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## **Verdict Due Next Week in Marathon Genocide Trial of Ethiopian Ex-Dictator**

ADDIS ABABA — The much-delayed, highly anticipated verdict in the 12-year genocide trial of former Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Miriam is to be handed down next week, a defense lawyer said Wednesday.

Joseph Gebre Igziabher, an attorney representing Mengistu, who has fled to Zimbabwe and is being tried in absentia, said Ethiopia's Federal High Court had moved up the announcement from January 23, 2007, to next Wednesday.

"The court changed the appointment," he told AFP. "The verdict will be announced on the 12th of December."

It was not immediately clear why the date of the announcement had been accelerated although there had been widespread dismay in May when the court postponed its expected verdict, saying it had to consider new defense evidence.

A source close to Ethiopia's justice minister would say only that the verdict was expected "near the beginning of next week."

The trial began in 1994 and has been beset by chronic logistical delays. Many had hoped it was coming to an end when the court announced last November that it would render its verdict on May 23 after hearing from 730 witnesses.

But on that day, chief judge Medhin Kiros announced to a packed courtroom filled with the families of thousands of people killed during the Marxist dictator Mengistu's 17-year regime that another postponement was necessary.

Mengistu, who was ousted in 1991, is accused of genocide and crimes against humanity along with other former senior members of his so-called "Derg" (Committee) regime that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991.

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 are also accused of the murders of Emperor Haile Selassie, whom they toppled in a 1974 coup, and Orthodox Patriarch Abuna Tefelows.

The evidence against Mengistu, who is approaching 70 and lives relatively comfortably outside Harare as a guest of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, despite efforts to have him extradited, includes execution orders and video

footage of assassinations and torture of detainees.

He is charged alongside 72 co-defendants, 26 of whom have also been tried in absentia.

About 5,200 lower-ranking 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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