

Mengistu found guilty of genocide
By Les Neuhaus, AP Writer
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ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia - An Ethiopian dictator known as ``the butcher of Addis Ababa'' was convicted Tuesday of genocide in a rare case of an African strongman being held to account by his own country.

Mengistu Haile Mariam, who has been living in exile in Zimbabwe since 1992, was convicted in absentia after a 12-year trial. He could face the death penalty at his Dec. 28 sentencing, but Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe said he won't deport Mengistu if he refrains from making political statements to the media.

The trial focused on Mengistu's alleged involvement in the killing of nearly 2,000 people during a 1977-78 campaign known as the ``Red Terror'' that targeted supposed enemies of his Soviet-backed regime.

A panel of judges, sitting before a packed courtroom, convicted him of instigating genocide, committing genocide, illegal imprisonment and abuse of power.

Mengistu ruled from 1974 to 1991 after his military junta ended Emperor Haile Selassie's reign in a bloody



Former Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile-Mariam, seen in this August 9, 1990 photo, is found guilty of genocide. He could face the death penalty at his Dec. 28 sentencing, but Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe said he won't deport Mengistu if he refrains from making political statements or comments to the press.(AP Photo/Aris Saris)



Former Ethiopian Prime Minister Fikre Selassie Wogderes (First from L) and former Ethiopian Vice President Fissiha Desta (second from L) appear before the Ethiopian Federal High Court, Addis Ababa, Tuesday Dec. 12, 2006. Mengisut was convicted of genocide, and the remaining 24 Derg officials are awaiting their respective verdict(AP photo/Les Neuhaus)

coup. Some experts say 150,000 university students, intellectuals and politicians were killed in a nationwide purge by Mengistu's Marxist regime, though no one knows for sure.

“I am very happy he has been found guilty,” said Tadesse Mamo, 32, a businessman in the capital. “He killed so many of our intellectuals and our youth, most notably our emperor.”

The emperor's cousin, Mulugeta Aserate, 55, said Mengistu's men came to his family's home in June 1974 and took his father away. He never saw his father again.

“They told us that they were taking him to an interview, but I found out later he was summarily executed with 60 others,” Mulugeta told the Associated Press. When deposed in 1991 by rebels led by Meles Zenawi, now Ethiopia's prime minister, Mengistu fled to Mugabe's authoritarian regime in Zimbabwe, where his army had helped train guerrillas in their struggle for independence from white rule. The asylum was brokered by the United States and Canada to end the Ethiopian civil war as quickly as possible.

Mengistu has been seen in public in Zimbabwe only twice since 1992, once in a restaurant and then browsing in a bookshop. In 1998, he told the Associated Press over the telephone in a rare interview that he was a “political refugee” who spent most of his time “staying at home and reading and writing something about my country.”

Mengistu was tried along with 72 of his former aides, although only 34 were in court Tuesday. Fourteen died during trial. All but one man were convicted of at least one charge Tuesday.

Most of those in the courtroom Tuesday were relatives of the defendants, and they looked sullen after the verdict.

Rebels who toppled Mengistu were determined to try him and started planning for trials almost as soon as they took over. But as the complex cases dragged on, public interest waned. Mengistu's trial, which began in 1994, was slowed by

requests from both sides for long breaks. Hundreds of key witnesses had died, further complicating proceedings.

African dictators are often followed by other dictators who don't want to set any precedent for trying holders of high office. Others hold onto power until they die. It was seen as a watershed when, in March, former Liberian President Charles Taylor was brought before a U.N.-backed war-crimes court in Sierra Leone on charges of backing Sierra Leonean rebels, who terrorized victims by chopping off body parts during the 1991-2002 civil war.

"Zimbabwe won't extradite Mengistu"

Zimbabwe said Wednesday it would not extradite former Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam, who was convicted of genocide earlier this week., CBC News of Canada reported on Wednesday.

Mengistu has lived in Zimbabwe since his 1991 ouster from Ethiopia, where he was convicted in absentia on Tuesday over the killings of tens of thousands of people during his 17 years in power.

Paul Mangwana, Zimbabwe's acting information and publicity minister, told Reuters the conviction didn't change his government's position.

"Mengistu applied for asylum and we granted him ? the position remains the same," he told Reuters.

Zimbabwe's controversial president, Robert Mugabe, considers Mengistu an ally and has shielded him from the media in the past.

Lives in Harare mansion

Mengistu lives in the wealthy Harare neighbourhood of Gunhill in a government villa surrounded by walls and guarded around the clock.

Known as the "butcher of Addis Ababa," Mengistu and dozens of his officials could face the death penalty if he returns to Ethiopia.

The 12-year-trial focused on the so-called "red terror campaign," carried out by his military regime, the Dergue. Amnesty International estimates 500,000 people were killed from 1977 to 1991.

In 1999, American officials confirmed they played a role in finding Mengistu a haven. They argued it was necessary to get him out of the country in order to bring peace.

Mengistu, who is believed to be about 65, took part in a bloody coup against Ethiopia's Haile Selassie in September 1974, forming a military ruling committee with other officers. He took power three years later.