

ICRC rejects Ethiopian charges after expulsion

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The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on Thursday denied consorting with rebels in Ethiopia's Ogaden region, and said its expulsion would hurt needy civilians.

The Swiss-based humanitarian agency denounced Tuesday's decision by authorities in Ethiopia's Somali regional state giving it seven days to leave after 12 years, the official Swissinfo website reported.

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

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

Dialogue between the ICRC and the region's authorities and security forces had deteriorated to a point where "issues of contention were not discussed in depth" before the ejection order was issued, Duvillard said.

The ICRC said it was ready to discuss the matter with Ethiopian authorities so it could continue its humanitarian activities in the Somali regional state, where it deploys 10 expatriates and 79 national staff.

Jama Ahmed, vice-president of the Somali region, said the ICRC must "recognize what they did wrong" before officials consider allowing it to continue work there.

A spokesman for the regional government said on Wednesday that the ICRC had been repeatedly warned "to desist from a smear campaign against the regional government and from supplying material and finance to a rebel group attempting to destabilize the region."

The ICRC said it carried out its aid work "impartially and on strictly humanitarian grounds."

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

