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Islamist militant group al-Shabaab has ambushed an Ethiopian base in Somalia, with dozens of casualties, reports say. They attacked the base, near Yurkut village in the central region of Geddo, from two directions at dawn. Al-Shabaab claimed to have killed 73 Ethiopians, while the Somali government said it in turn killed 48 members of the militant group. It is the most intense fighting since Ethiopian troops entered Somalia last November. The fighting lasted for more than three hours, but correspondents say it will be difficult to verify the exact number of dead. The attack took place between the border with Ethiopia and Baidoa, a town Ethiopian forces took last month from al-Shabaab rebels (*BBC, March 10*).

Ethiopian rebels said they had released two German tourists they have been holding hostage for almost two months. The two were among a group of tourists who were caught up in an attack when a rebel group stormed a camp in the remote region of Afar, close to the Eritrean border. Five tourists were killed during the raid, which Ethiopia blamed on its neighbor Eritrea. The Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF), which later claimed it was holding the two Germans alongside two Ethiopian guides said it had freed the tourists after days of negotiations with elders in the region. The government also confirmed the release. ARDUF had been fighting a low-level insurgency in the northern region near the tense Eritrean border to end what it says is "political marginalization and economic deprivation" by Addis Ababa. The group claims to have no links to Eritrea although neighbor (*The Africa Report, March 6*). - Ethiopia's foreign ministry spokesman Dina Mufti said the Germans were freed from kidnappers who were associated with the country's archrival, Eritrea. He denied claims two days ago by a rebel group from Ethiopia's northern Afar region that the group had released the tourists. Dina said he couldn't give any further details about the Germans' release, including their health status or when they were freed. The German Foreign Ministry had had no immediate comment (*AP, March 8*).

An American investor has started activities to launch the rearing of varieties of fish in artificial lakes around Arbaminch in Gamu Gofa Zone, the zonal investment office said. The investor will be rearing fish such as Nile Perch, tilapia, lobsters and grey fish, which are highly reproductive, the office said. The investor is digging water wells on 100 ha where the fish would be multiplied. The project is expected to start fish supply within a period of four years. The project is expected to export fish abroad that would enable the country secure 7.5m USD per year (*State media, March 8*).

The national parks of the Lower Omo Valley in Southwest Ethiopia are among „the last unspoiled biodiversity hotspots in Africa“ and constitute „resources of all people in the world.“ These are not the words of tree-hugging foreign environmentalists, but of Ethiopian government officials who recently prepared a report about the region. The Gibe III Dam and the sugar plantations associated with it are now putting these unique biodiversity hotspots at risk. - The remote Lower Omo Valley is home to eight different indigenous peoples, three national parks and a World Heritage Site. According to the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority, the region preserves the „outstanding biodiversity of the country,“ with more than 300 bird and more than 80 large mammal species. It is a refuge for elephants, rhinos, lions, leopards, cheetahs, giraffes, buffaloes, gazelles and other species. The unique wildlife of the Lower Omo Valley is not a rich man's luxury. As the Wildlife Authority points out, it supports the livelihoods of the local people through wild food, medicinal plants, subsistence hunting, and revenues from tourism activities. The biodiversity also „plays a significant role“ in helping the region cope with the impacts of climate change. The sensitive ecosystems of the Lower Omo Valley are now under threat. The Gibe III Dam, which is currently under construction upstream of the national parks, will allow the creation of large sugar plantations and other cash-crop farms that are irrigated with water from the Omo River. A government map which was just leaked to International Rivers delineates sugar plantations with a total area of 2,450 sq. km – almost the size of Luxembourg – which are largely carved out of the national parks. The plantations are part of a government plan to increase the country's sugar production from 300,000 to 2.3 million tons. - The lands which have been designated as sugar plantations have been inhabited by indigenous peoples since time immemorial. The government has already started putting pressure on the local Mursi and Njangatom communities to move into resettlement camps under its control. International Rivers receives regular updates about the harassment, rape and imprisonment of tribal people in the Lower Omo Valley by security forces (*International Rivers, March 6*).

Ethiopia has prioritized the Universal Road Accessibility Program (URAP) as part of its poverty alleviation efforts, the Ministry of Transport said. Transport Minister Driba Kuma said Ethiopia envisages constructing 71,000 km of road in the Growth and Transformation Plan of which 11,000 km have been accomplished so far. Ethiopia has been building its capacity to produce machineries locally for the construction of roads, he added. According to the minister, 4,000 locally produced machineries have been distributed to various regions. Ethiopian Roads Authority Director General, Zaid Woldegebriel, said some 26 billion birr will be allocated for the full-fledged implementation of the program. The people are contributing through labor estimated at 76.6m birr. The project has also created jobs for 86,300 people (*ENA, March 7*).

The Addis Ababa University (AAU) and the Korean Foundation signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to launch Korean language courses at AAU. AAU President Dr. Admasu Tsegaye said the academic collaboration is important for the university as it focuses on graduate studies to train instructors for 33 universities. The university is keen on sharing the best experience of South Korea (*ENA, March 9*).