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Ethiopia: Why Mugabe Rejects an Appeal for Extradition of Mengistu

By Fred Bridgland

Prominent Zimbabweans feel Mugabe was wrong to reject Ethiopia's request for its former leader to be sent home to face justice

Opposition representatives, top human rights lawyers and church leaders in Zimbabwe have called for the extradition of the former Ethiopian president Mengistu Haile Mariam who was sentenced to life in prison in absentia for crimes of genocide by a court in Addis Ababa.

A day after the conviction on December 12, Zimbabwe's president Robert Mugabe rejected an appeal by the government of Ethiopia to extradite Mengistu, found guilty of causing the deaths of between half a million and 1.5 million of his fellow countrymen, to face justice at home.

Mengistu, dubbed "The Butcher of Addis", fled ten days before rebel forces entered the city in May 1991 and was given asylum and permanent residence in Zimbabwe by Mugabe.

Justifying protecting a leader responsible for more deaths than any other African dictator, Mugabe said through his spokesman, "As a comrade of our struggle [against white rule in former Rhodesia], Comrade Mengistu and his government played a key and commendable role during our struggle for independence and no one can dispute that."

The Ethiopian court found Mengistu guilty of genocide for atrocities committed under his Marxist regime. "Members of the Dergue [government] who are present in court today and those who are being tried in absentia have conspired to destroy a political group and kill people with impunity," said the presiding judge, Medhen Kiros. The trial lasted twelve years and sentence, when passed at the end of December, seems certain to be death. The Soviet-backed revolution that brought Mengistu and a group of other young army officers to power in 1974 ended the feudal rule of Emperor Haile Selassie, treated as a deity by millions of dirt-poor people in Africa's second most-populous country. The court was told how the ageing emperor was suffocated to death with a pillow and his body buried under a lavatory in the royal palace, where he was under house arrest.

Mengistu provided arms to Mugabe's ZANU, Zimbabwe African National Union, and guerrilla movement and trained Zimbabwe's air force pilots after independence. But Mugabe has come under a barrage of criticism from human rights and opposition groups in Zimbabwe for protecting Mengistu. Various international

organizations such as the London-based International Bar Association have called for the president himself to be tried by the new International Criminal Court in The Hague for crimes against humanity.

"Verdicts such as this [in Addis Ababa] build up pressure and send the message that leaders who are bloodstained must not be allowed to retire in comfort," said Peter Takirambudde, Africa head of Human Rights Watch. He said Mengistu would find it impossible to travel to neighboring countries, even for medical treatment, without facing the danger of arrest. "This man and his followers committed monstrous crimes against humanity, and international justice demands he be brought to face justice. The cycle of impunity must and will be stopped."

Mugabe has appointed Mengistu as one of his own security advisers. In that role, said Nelson Chamisa, national spokesman of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, Zimbabwe's main opposition party, Mengistu helped plot last year's devastating Operation Murambatsvina (Operation Clean Out the Trash), in which police and Mugabe's personal militiamen bulldozed, sledge hammered and burned down the homes of some 700,000 to a million town dwellers, most of them MDC supporters.

Chamisa said most Zimbabweans regard Mengistu as an undesirable guest who has long overstayed his welcome. He added that Mugabe's refusal to hand over the former Ethiopian dictator to face justice betrayed his own inner fear of international law, saying, "The days in which dictators would consort in a boys' club and luxuriously look after themselves are over. Mr. Mengistu may be safe in Harare for now, but for how long?"

Leading Zimbabwean human rights lawyer Otto Saki, of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, said his organization demanded that Mengistu be conveyed to Ethiopia to accept responsibility for his crimes. "We expect the government to fulfill this commitment," he said. "We expect government to draw a precedent from the Taylor case."

Former Liberian president Charles Taylor was extradited this year from Nigeria, where he had been given political asylum, to face charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity at the United Nations-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone, Liberia's neighbor where Taylor gave weapons to rebel forces. Taylor is presently imprisoned in The Hague awaiting trial.

For 17 years in Ethiopia, Mengistu ran The Dergue, perhaps the most terrifying regime modern Africa has known. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both estimate that at least half a million, and possibly as many as 1.5 million, people died in assassinations and executions, warfare and politically induced famine during Mengistu's "Red Terror" campaign against opponents.

It is difficult to exaggerate the scale of Mengistu's crimes. At the start of

the darkest days of his rule in 1976, Mengistu stood before a huge crowd in the central plaza of Addis Ababa and smashed a series of bottles filled with pigs' blood. They represented, he said, the blood of the "counter-revolutionaries" that would flow as his regime set out to eliminate rivals of the ruling junta.

"The revolution needs to be fed by the blood of traitors," he said. Human rights groups reported that at the height of the terror campaign, organized by Soviet advisers and Mengistu's East German-controlled Department of State Security, government hit squads were summarily executing 100 to 150 "anarchists, feudalists, exploiters of the people and counter-revolutionaries" each day on the streets of Addis Ababa, other centers and in the notorious state prison on the edge of the capital.

It became commonplace to see students, suspected government critics and rebel sympathizers hanging from lampposts each morning. Families had to pay a tax known as "the wasted bullet" to obtain the bodies of their executed loved ones. At the height of his power, Mengistu himself frequently garroted or shot dead opponents, saying that he was leading by example, and may have personally killed Haile Selassie.

During his 1974-1991 rules, Mengistu's mass herding of Ethiopia's peasant farmers into giant collective farms spawned a famine that took hundreds of thousands of lives.

Mengistu, also known as the Black Lenin, was alleged to have fled Ethiopia with many millions of US dollars, including a chunk of the 300 million dollars that Israel paid for the right to evacuate 15,000 Falasha Jews from Ethiopia. In the months before he left, Mengistu nationalized Nestlé's Ethiopian Livestock Development Company without compensation. He sold the cattle stock for 10 million dollars and took the money with him to Zimbabwe. The Ethiopian people did not get a cent.

In Zimbabwe, Mugabe gave Mengistu a luxury villa in the up market Gun Hill suburb, where Zimbabwean reporters have observed up to six luxury cars, including a Mercedes and a BMW, parked in the drive. The house is heavily protected by soldiers from Mugabe's elite Presidential Guard battalion, and anyone who attempts to take photographs is arrested. On the rare occasions when Mengistu is spotted shopping, he wears military boots and carries a pistol.

Mengistu, 69, has also been given a large farm 45km outside Harare and a property in the far north on the shores of Lake Kariba, to which he is believed to have moved in July for security reasons.

Kenya's main daily newspaper, The Nation, commented: "Why does it not come as a surprise that President Mugabe is not willing to hand over Mengistu to the Ethiopian government? It is no wonder that he [Mengistu] long ago

found a soul-mate in Mugabe and was given sanctuary; the two are birds of a feather when it comes to atrocities against their people."

Among the voices raised against Mengistu's presence in Zimbabwe is that of Pius Ncube, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bulawayo, Mugabe's most fearless and outspoken critic who repeatedly says the best service the Zimbabwean head of state can do for his countrymen is to die. "Mugabe is using the taxpayers' money to keep a dictator who killed a million people," said the archbishop. "You can see what kind of friends Mugabe keeps. You need one dictator to prop up another."

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