

No.4, March 24, 2014(*) Seven Days, Vol. 21

The United States' State Department annual report this year has toughened its tone in condemning Ethiopia's record on rights, even Secretary of State John Kerry, grouped the country with Cuba, Belarus and China. This, former diplomats and experts say, is an indication that Washington will be testing the new leadership in Addis Ababa to see if it's willing to embrace political reforms ahead of 2015 national polls. Successfully staging the country's first ever peaceful power transfer, the ruling party has consolidated its control. There is however no sign that the government of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn is heeding Washington's calls for major reform. A spokesperson for the PM earlier this week said any legislative or political reforms have to be "organic" and initiated by the government's own assessments. The State Department report says Ethiopia restricts freedom of expression and association. Ethiopian security forces reportedly arrest, detain, harass, intimidate and put people on politically motivated trials to stifle dissidence. The report said its sources are convinced that police investigators often used physical abuse to extract confessions in Maekelawi, the central police investigation headquarters in Addis Ababa. Some prisons are described as "harsh" and "life threatening". According to the report, opposition politicians and journalists are the main target of the government's crackdown (Capital newspaper (March 18)).

The new Electric Power Enterprise has begun efforts to secure the release of suspended loans from foreign sources. International financial institutions had suspended the loans which they had earlier approved complaining that they did not like the new organizational structure of the enterprise. The new enterprise is busy renewing all other financial agreements with the institutions. A high-level Ethiopian delegation headed by Finance Minister Sofian Ahmed including the Enterprise General Manager Woizero Azeb Asnake last week visited Beijing, China, for talks on the matter. An agreement has been reached to release the loans earlier approved for the installation of electric power lines for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. A Chinese company called China State Grid is undertaking the 1.4 billion USD power installation on the dam (Reporter, March 19). Prominent Muslim scholars from the United States have arrived in Addis Ababa to arbitrate in the conflict between the Ethiopian government and detained Muslims in Ethiopia. It is to be recalled that a number of Muslim radicals were arrested following dispute among Muslim factions at Awalia School which later took national dimensions (Addis Admas, March 22).

Construction work on the Addis Ababa Light Rail project may be delayed for up to six months to one year. Engineer Behailu Sentayehu of the Ethiopian Railway Corporation said it is possible that the light rail may be delayed for some time. He quoted Engineer Tekabe Negash, a sub-contractor of the project, as saying that the Belg rains have the potential to hinder smooth work on the project and hence the anticipated delay. It was disclosed that up to 7 km out of the total 32 km of the project has so far been finished (Yegna Press, March 18). Ethiopia has secured over US\$ 60m revenue from export of textiles and garment during the first half of the current budget year, the Textile Industry Development Institute said. Institute Director, Sileshi Lema told that the revenue exceeded the previous year's performance by US\$ 15m. The Institute is supporting industries to realize the target set for the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) period, which is to secure one billion dollar from the industry. Despite efforts being exerted to realize the target, the performance during the three years of the GTP period is low. The country secured only US\$ 305m during the reported period. The target was to secure US\$ 637m. Shortage of quality cotton supply contributed for the reduction, Sleshi said. The country has been importing cotton to supply the industries (ENA, March 18).

The World Bank's Board of Executive Directors approved a US\$205m International Development Association (IDA) credit to help the government of Ethiopia increase access to clean drinking water and improve sanitation services for many households in the country. The project will focus equally on women and children who are typically responsible for fetching water for their families. The funds will support the Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Project, designed to contribute to meeting Ethiopia's One WaSH National Program (OWNP) and Growth and Transformation targets of 100% access to water and 84% improvement in household latrines by 2015. The project will finance the construction of about 6,300 rural

water schemes, and rehabilitation and expansion of water supply systems for about 70 towns. In addition the project will finance the improvement of water supply for health clinics and schools (WIC, March 20).