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Government Spirits Away Mengistu

HARARE — The Zimbabwe government has hurriedly moved Ethiopia's former military dictator, Mengistu Haile Mariam, from his plush Gunhill home to Kariba, a stone's throw from the Zambian border, intelligence officials confirmed this week.

Mengistu—convicted last week for war crimes in Ethiopia—has lived a lavish but reclusive life in exile in Zimbabwe since being overthrown in 1991. Government says he is a guest of President Robert Mugabe.

Intelligence sources said Mengistu and his family were rushed to Kariba following an official rebuttal to an extradition request from the Ethiopian ambassador to Zimbabwe, Adbi Dalal Mohammed.

Acting Information Minister Munyaradzi Paul Mangwana last week told a financial weekly that Zimbabwe would not hand over the former dictator to Ethiopia.

An Ethiopian court on Tuesday convicted Mengistu in the 12-year genocide trial, which has been held in absentia along with his officials in Addis Ababa since 1994.

Mengistu is accused of killing tens of thousands of people during a 17-year rule that began with the toppling of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 and included war, brutal purges and famine.

In the so-called 'Red Terror' campaign in 1977-78, suspected opponents were rounded up and executed, and their bodies thrown into the streets.

An official in the Ethiopian embassy in Harare said many Ethiopians were happy with the verdict and that it had drawn a line under one of the darkest periods in their country's turbulent history.

Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe after being overthrown by a guerrilla army led by Meles Zenawi, now the prime minister.

About 40 members of Mengistu's "Dergue" junta have also been tried in Addis Ababa. Mengistu faces death for crimes against humanity and genocide, which Ethiopia defines as intent to wipe out political and not just ethnic groups.

Major Melaku Tefera, known as the 'The Butcher of Gondar', was sentenced to death last year for genocide and abetting the murder of 971 people during the 'Red Terror'. One of Mengistu's most feared aides, he was administrator

of Gondar province.

The most prominent victim Mengistu is accused of killing was Haile Selassie, said to have been strangled in bed and secretly buried under a latrine in his palace. About 70 of the emperor's senior officials were shot by firing squads and dumped in a mass grave.

In 1984, Mengistu denied for months that famine was ravaging the north of the country and aid workers said he flew in plane-loads of whisky to celebrate the anniversary of his revolution. One million people died of starvation.

Mengistu's army helped train Zimbabwe President Mugabe's guerilla forces in their 1970s independence struggle against white rule.

Analysts say despite extradition calls, Zimbabwe will continue to refuse to hand over Mengistu. Rights campaigners hope a post-Mugabe government may take that step.

MDC secretary general Tendai Biti said Zimbabwe should not be a haven for tin-pot dictators and that Zimbabwe should hand over Mengistu.

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