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Ethiopian Ex-Dictator Mengistu Convicted of Genocide

By Alexander Joe

ADDIS ABABA — An Ethiopian court has convicted former dictator Mengistu Haile Miriam of genocide for atrocities committed during his 1974-1991 Marxist regime after a marathon 12-year trial.

Mengistu, on trial in absentia, and 11 co-defendants who served on the ex-government's central committee were found guilty, of genocide, homicide, illegal imprisonment and illegal confiscation of property by Ethiopia's Federal High Court Tuesday.

"Accused numbers one to 12 are found guilty of all charges," Justice Medhin Kiros told a packed courtroom in Addis Ababa, reading from a unanimous verdict by the three-judge panel hearing the case.

Mengistu, who was ousted in 1991 and now lives in exile in Zimbabwe, was known as "defendant number one" in the case against himself and other senior members of his so-called Derg (Committee) regime.

Another 60 co-defendants were also found guilty of genocide, but only by a majority 2-1 ruling by the judges, who ruled unanimously for their convictions on the other counts. One defendant was acquitted on all charges.

Those convicted, including Mengistu, face the death penalty and their lawyers have until December 28 to file motions seeking lesser sentences, the judge said.

The charges relate to atrocities committed during the 1977-78 "Red Terror" period when tens of thousands of people were killed or disappeared in Mengistu's bid to turn Ethiopia into a Soviet-style workers' state.

He and his former top aides were also accused of the murders of Ethiopia emperor Haile Selassie, whom they overthrew in a 1974 coup d'etat, and Orthodox Patriarch Abuna Tefelows.

Of the 73 accused, 14 have died and only 34 were present in court. Mengistu was among 25 defendants being tried in absentia.

The lengthy verdict took more than four hours to read and was interrupted by a midday break. Before reaching the panel's final conclusions, Medhin threw out rejections of numerous claims of innocence from the defendants.

Some of the accused maintained they had been out of the country—many in the

former Soviet Union—or out of the capital when the atrocities took place, but the judges ruled they were still culpable.

The one defendant acquitted, a former member of the central committee, was able to prove that he had been imprisoned by his colleagues at the time the crimes occurred.

The trial began in 1994 and many Ethiopians had hoped it was coming to an end when the court announced in November 2005 that it would render its verdict in May after hearing from 730 witnesses.

But their expectations were foiled when the court then announced a new delay to consider new defense evidence until next year, a date then moved up last week to Tuesday without explanation.

The evidence against Mengistu, who is approaching 70 and lives comfortably outside Harare as a guest of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, included execution orders and video footage of assassinations and torture of detainees.

Mugabe refused repeated Ethiopian requests to extradite the former dictator and is considered unlikely to change his position even after the conviction due to the support Mengistu gave to his forces fighting white minority rule in what was then Rhodesia.

About 5,200 lower-ranking Ethiopian ex-soldiers and communist militants face similar charges in a series of other slow-running and oft-delayed trials in which verdicts are sporadically announced.

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