

Red Cross deplores expulsion from region in eastern Ethiopia, denies helping rebels

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ADDIS ABABA Ethiopia

The Red Cross denied government allegations it was helping rebels in Ethiopia's volatile east, and said Thursday its expulsion from the region will restrict people's access to basic services.

The government has given the International Committee of the Red Cross one week until Monday to leave the area known as the Somali regional state, accusing it of helping ethnic Somali rebels from the Ogaden National Liberation Front.

"A suspension of ICRC activities will inevitably have a negative impact on the population concerned, whose access to basic services will be reduced," said Daniel Duvillard, ICRC's head of operations for the Horn of Africa. The Red Cross conducts water and sanitation projects in the east.

The rebels, who have been fighting the government for more than a decade, earlier accused Ethiopia of blockading aid to their region near the Somali border for nearly two months.

Ethiopia announced a crackdown on the rebels in June, two months after the rebels attacked a Chinese-run oil exploration field, killing 74 people.

The U.N. World Food Program said this week that the military operations are hampering the delivery of humanitarian aid, but that the government is not blockading shipments.

The rebels said the Red Cross expulsion was designed to prevent the world from "witnessing the war crimes taking place against the civilian population of Ogaden at the hands of the Ethiopian regime."

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.