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On the outskirts of Addis Ababa, a muezzin leads a solemn sermon at a mosque before thousands of worshippers stamp their feet to protest against what they say is the Ethiopian government's interference in religious affairs. Protests are uncommon in tightly-controlled Ethiopia, and the unrest has caused concern in the predominantly Christian nation that takes pride in centuries of coexistence. The government fears hard-line Islam is taking root in the Horn of Africa country, which has long been seen by the West as a bulwark against militant Islam in neighboring Somalia (Reuters, May 10).

Sources have said that the leaders of the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) held a meeting on May 4, 2012 and reached understanding to hand over their power to new elected leaders. The council was informed about the government decision by Dr. Shiferaw Teklemariam, Minister of Federal Affairs, and Ato Tsegaye Berhe, Advisor of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. The sources said that preparations for the election of new leaders would start in early June, and elections in the kebeles and woredas would be conducted in early July. EIASC and the Ministry of Federal Affairs have decided that the elections would be conducted by the Ulama Council, that only followers of the old Islam can take part in the election and become observers, and that the Awalia College would be administered under the EIASC (Fitih, May 11).

Residents of Humera area in north-west Ethiopia near the Ethio-Eritrea border told that young people in the area are being rounded up and taken to unknown places. Some residents said the youth are being rounded up by armed infiltrators from Eritrea. A high-ranking zonal official who wanted to remain anonymous confirmed that there was a problem with young people who came to the area to collect gold through traditional means. The opposition Arena Tigray for Democracy and Sovereignty party which operates in the area issued a statement It said that in April young people were abducted from the area three times. This year, it said, over 1,000 people have been abducted. Some residents said that abductors from Eritrea take the young people for military training, force them to do hard labor and deny them food and shelter. This information was obtained from some of the young people who escaped after being abducted, they said (Sendek, May 9).

The Commercial Bank of Ethiopia is to open its second branch in Southern Sudan in the second largest city in South Sudan and Malakal. The bank aims to tap into the growing business in the area, according to a banker attached to the Commercial Bank branch at Juba. The bank has already sent thirteen employees to Juba and CBE has built an office that will house the bank. There are only three banks, two local banks Nile Commercial and Ivory, and Kenyan bank Equity, currently operating in Malakal in spite of the business created by its proximity to Ethiopia and North Sudan. The CBE branch in Juba, CBE-Southern Sudan Ltd, was opened three years ago with a paid up capital of 15 million US dollars. Currently, the bank mobilizes 100 million dollars in deposits from 4000 depositors. Most clients are interested in money transfer services as well as deposit, according to the banker. Most of the bank's customers are Ethiopian, Sudanese and Eritrean, he noted (Fortune, May 8).

Ethiopian troops and Somali government forces killed 17 Shabaab rebels after the rebels blocked a road in southern Somalia and stole supplies from passing trucks, said Mohamed Abdi Mayow, the governor of the Bakool region. The militants routinely extort taxes and loot food to sustain their insurgency (Reuters, May 10).

Ethiopia's economy may expand 11% in the current fiscal year, helped by increased agricultural productivity and investment in industry and services, Minister of State for Finance Abraham Tekeste said. The International Monetary Fund estimates growth will be 5% in the period, according to the Washington-based lender's website (Bloomberg, May 10).

Annual inflation in the Horn of Africa country, which peaked at 40.6% in August, fell again in April after slowing to 32.5% in March, Abraham said, without providing further details. The government's

halt to borrowing from the country's central bank is partly responsible for slower price growth, he said. "We have not taken a cent from the central bank since last year," said Abraham (Bloomberg, May 10).

Ethiopia has made more than 4 million ha of "fertile and unutilized" land available for agriculture companies that meet government requirements, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said. About 300,000 ha has been leased for commercial farming so far, he said at an Ethiopian investment forum in the capital, Addis Ababa. Investors in Ethiopian land include Bangalore-based Karuturi Global Ltd. (KARG), the world's largest rose grower, which is developing 100,000 ha in Ethiopia's southwestern Gambella region. The farm will have its first harvest in October, Managing Director Sai Ramakrishna Karuturi told the forum Wednesday. Horizon Plantations Ethiopia, which is majority owned by Saudi billionaire Mohamed al-Amoudi, leased a 20,000-ha plot in the western Benishangul-Gumuz region in March to grow groundnuts to produce cooking oil. New land will only be allocated to applicants who submit "proper" business and land-use plans, manage the environment and provide jobs for local citizens, Meles said. Inadequate applications are "perhaps one of the reasons we've not succeeded in allocating more than 10 of land that has been allocated for investment," he said. The government has repossessed land from inactive operators, Meles said (Bloomberg News, May 9).

Ethiopia's efforts to increase energy efficiency and diversify its hydro-dependent energy mix through renewable energy got a 50m USD boost from the Climate Investment Funds (CIF) committee meetings last week. Ethiopia's plan calls for AfDB technical support and investment to implement the Assela wind farm project and Phase II of the Aluto Langano geothermal project. Funds will be applied to technology transfer to reduce the cost of wind energy and to initial drilling and exploration activities of geothermal," stated Gosaye Mengistie Abayneh, Director of Energy Study and Development in the Ethiopian Ministry of Energy (State media, May 9).