

Swedish journalists reject Ethiopian charges

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Two Swedish journalists on trial in Ethiopia on Tuesday admitted contact with an outlawed rebel group but rejected accusations that they received weapons training.

The journalists dismissed video evidence presented by the prosecution earlier as proof they were trained by rebels.

In the video the journalists are seen holding automatic rifles, but which they said belonged to a security guard and not a member of the rebel Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF).

"This video doesn't show some bizarre training with weapons in a parking lot, it shows another day at the office for a foreign correspondent," one of the accused, Martin Schibbye, told the judge.

Reporter Schibbye and photographer Johan Persson -- both freelancers -- were arrested in Ethiopia's Ogaden region on July 1 after entering the country from Somalia.

They were arrested after a gun battle erupted between Ethiopian troops and ONLF fighters, and are charged with supporting a terrorist group and entering the country illegally. They face up to 15 years in jail if found guilty.

Witness Matthias Goransson, the editor of Swedish Filter magazine which had expressed interest in publishing the journalists' story, said the pair was on a reporting assignment.

"It was a report on (Lundin's) action in the Ogaden. Good and bad, whatever it was, was to find the facts and reporting them," Goransson said, referring to the activities of Swedish oil company Lundin Oil the two were to report on.

Goransson added that he was aware the journalists planned to enter Ethiopia illegally.

"They informed me and I took it as fact that the government of Ethiopia would not let them into

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the Ogaden," he said, adding that journalists often have to break laws to report in conflict zones.

Schibbye and Persson have admitted to entering Ethiopia illegally. Last month, charges of participating in terrorism were dropped due to a lack of evidence.

The two said they met ONLF chiefs in London and Nairobi before meeting with about 20 members of the group in Ethiopia, about 40 kilometres (25 miles) from the Somali border.

Persson said meeting with the ONLF contacts was for professional reasons only. "I came to Ethiopia for one purpose, that's to do my job as a journalist," he said.

Sweden's ambassador to Ethiopia, Jens Odlander, said he was happy the accused had a chance to provide a statement in court, which he said they had been "preparing for weeks."

"We have always believed at the Swedish embassy that they are journalists," he told AFP after court Tuesday.

The ONLF has been fighting for independence of the remote southeastern Ogaden region since 1984, claiming they have been marginalised from Addis Ababa. The trial continues.