

Ethiopia "blocks emergency food aid to Ogaden region"

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The Ethiopian government is blockading emergency food aid and choking off trade to large swaths of a remote region in the eastern part of the country that is home to a rebel force, putting hundreds of thousands of people at risk of starvation, western diplomats and humanitarian officials say.

The Ethiopian military and its proxy militias have also been siphoning off millions of dollars in international food aid, and using a United Nations polio eradication program to funnel money to their fighters, according to relief officials, former Ethiopian government administrators and a member of the Ethiopian parliament who defected to Germany last month to protest the government's actions.

The blockade takes aim at the heart of the Ogaden region, a vast desert on the Somali border where the government is struggling against a growing rebellion and where government soldiers have been accused by human rights groups of widespread brutality.

Humanitarian officials say the ban on aid convoys and commercial traffic, intended to squeeze the rebels and dry up their bases of support, has sent food prices skyrocketing and disrupted trade routes, preventing the nomads who live there from selling their livestock. Hundreds of thousands of people are now sealed off in a desiccated, unforgiving landscape that is difficult to survive even in the best of times.

"Food cannot get in," said Mohammed Diab, the director of the United Nations World Food Programme in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian government says the blockade covers only strategic locations, and is meant to prevent guns and materiel from reaching the Ogaden National Liberation Front, the rebel force that the government considers a terrorist group. In April, the rebels killed more than 60 Ethiopian guards and Chinese workers at a Chinese-run oil field in the Ogaden.

"This is not a government which punishes its people," said Nur Abdi Mohammed, a government spokesman.

But western diplomats have been urging Ethiopian officials to lift the blockade, arguing that the many people in the area are running out of time. "It's a starve-out-the-population strategy," said one western humanitarian official, who did not want to be quoted by name because he feared reprisals

against aid workers. "If something isn't done on the diplomatic front soon, we're going to have a government-caused famine on our hands."

The blockade, which involves soldiers and military trucks cutting off the few roads into the central Ogaden, comes as Congress is increasingly concerned about Ethiopia's human rights record [passage omitted].