



## **Ethiopian Dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam**

### **November 24, 1999**

Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam headed the junta which in 1974 overthrew the government of Emperor Haile Selassie in a bloody coup. Known as the "Derg" or "Dergue," the "committee," the junta consisted of about a hundred junior officers drawn from all regions of Ethiopia. Proclaiming a revolutionary agenda for the country, the Dergue inaugurated its rule by sending some sixty senior officials of the emperor's government to the firing squad. The emperor and the Patriarch of the dominant Ethiopian Orthodox church were both secretly killed in the months that followed. The Dergue's early victims included members of the group itself. Col. Mengistu emerged as its undisputed leader after orchestrating the physical elimination of rivals from within.

In 1976 Col. Mengistu gave a dramatic send-off to a campaign of terror that he officially dubbed the "Red Terror." He threw to the ground before a huge crowd in the capital Addis Ababa bottles filled with a red substance representing the blood of enemies of the revolution: the "imperialists," and the "counter-revolutionaries," as members of rival leftist groups were labeled by the Dergue. In particular, the campaign targeted students and young people suspected of membership in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Thousands of young men and women turned up dead in the streets of the capital and other cities in the following two years. They were systematically eliminated mainly by militia attached to the "Kebeles," the neighborhood watch committees which served during the Dergue period as the lowest level local government and security surveillance units. The Kebeles required families to reimburse the administration for the price of bullets used to kill victims when they reclaimed their bodies for burial.

The process of eliminating the "counter-revolutionaries" was quite organized. Each neighborhood committee would meet to discuss how to eliminate individual suspects, and each member would sign on documents to confirm the decision reached at the meeting. Copies of the document would be sent to different levels of the administrations and the party apparatus. The centralized killing enterprise thus left mountains of documentary evidence of its crimes.

Cold war rivalries helped the Dergue to flourish and tighten its hold on power. It became the main client of the Soviet block in Africa, and received massive shipments of arms to help it counter serious challenges from several armed insurgencies by ethnic and regional liberation movements seeking to break away from centuries of centralized hegemony by Ethiopia's ruling elite. The counter-insurgency campaigns unleashed by the Dergue were characterized by widespread violations of international humanitarian law. Civilians were deliberately targeted and fell victims by the hundreds of thousands as a result of the indiscriminate violence against them.

When famine in 1984 hit areas in northern Ethiopia partially held by rebels of the Tigray and Eritrean People's Liberation Fronts (TPLF and EPLF respectively), Mengistu's government for a while blacked out information about the famine. It later used the disaster as a pretext to forcibly relocate hundreds of thousands of villagers from northern Ethiopia to areas in the south. The Dergue argued that its "villagization" campaign, as it came to be known, was meant to relocate people from food deficient areas to the fertile plains of the south. In reality, the move was meant to empty rebel-held areas from potential supporters. Again, victims of government action during the forced relocation were in the hundreds of thousands. A 1991 Human Rights Watch report, "Evil Days: 30 years of war and famine in Ethiopia," gives a detailed account of this dark period in Ethiopia's recent history during which it is estimated that at least half a million civilians were killed as a result of the Dergue actions.

The Dergue was deposed in 1991 by the Ethiopian people's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of regional and ethnic rebel groups led by the TPLF. In the province of Eritrea the EPLF established a provisional government that steered the province to full independence by 1993, with the blessing and cooperation of its former ally the TPLF.

In 1992 the new government established a Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) to investigate the widespread crimes committed during the Dergue period and prosecute those responsible for them. However, the trials on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity of the seventy-two top-ranking Dergue officials, including Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, who had fled to Zimbabwe shortly before the fall of Addis Ababa to the EPRDF, are still pending. As for the majority of those detained in relation to their suspected role during the Dergue dictatorship, it was only in the first quarter of 1997 that the SPO announced their charging with criminal offences. In January 1997 the Office charged a total number of 5,198 people, of whom 2,246 were already in detention, while 2,952 were charged in absentia. The vast majority of the defendants were charged with genocide and war crimes, and faced alternative charges of having committed aggravated homicide and wilful injury. All charges

were based on the Ethiopian penal code of 1957. New additional trials of Dergue era defendants opened before the Federal High Court in Addis Ababa during March 1997. However, a serious crisis in the Ethiopian judiciary has left federal courts with a backlog of thousands of "ordinary cases." These court proceedings are now running into constant delays. Many of the defendants were in pre-trial detention for almost six years before they were first brought to court.

The SPO subdivided the defendants in three groups by degree of responsibility: policy and decision makers; intermediary level officials who relayed orders, but initiated some decisions on their own; and the hands directly involved in committing the crimes. Mirroring the Dergue's preferred mode of operation, the SPO had structured the prosecutions by committee, leading to 172 cases, each of multiple defendants. There is no special tribunal hearing the Dergue cases. They are heard in both the central and regional courts of Ethiopia's decentralized federal court system. The SPO opted to prosecute the central authorities, such as the central politburo of the Dergue, in the central court system, and prosecute cases of other suspects in regions where they operated.

As the leader of the Dergue, Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam is already being tried in absentia, together with his closest collaborators. But the manner in which the trials are being conducted has caused serious concerns to Human Rights Watch. In particular, excessive delays in the investigative phase led to the pretrial detention of hundreds of suspects for years at length. Additionally, Ethiopian law provides for the death penalty. Two Dergue officials were sentenced to death in absentia this month in these trials. Trial lawyers repeatedly complained about due process flaws in that their access to their detained clients was rendered difficult because of restrictions imposed by the government. The government was also slow in providing legal representation to some of the defendants.