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General John Abizaid, the head of the United States Central Command, held talks with Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi on local and international efforts to combat terrorism, state media said on Tuesday.

The talks came as Ethiopia faced accusations of deploying its troops inside Somalia to protect the country's fledgling interim government from an increasingly powerful Islamic militia.

The pair held talks "on national and international issues, especially on ongoing efforts in fighting terrorism", state-run Ethiopia News Agency said in a statement.

A key US ally in Washington's so-called war on terror, the largely secular Ethiopia is nervous about the swift victory of the Islamist forces in large swathes of neighbouring Somalia, including the capital Mogadishu.

Over the weekend Islamic courts' chief Sheikh Shariff Sheikh Ahmed claimed that several hundred Ethiopian troops had crossed the border and were moving towards the interim government's seat in Baidoa, about 250km from Mogadishu.

But Addis Ababa denied the charge, saying it had, however, boosted troops along their common border in response to an Islamist provocation.

The US, concerned about growing extremism in Somalia, helped bankroll a secular warlord alliance, the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism, in February.

But the hard-line Islamic militia in Somalia last Wednesday captured the warlords' last strongholds after four months of fighting, and has begun setting up courts and administrations adhering to strict Sharia law.

The Islamists deny having links to extremist groups such as al-Qaeda or harbouring foreign fighters, and instead claim to be working to restore law and order in the Horn of Africa nation.

-- AFP