

Swedes deny backing Ethiopian rebels

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ADDIS ABABA, November 1, 2011 (AFP) - Two Swedish journalists charged with terrorism in Ethiopia rejected witness claims Tuesday that they had supported a rebel group, as the prosecution opened its case against them.

Police inspector Mohamed Ahmed testified that the accused, photographer Johan Persson and reporter Martin Schibbye, had told him they came to Ethiopia to support the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) rebels.

"They told us that they came to organise and train the ONLF," Mohamed told the court in the Ethiopian capital through a translator.

Asked if this was true, Schibbye shook his head and told reporters "no."

The Swedes were charged last month with engaging in terrorist activities, aiding and abetting a terrorist group, and entering the country illegally.

Last month, Persson and Schibbye pleaded not guilty to charges of terrorism but admitted entering the country illegally.

Mohamed also described the arrest of the Swedish journalists after they entered the country from Somalia on July 1.

He said their car was spotted in the middle of the night some 90 kilometres (55 miles) from the Somali border.

Police claim to have tracked the pair -- travelling with 13 gunmen accused of being rebel soldiers -- for 11 hours, when fighting broke out.

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"The two foreigners were guarded by ONLF members and the foreigners were shot by their own guards," Mohamed said.

He added the journalists were not armed, but were instead found carrying two cameras, mobile phones, and passports.

When caught by police, Persson was wearing just one shoe and his shirt was "soaked in blood," according to the witness.

Schibbye and Persson appeared in suits and ties with rubber sandals, looking more exhausted than when they last appeared in court on October 20, according to an AFP reporter in the courtroom.

There were about 50 members of the public and journalists inside -- about half the number who crowded the room last month when the Swedes entered their not guilty plea.

The ONLF, formed in 1984, has been fighting for the independence of the remote southeastern Ogaden region, populated mainly by ethnic Somalis, which the rebels say has been marginalised by Addis Ababa.

The Swedes are charged with two Somalis of Ethiopian ethnicity, accused of being ONLF members, who have also pleaded not guilty.

The trial is expected to last six months, according to legal sources.

Rights groups have criticised the process after Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said in an interview last month that the Swedes were "at the very least messenger boys of a terrorist organisation."