

Ethiopia rebels seek U.N. investigation into aid claims

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Rebels in eastern Ethiopia called for a U.N. investigation into allegations the government has been blocking food aid to their volatile region for nearly two months.

The Ogaden National Liberation Front, ethnic Somalis who have been fighting the government for more than a decade, said Monday that the situation has "reached alarming levels warranting international intervention."

Ethiopian officials denied the allegations. U.N. officials did not immediately return calls for comment.

"There is no food shortage crisis in our region and there is nobody banning food aid to our region," said Jama Ahmed, a vice president of the Somali region whose office is in the regional capital, Jijiga.

An official from a prominent aid organization with offices in the Ogaden said the Ethiopian military has been barring aid trucks since mid-June, when the government announced a crackdown on the rebels. The ONLF attacked a Chinese-run oil exploration field in April, killing 74 people.

"Allegedly people are surviving on camel milk and tea," said the representative, who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the issue. She cited employees in the Ogaden.

Another aid group based in eastern Ethiopia echoed claims that food aid was being blocked. Ethiopia, one of the poorest countries in the world, has suffered food crises almost every year since 1986.

Sisay Tadesse, a spokesman for the Ethiopian Federal Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Agency, said his organization is planning to send daily shipment of nearly 3,000 kilograms (6,600 pounds) of food to the region. He said he was not aware of any blockades or impediments to delivery.

Last month, Human Rights Watch accused the Ethiopian army of blocking aid, burning homes and displacing thousands of civilians in a crackdown on the rebels. The New York-based group cited witnesses.

The ONLF is fighting to overthrow the government for what it says are human rights abuses and to establish greater autonomy in the Ogaden, which covers 200,000 square kilometers (77,220 square miles).