxpayer affected may, <u>within thirty (30) days from the receipt of the decision denying the claim or after the expiration of the one hundred twenty day-period</u>, appeal the decision or the unacted claim with the Court of Tax Appeals.** [Emphases supplied]

The Court, in earlier cases, had the opportunity to decide which provision of the NIRC was applicable to claims for refund or tax credit for creditable input VAT. In the case of *Commissioner of Internal Revenue v. Mirant Pagbilao Corporation (formerly Southern Energy Quezon, Inc.),*[21] it was held that Section 229 of the NIRC, which provides for a two-year period, reckoned from the date of payment of the tax or penalty, for the filing of a claim of refund or tax credit, is only pertinent to the recovery of taxes erroneously or illegally assessed or collected; and that the relevant provision of the NIRC for claiming a refund or a tax credit for the unutilized creditable input VAT is Section 112(A):

To be sure, MPC cannot avail itself of the provisions of either Sec. 204(C) or 229 of the NIRC which, for the purpose of refund, prescribes a different starting point for the two-year prescriptive limit for the filing of a claim therefor. Secs. 204(C) and 229 respectively provide:

x x x x

Notably, the above provisions also set a two-year prescriptive period, reckoned from date of payment of the tax or penalty, for the filing of a claim of refund or tax credit. Notably too, both provisions apply only to instances of erroneous payment or illegal collection of internal revenue taxes

x x x x

Considering the foregoing discussion, it is clear that Sec. 112(A) of the NIRC, providing a two-year prescriptive period reckoned from the close of the taxable quarter when the relevant sales or transactions were made pertaining to the creditable input VAT, applies to the instant case, and not to the other actions which refer to erroneous payment of taxes.[22]

This ruling was later reiterated in *Commissioner of Internal Revenue v. Aichi Forging Company of Asia, Inc.*,[23] where this Court upheld the ruling in *Mirant* that the appropriate provision for determining the prescriptive period for claiming a refund or a tax credit for unutilized input VAT is Section 112(A), and not Section 229, of the NIRC.[24]

Finally, the recent pronouncement of the Court *En Banc* should put an end to any question as to whether Section 229 may apply to claims for refund of unutilized