

## **Ethiopian govt dismisses rebel threats to foreign gas companies**

AFX International Focus

April 26, 2006

ADDIS ABABA (AFX) - The Ethiopian government dismissed rebel threats to foreign energy firms considering investing in gas fields in the restive southeast of the country, saying the area is stable with no risk to potential investment.

The information ministry said the warning from Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) that natural gas exploration in the Ogaden region 'will not be tolerated' was hollow and nothing new.

'The government would like to assure the residents as well as the companies who are interested in investing in gas field projects there that the threats of the ONLF will not be fulfilled,' it said in a statement.

'They will not change the current peaceful situation in the region,' the official said, adding: 'The ONLF has been putting out these statements on a regular basis, there is nothing new there.'

On Monday, the ONLF, which is fighting for the independence of ethnic Somalis living in Ogaden near the border with Somalia, warned all foreign companies, specifically mentioning two Indian companies, not to work in the area.

'We wish to make clear... that there is currently an armed conflict waging in Ogaden between Ethiopian troops and ONLF liberation forces resulting in an unsafe environment for any exploration to occur,' it said.

The Indian companies, Gail India Limited and the Gujarat State Petroleum Corporation Limited, are among energy concerns that have expressed interest in bidding to explore and develop Ogaden's Calub and Hilala gas fields.

Seven of 19 such companies were this week shortlisted to make final bids, according to local press reports.

The ONLF said any firm interested in the fields should 'cease and desist all engagement with the Ethiopian government in this regard and investigate for themselves the true political and security environment in Ogaden.'

Ogaden, a dry belt about 1,200 kilometers southeast of Addis Ababa, is believed to be lying on large quantities of gas, but further exploration is needed to verify the exact amount and develop the fields.

The ONLF was formed in 1984 to fight on behalf of the Ogaden people, who have allegedly been marginalised and brutalised by the Ethiopian government.

Addis Ababa has repeatedly accused the insurgents of carrying out attacks on civilians.