

Ethiopia seeks to reassure foreign investors in gas fields after rebels issue warning

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ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia

Ethiopia on Tuesday sought to reassure potential investors looking to develop natural gas fields in a contested region of this Horn of Africa nation, one day after a rebel group warned that the land belonged to them.

The rebel Ogaden National Liberation Front, which wants an independent state in Ethiopia for ethnic Somalis, said Monday it would not tolerate developing gas fields "in what is essentially a combat zone."

Somalis lost a war in 1977 over control of Ethiopia's Ogaden region, which is largely inhabited by ethnic Somalis. In recent years, rebels have clashed with government forces in the drought-stricken region.

Last month, the Ethiopian Ministry of Mines and Energy issued a notice soliciting bids for the development of Ogaden's Calub gas fields, which are estimated to contain about 4 trillion cubic feet of gas.

"The Ethiopian government wants to assure all interested companies looking to put bids into the gas field project, along with the local residents, that the situation in the area is peaceful," the Ethiopian Ministry of Information said in a statement Tuesday.

Ethiopia has backed factions that fought in Somalia in the 14 years that the nation has been without an effective central government.