

SECOND DIVISION

[G.R. No. 180384, March 26, 2010]

**LAND BANK OF THE PHILIPPINES, PETITIONER, VS. PRESENT:
CORAZON M. VILLEGAS, RESPONDENT.**

[G.R. NO. 180891]

**LAND BANK OF THE PHILIPPINES, PETITIONER, VS. HEIRS OF
CATALINO V. NOEL AND PROCULA P. SY, RESPONDENTS.**

D E C I S I O N

ABAD, J.:

These consolidated cases^[1] are about the jurisdiction of a Regional Trial Court (RTC), acting as a Special Agrarian Court, over just compensation cases involving agricultural lands located outside its regular territorial jurisdiction but within the province where it is designated as agrarian court under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law of 1988.

The Facts and the Case

Petitioner Land Bank of the Philippines (Land Bank) filed cases for determination of just compensation against respondent Corazon M. Villegas in Civil Case 2007-14174 and respondent heirs of Catalino V. Noel and Procula P. Sy in Civil Case 2007-14193 before the RTC of Dumaguete City, Branch 32, sitting as a Special Agrarian Court for the province of Negros Oriental. Respondent Villegas' property was in Hibaiyo, Guihulngan City, Negros Oriental, while respondent heirs' land was in Nangca, Bayawan City, Negros Oriental. These lands happened to be outside the regular territorial jurisdiction of RTC Branch 32 of Dumaguete City.

On September 13, 2007 RTC, Branch 32 dismissed Civil Case 2007-14174 for lack of jurisdiction.^[2] It ruled that, although it had been designated Special Agrarian Court for Negros Oriental, the designation did not expand its territorial jurisdiction to hear agrarian cases under the territorial jurisdiction of the RTC, Branch 64 of Guihulngan City where respondent Villegas' property can be found.

On November 16, 2007 RTC, Branch 32 also dismissed Civil Case 2007-14193 for lack of jurisdiction. It pointed out that RTC, Branch 63 of Bayawan City had jurisdiction over the case since respondent heirs' property was within the latter court's territorial jurisdiction.

Petitioner Land Bank moved for the reconsideration of the dismissal of the two cases but RTC, Branch 32 denied both motions.^[3] Aggrieved, Land Bank directly filed this petitions for *certiorari*^[4] before this Court, raising a purely question of law.

Sole Question Presented

The sole question presented in these cases is whether or not an RTC, acting as Special Agrarian Court, has jurisdiction over just compensation cases involving agricultural lands located outside its regular jurisdiction but within the province where it is designated as an agrarian court under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law of 1998.

The Court's Ruling

The RTC, Branch 32 based its order on Deputy Court Administrator (DCA) Zenaida Elepaño's opinion that single *sala* courts have jurisdiction over agrarian cases involving lands located within its territorial jurisdiction. An RTC branch acting as a special agrarian court, she claimed, did not have expanded territorial jurisdiction. DCA Elepaño said:

x x x [B]eing a single sala court, the Regional Trial Court, Branch 64, Guihulngan, Negros Oriental, has jurisdiction over all cases, including agrarian cases, cognizable by the Regional Trial Court emanating from the geographical areas within its territorial jurisdiction.

Further, the jurisdiction of the Special Agrarian Courts over agrarian cases is co-extensive with its territorial jurisdiction. Administrative Order No. 80 dated July 18, 1989, as amended by Administrative Order No. 80A-90 dated February 23, 1990, did not expand the territorial jurisdiction of the courts designated as Special Agrarian Courts.^[5]

Respondent Villegas^[6] adopts DCA Elepaño's view. Villegas points out that the designation of RTC, Branch 32 as a Special Agrarian Court did not expand its territorial jurisdiction. Although it has been designated Special Agrarian Court for the Province of Negros Oriental, its jurisdiction as an RTC did not cover the whole province.

Respondent Villegas adds that, in hearing just compensation cases, RTC, Branch 64 in Guihulngan City should be no different from the situation of other single *sala* courts that concurrently hear drugs and family-related cases even as the Supreme Court has designated family and drugs courts in Dumaguete City within the same province. Further, Guihulngan City is more than 100 kilometers from Dumaguete City where RTC, Branch 32 sits. For practical considerations, RTC, Branch 64 of Guihulngan City should hear and decide the case.

For their part, on June 19, 2009 respondent heirs of Noel informed^[7] the Court that petitioner Land Bank had already paid them for their land. Consequently, they have no further interest in the outcome of the case. It is not clear, however, if the trial court had already approved a settlement.

"Jurisdiction" is the court's authority to hear and determine a case. The court's jurisdiction over the nature and subject matter of an action is conferred by law.^[8] In