

Red Cross condemns Ethiopian eviction order

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The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Thursday condemned its expulsion from Ethiopia's volatile Ogaden region and rejected charges that it was meddling in local politics.

The ICRC "deplores the decision by the authorities of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State, where it has been present for over 12 years, to give it seven days' notice to leave," a statement released in Geneva said.

The eastern region is also known as Somali and shelters an ethnic Somali rebellion -- the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) -- on which the government is trying to keep a lid.

Jema Ahmed Jema, the vice-president of the region, Wednesday said the ICRC had been asked to leave "because they have been meddling in the region's affairs," and added that several "verbal warnings" earlier had come to naught.

The ICRC said it "firmly rejects the accusations made."

"All ICRC activities in Ethiopia are conducted in strict accordance with the principles of independence and neutrality," said Daniel Duvillard, the organization's head of operations for the Horn of Africa.

"A suspension of ICRC activities will inevitably have a negative impact on the population concerned, whose access to basic services will be reduced," the statement said.

At the beginning of July, New York-based Human Rights Watch accused Addis Ababa of slapping a trade blockade on the impoverished region since June, with few goods -- including food -- permitted into the area.

The ONLF, formed in 1984, is fighting for the independence of Ogaden, a region which is suspected of holding large oil and natural gas reserves and which rebels say has been marginalised by Addis Ababa.