

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1066
Land:	Iran
Kilde:	Bundesamt für Flüchtlinge und Migration (BAMF)
Titel:	Briefing Notes
Udgivet:	20. november 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	9. februar 2024



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

20 November 2023

Afghanistan

Expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan; humanitarian situation

The expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan continues. The Taliban and international organisations have expressed concern about the situation of Afghans returning from Pakistan in view of the approaching winter and inadequate humanitarian provisions. On 17.11.23 Save the Children reported major outbreaks of infectious diseases among the returnees. This is attributed first and foremost to the lack of sanitary facilities and clean water.

The humanitarian situation also remains tense in Herat province. Many of the approx. 37,000 families affected by the earthquakes in October 2023 are living in improvised tent camps without adequate humanitarian provisions and with no possibility of preparing for the winter.¹

Persecution

The Taliban arrested women's rights activist Pari Azada in Kabul on 16.11.23.

On 17.11.23 the Taliban reportedly arrested two former soldiers after they had crossed the border from Iran. They allegedly fled to Iran after the Taliban assumed power, where they were subsequently arrested and have now been deported to Afghanistan. According to Iranian authorities, 450,000 Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan from Iran in the past four months.

On 18.11.23 the Afghan Journalists Center published a report documenting severe censorship and 33 arrests of journalists between 21.03. and 17.11.23.²

Armed opposition

By its own account, the Afghanistan Freedom Front killed a total of five Taliban fighters in Baghlan, Parwan and Kandahar provinces on 13.11., 14.11. and 16.11.23.³

Taliban representative in Germany

On 16.11.2023 the head of the Taliban's supervisory authority for foods, Abdul Bari Omar, spoke to an audience of 70 in a mosque in Cologne. He had previously been at an event staged by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the Netherlands. German authorities have expressed criticism of his admission into Germany and his public appearance in the country.⁴

Argentina

Opposition politician Milei wins presidential election

Javier Milei, leader of the right-wing populist alliance "La Libertad Avanza", won the run-off in the presidential election on 19.11.23 (cf. BN of 23.10.23). After almost all votes had been counted, the electoral office declared him

the winner with 55.76 % of the vote, well ahead of the incumbent minister for economic affairs, Sergio Massa of the centre-left governing coalition “Unión por la Patria”. Milei, who does not have a majority in parliament, describes himself as an anarcho-capitalist and is planning comprehensive changes to the economy. These include the abolition of the central bank, the introduction of the US dollar as legal tender and cuts in welfare spending. Argentina is in a deep economic crisis. The inflation rate is above 140 %.⁵

Bangladesh

Date for parliamentary elections; opposition strikes continue

On 15.11.23 the electoral commission announced that the next parliamentary elections are to be held on 07.01.24. The opposition, and in particular the largest opposition party - the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) - subsequently called for a continuation of the strikes in protest at the planned date for the elections, and for elections to be held under a neutral interim government. Cases of arson and clashes between supporters of the ruling Awami League and the opposition occurred in various parts of the country. The strikes have led to restrictions for road traffic. According to various sources, more than 10,000 BNP supporters, leading figures and party activists have been arrested in the course of the protests in recent weeks alone (cf. BN of 30.10.23).⁶

Gabon

Military planning elections for 2025

On 13.11.23 Gabon's military rulers announced their intention to hold parliamentary elections in August 2025. According to reports in the media, this latest development comes in response from pressure from the international community to implement a timetable for the return to a civilian government. The military announced its takeover of power on 30.08.23 (cf. BN of 04.09.23) and six weeks later the military ruler, Brice Oligui Nguema, appointed members for the two chambers of parliament (cf. BN of 09.10.23).⁷

The Gambia

Article 19 sees freedom of speech under threat

In the light of the most recent incidents and developments, the NGO Article 19 (A19) has expressed its concern about setbacks regarding the freedom of speech, which A19 considered to have developed in a positive direction since the change of government from long-time president Yahya Jammeh to president Adama Barrow. A19 has recently observed increasing restrictions on freedom of speech by the government, the suppression of political dissidence and a narrowing of the realm of civil society. The NGO has reported on the cases of the journalists Alhagie Bora Sisawo (cf. BN of 16.10.23) and Bakary Mankajang (cf. BN of 16.09. and 25.09.23), the two opposition figures Momodou Sabally and Sheriffo Bayo Sonko (cf. BN of 25.09.23) and the case of human rights activist Madi Jobarteh (cf. BN of 16.10. and 13.11.23). According to A19, these individuals have all been arrested and held temporarily in custody solely for having shared their opinions in the public or digital domain or for having exercised their journalistic professions. Alfred Nkuru Bulakali, A19's regional director in West Africa, alleges that the prosecution of politically active individuals and journalists is at odds with the Barrow government's promises to break with the era of repression and censorship under Jammeh.

A19 has also expressed its concern at the latest utterances against the press and freedom of speech and corresponding verbal threats by president Barrow, who has also described the main opposition party - the United Democratic Party - as the greatest danger to national security (cf. BN of 16.10.23).⁸

Iran

Supreme court affirms death sentence

It was reported in the media on 14.11.23 that the death sentence passed on a man had been affirmed by the supreme court. The 20 year-old was reportedly sentenced to death for participating in the killing of a member of the Revolutionary Guard Corps (short form in Persian 'Sepah' or 'Pasdaran') in the city of Malayer (Hamadan province). A human rights organisation alleges that the convicted man was brought to trial under false pretences and had no access to a lawyer.⁹

Political activist receives additional prison term

It has been reported in the media that the Revolutionary Court in Tehran has sentenced a political activist who is already serving a long prison term to an additional four years and three months' imprisonment. The journalist has reportedly already been handed down a 45-year sentence on charges of collaborating with an enemy government and enmity towards god, and has been in prison for around 400 days. The latest sentence has apparently been imposed for propaganda against the system and conspiracy against national security.¹⁰

Arrests at mixed-gender wedding party

It was reported on 14.11.23 that 300 people had been arrested in the city of Shahrood (Semnan province) for attending a mixed-gender wedding party. According to the province's deputy chief of policy, the venue has been closed and cordoned off.

In the course of ongoing efforts by the Iranian government to enforce Muslim clothing regulations and moral directives more strictly, various companies and leisure facilities have been closed throughout the country in 2023 for breaching Muslim dress regulations.¹¹

Iraq

Speaker of parliament relieved of his mandate

On 14.11.23 the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq relieved Mohamed Al-Halbousi, who was also the speaker of parliament, of his parliamentary mandate and expelled him from parliament.

The court considered it proven that Al-Halbousi, who is a member of the Takadum (Progress) party, had falsified a parliamentary document. Takadum, which is the largest Sunni party in the country, described the court's verdict as unconstitutional and announced a boycott of parliamentary sessions by Takadum members. Three of the four ministers appointed by Takadum have already stepped down. Al-Halbousi is regarded as the most influential Sunni politician in the country. Accusations of corruption have recently led to growing resistance among his supporters, however. His relations with the Shiite coalition partners are also considered to be strained.¹²

Conflict between Türkiye and PKK

According to the Yazidi militia Sinjar Resistance Units (Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şingal, YBŞ), two of their fighters have been killed and one injured in a drone attack in Sinjar. In pro-PKK media the attack is being blamed on Türkiye. As part of a military operation, Türkiye has been carrying out attacks on PKK positions on a regular basis for a number of years. Türkiye, among other countries, considers YBŞ to be associated with the PKK.¹³

Erbil: Attack on US base

The Harir airbase in Erbil, which is used by US troops, among others, was attacked by a number of drones on 17.11.23.

So-called Islamic Resistance has claimed responsibility for the attacks, stating that they were a response to the USA's support for Israel in the Gaza war. Islamic Resistance is an alliance of largely pro-Iranian militias. On 16.11.23 a Pentagon spokeswoman put the number of attacks on US facilities in Iraq since the outbreak of the Gaza crisis at 27.¹⁴

Attempted assassination of Iranian-Kurdish lawyer

The lawyer and political activist Sohrab Rahmati was shot outside his home on 16.11.23. He suffered grave injuries. The attacker or attackers remain at large. Rahmati is a member of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), an exiled association based in northern Iraq. The KDPI is accusing Iran of being responsible for the attack. In the past, Rahmati has represented the families of murder victims who are believed to have been killed at the behest of Iran. Several KDPI members have suffered violent deaths in recent months.¹⁵

Lebanon

Effects of the war between Israel and Hamas

The repercussions of the war between Hamas and Israel continue to overshadow the entire domestic agenda in Lebanon. Aside from Hezbollah, the general political consensus is that involving Lebanon in the war is not in Lebanon's interest. Representatives of the Sunni, Druze and various Christian segments of the populations have voiced sharp criticism of the border clashes.¹⁶

The situation in the south of Lebanon and the north of Israel

In view of the large number of individual armed clashes and military developments at the southern border of Lebanon/northern border of Israel, a summary of developments is provided below:

There are many reports of individual incidents along the border every day. In most cases, only short exchanges of fire take place. Missile systems are now being used to an increasing extent from the Lebanese side. The scale and range of the strikes have increased over the course of time. For the first time since 2006, the Israelis have hit the city of Nabatieh – the deepest strike in Lebanon so far.

With regard to the death toll, an international news agency has revised the previous week's figures (cf. BN of 13.11.23) and now assumes that 90 people have been killed in all on the Lebanese side since 07.10.23. On the Israeli side, it is believed that six soldiers have been killed to date and three civilians have also died. 553 Israeli strikes against Lebanese territory were counted between 08.10. and 10.11.23. In Israel, the evacuation orders for more than 40 settlements in the north of the country remain in force. There are calls for Hezbollah to retreat behind the Litani River, which flows around 13 km north of the border, on the grounds that this would be in accordance with the agreement between Hezbollah and Israel after the war of 2006.¹⁷

Liberia

Opposition party's candidate wins elections

A change of government lies ahead in Liberia: Following the official count of the votes from 17.11.23, Joseph Boakai, former vice-president and candidate of the opposition Unity Party (UP), claimed 50.9 % of the vote, ahead of the incumbent, George Weah of the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC), who finished on 49.1 %. According to reports in the media, Weah has conceded defeat and Boakai will officially take up office in January 2024. He has reportedly promised to invest in the infrastructure and alleviate poverty in the country. Weah has noted that the tight election results reveal a division in the country and warned that the attendant dangers must be considered in the transition to a new government.

The Liberian elections commission scheduled a run-off after neither of the leading candidates claimed over 50 % of the vote in the presidential elections on 10.10.23. Weah finished just ahead of Boakai, taking 43.8 % of the vote compared to the latter's 43.4 % share (cf. BN of 30.10.23).

In the last election in 2017, Weah won the run off against Boakai with 61.5 % of the vote, while Boakai finished on 38.5 % (cf. BN of 31.10.23). The government under Weah was linked to a number of corruption scandals.¹⁸

Mali

Northern Mali: Fighting between Malian military and Tuareg rebels

According to reports in the media, fighting went on for several days between the Malian military and armed Tuareg rebels in the Kidal region in the north of the country. At least 15 people, including eight children, were reportedly killed in an air strike on the town of Kidal on 07.11.23. The Malian army confirmed the drone attack, but said it had taken out the “terrorists”.

The aim of the Malian troops was to recapture the town of Kidal, which is considered to be a home base for the independence movements in the north. The former UN base in Kidal, which was occupied by Tuareg rebels after the UN’s MINUSMA peace mission withdrew at the end of October 2023, was also to be recaptured. The town of Kidal has been under the control of armed Tuareg rebels since 2014. A ceasefire prevailed after the peace treaty came into effect in 2015, providing for partial autonomy in the north of Mali. The military junta which has been in power since the military coup in 2020 ceased to recognise the autonomy provisions in August 2023, however, prompting the Tuareg rebels to rearm.

On 14.11.23 the Malian military reported that it had captured the town of Kidal.¹⁹

Morocco

Teachers’ strikes

Teachers without civil servant status have been striking throughout the country since the beginning of October 2023. Lessons are frequently cancelled at state schools, with a serious impact on pupils. The teachers are calling for higher salaries, better working conditions and a greater say in decision-making. They reject the reforms to the education system.²⁰

Clashes with police at pro-Palestinian demonstration

Clashes are reported to have occurred between police and demonstrators at a pro-Palestinian demonstration in Marrakesh on 14.11.23. The Movement for Justice and Charity, which is said to be close to the Muslim Brotherhood, allegedly staged a demonstration without official approval. Videos showing the police attempting to break up the demonstration are said to be circulating in the social networks. There have been a number of pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Morocco in recent weeks; no clashes with the security services had previously come to light.²¹

Nigeria

Katsina State: Security forces prevent attack

According to a report in the media, members of the Nigerian police thwarted an attack on a village in Jibia Local Government Area (LGA) in Katsina State on 11.11.23, freeing at least three kidnap victims in the process. On 12.11. and 16.11.23 troops belonging to the 1st Division of the Nigerian armed forces killed around ten attackers referred to as ‘bandits’ in Kajuru and Birnin-Gwari LGAs in neighbouring Kaduna State. Such reports of successes are no rarity (cf. BN of 06.02. and 14.08.23).²²

Borno State: Military strike against suspected terrorists

The Nigerian Air Force killed a number of actors referred to as ‘terrorists’ in the localities of Ajigin and Banki Junction in Borno State. In two air strikes carried out as part of Operation Hadin Kai on 08.11. and 11.11.23. Among the resources destroyed in the attacks were four trucks loaded with weapons. According to reports in the media, the military is conducting a sustained campaign against a number of militant and criminal groups in the north-east of the country. There have been similar reports of successes in the past (cf. BN of 06.02. and 14.08.23).²³

Anambra State: Success in the fight against human trafficking

Police freed two underage girls and 18 adult women from the hands of individuals referred to as human traffickers during a raid on a hotel in Oba Town in Anambra State in the south of the country on 01.11.23. According to reports

in the media, the individuals arrested in the raid are to be put on trial. Systematic exploitation and violence are said to have prevailed at the establishment. The women and girls concerned, who are aged between 16 and 24, were reportedly forced to hand over the money which they earned from prostitution to the person running the accommodation and, in particular, to individuals whom they referred to as 'madams'. The madams had intimated to the women and girls that they would be released from the establishment after a year. Similar reports of successes achieved by government agencies in the fight against human trafficking have appeared in Nigerian media in the past (cf. BN of 07.08. and 09.10.23).²⁴

Thousands of prisoners released

The Nigerian government announced on 19.11.23 that 4,068 prisoners had been released on the previous day to reduce prison overcrowding. According to reports in the media citing official information from the interior minister, the inmates concerned were in prison for failing to pay fines up to the equivalent of EUR 1,100. President Bola Tinubu is reportedly planning further measures to relieve the strain on overcrowded prisons. According to information from the UN, penal institutions in Nigeria are 147 % overcrowded, one reason for this being the large proportion of inmates who have been remanded in custody pending trial. It emerges from reports in the media on 09.10.22 that 68 % of all inmates in Nigeria's prisons are prisoners awaiting trial, some of whom are held on remand for a number of years before their cases are brought to trial (cf. BN of 31.10.22).²⁵

Pakistan

Criticism of deportation of refugees without documented residence status

On 17.11.23 the UNHCR stated in social media that most of the returning Afghans would not be able to find work or accommodation and criticised Pakistan for carrying out the expulsion campaign shortly before winter. On 18.11.23 the Pakistani Joint Action Committee for Refugees organised a demonstration in Karachi against the deportation of refugees without documented residence status. The demonstrators carried banners warning of the even more severe hardship facing women and minorities after deportation to Afghanistan. According to reports in the media on 13.11.23, the Pakistani government has opened three additional border crossings in Balochistan province.²⁶

Military operation in North Waziristan

According to information from the military, four armed fighters, including one high-ranking target, were killed in a military operation on 18.11.23 in the Khaisoor area of the tribal district of North Waziristan, which belongs to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.²⁷

Palestinian territories / Israel

Current developments / humanitarian situation

By its own account, the UN found itself forced to stop supplying food and other essential goods to the Gaza Strip on 17.11.23, warning of a growing danger of widespread famine after internet and telephone services had collapsed in the besieged Gaza Strip due to a lack of fuel.

Israel's government has announced that two trucks carrying fuel for the UN will be allowed into Gaza daily. This corresponds to half the amount of fuel which the UN says it needs for the people in Gaza, including fuel supplies for water systems, hospitals and trucks. The Israeli government has refused to allow fuel into the Gaza Strip since the beginning of the war, claiming that it would be seized by Hamas and used for military purposes. Israel has also drastically reduced the supply of food, water and other goods via Egypt. According to the UN, the daily supplies from Egypt cover only 10 % of the Gaza Strip's food requirements. In addition, the shutdown of the water system means that the majority of the population have access only to contaminated water, which has led to a breakout of diseases. In addition, a WFP spokeswoman has stated that dehydration and malnutrition are on the increase and almost the entire population of the Gaza Strip is being affected by a shortage of food.

Conditions at the Al Shifa Hospital complex have worsened still further. According to the hospital's director, 52 patients have died so far.

The Israeli forces have announced that they could broaden their offensive to include the south of the Gaza Strip while continuing their operations in the north. The Israeli government had previously called on people from the Gaza Strip to flee to the south. Should the offensive shift to the south, it is unclear where the Palestinian refugees could go. The Egyptian government is refusing to admit people from the Gaza Strip who are seeking shelter. According to the Hamas-run health ministry in the Gaza Strip, since the beginning of the Israeli ground offensive on 13.10.23 the death toll in the Gaza Strip has risen to over 13,000. The UN states that approx. 1.7 million of the Gaza Strip's 2.3 million residents have been displaced. It is unclear how many of them have fled to the south.²⁸

Senegal

AI: Repression and suppression of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and the opposition

Human rights NGO Amnesty International (AI) has stated that more than 1,000 people have been "targeted, persecuted" and arrested by the Senegalese authorities in the space of a year, solely for having peacefully exercised their constitutional right to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly or on only the slightest suspicion of links to Ousmane Sonko's opposition party, Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité (PASTEF), which has been banned since 31.07.23. AI has called, among other demands, for an end to the use of pre-trial detention as a punishment for people with suspected links to a political party.²⁹

PASTEF activists and secretary-general remain in custody; activist in critical condition

According to information in the media, two PASTEF activists who were arrested in controversial circumstances are being held in pre-trial detention, as is Bassirou Diomaye Faye, PASTEF's secretary-general and Sonko's "right-hand man" (cf. BN of 17.04.23). The fifth application for provisional release of the activist Mohamed Samba Djim – known as Hannibal –, who lives abroad and was arrested in Senegal during a brief visit in February 2023, has since been rejected. Djim has reportedly been charged, among other offences, with "actions and the funding of activities which pose a danger to public security and are intended to cause serious political unrest", conspiracy against the authority of the state and a criminal offence posing a danger to national security. According to AI, Djim was "targeted, persecuted and arbitrarily arrested" in connection with online appeals for donations to the PASTEF party.

Meanwhile, the public prosecutor's office in Dakar has reportedly managed to avert an end to the long time spent in pre-trial detention by Mamadou Lamine Diop, who is known as Diop Taïf. A few days previously, a court apparently ordered the PASTEF activist's provisional release. Diop was reportedly arrested on account of a live broadcast from Rebeuss prison in Dakar against the backdrop of the political affair over Sonko and charged, among other offences, with "actions and manoeuvres posing a danger to public safety and security" and spreading fake news.

According to a report in the media, the activist Pape Abdoulaye Touré, who is being held in pre-trial detention, has gone into a coma as a result of a further hunger strike lasting a number of days. The civil-society movement Sénégal notre priorité has criticised what it refers to as Touré's "arbitrary" arrest and indicated that he has undergone torture. According to information from lawyers, Touré has been charged with involvement with an insurgent movement and "actions or manoeuvres posing a danger to public safety and security". Touré was reportedly arrested at a demonstration in June 2023. He is said to belong to the heterogeneous opposition movement Mouvement des forces vives du Sénégal (F24), whose vice-coordinator, Aliou Sané, has recently been remanded in custody on several occasions (cf. BN of 16.10.23).³⁰

Further Walfadjri journalist and others arrested

Pape Sané, a columnist working for the Walfadjri media group, was reportedly arrested on 13.11.23 on charges of spreading fake news. His arrest apparently stemmed from a Facebook post about the allegedly humiliating circumstances relating to the dismissal of the former commander-in-chief of the gendarmerie in the wake of the serious disturbances in March 2021, following the temporary detention of opposition leader Sonko on accusations of rape (cf. BN of 08.03.21 and 15.03.21). A number of media representatives, including journalists working for Walfadjri, have been arrested, taken into custody and prosecuted in 2023 so far, and the Walfadjri TV station has

been temporarily banned from broadcasting on two occasions on account its coverage (cf. BN of 13.02., 05.06. and 31.06.23). The NGO Article 19 has condemned Sané's arrest and the repression of media representatives, media and the freedom of speech, and has documented further cases in which politically active individuals and journalists have been detained for spreading false information. Another NGO has criticised backsliding in the area of freedom of the press.

In addition, an individual was reportedly arrested on 17.11.23 for sharing an allegedly controversial post by a Walfadjri journalist on Facebook relating to the gendarmerie's current commander-in-chief, general Moussa Fall. On the same day, the anti-government rapper Nitt Doff, who was only recently granted a provisional release and placed under judicial supervision (cf. BN of 23.10.23), was arrested once again. According to information from lawyers, he faces charges of calling for insurrection and insulting the police. No further details are known.³¹

Sonko's legal actions fail before the supreme court and the ECOWAS Court of Justice; bans on demonstrations and disturbances

On 17.11.23 imprisoned PASTEF leader Sonko failed in his legal actions before the Constitutional Council – Senegal's supreme court – and the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The Constitutional Council revoked the lower court's judgement ordering Sonko's reinstatement on the electoral rolls (cf. BN of 16.10.23) and referred the case to a court in Dakar for a renewed hearing – this is likely to diminish Sonko's prospects of running as a candidate in the election on 25.02.24 considerably. A large police presence secured the court. No reports of any incidents are known. Only hours beforehand, the ECOWAS Court of Justice found that the Senegalese state had not violated any of Sonko's human rights or procedural rules, as he had alleged. The court furthermore declined to pronounce a judgement on the banning of the PASTEF party (cf. BN of 07.08.23). A number of protests planned by Sonko's supporters for 17.11.23, including rallies in Dakar and Ziguinchor, were banned by the authorities, citing public order and security grounds among other reasons. The prefect of Dakar ordered further restrictions for the capital, citing security grounds. In the city of Ziguinchor, of which Sonko is mayor, protests and clashes between protesters and security forces ensued in the evening following the Constitutional Court's judgement, which was described as a "travesty of justice". Protesters reportedly erected street barricades and set fire to tyres. The police allegedly deployed tear gas to break up the protesters.³²

Further demonstration banned in Dakar

On 10.11.23 the authorities in Dakar rejected an application for a demonstration by a number of civil-society organisation to call for the release of political prisoners. This came weeks after a political demonstration had been allowed in Dakar for the first time since 12.05.23 (cf. BN of 30.10.23).³³

Sri Lanka

Supreme Court: Rajapaksa brothers partially to blame for economic crisis

On 14.11.23 the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka found that the actions of the former president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and his brother and former prime minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa, had contributed to the worst economic crisis for decades. The action was brought against 13 former officials by a number of parties, including Transparency International Sri Lanka. While the judgement does not entail any punishment apart from the requirement for the plaintiffs' legal costs to be borne by the accused, experts believe it could pave the way for further actions.

The economic crisis led to large-scale protests in 2022, in the face of which ex-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigned and fled the country. He returned in September 2022. There were intermittent shortages in the supply of food, medicines, electricity and fuel. Sri Lanka was declared bankrupt in May 2022. Strict targets and reform requirements are attached to a bailout package from the International Monetary Fund to the amount of around US\$ 3 billion.³⁴

Sudan

Continued fighting and mediation talks

According to reports in the media, on 16.11.23 the military interim government called on the United Nations Security Council to end the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) with immediate effect. The reasons behind this move have not been made publicly known.

In the future course of the conflict with the paramilitary militia Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the Sudanese army (SAF) will be actively supported by various organisations, including the armed groups Sudan Liberation Movement – Minni Minawi (SLM-MM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). During a press conference in Port Sudan, the SLM-MM and the JEM announced along with other groups that they would be abandoning their neutrality in the prevailing conflict and siding with the military, due to the crimes against humanity committed by the RSF. They stated that the RSF posed a threat to national unity and the civilian population's property and freedom, prompting them to participate in the fight without hesitation on all fronts. The group further warned other countries in the region not to become involved in the conflict or to support the RSF. These warnings stem first and foremost from recent reports of arms deliveries to the RSF by the United Arab Emirates via the neighbouring country of Chad.

In contrast to these changes of strategy, the groups Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF) and Sudan Liberation Movement Transitional Council (SLM-Transitional Council) are remaining neutral, but have announced that they will abandon their neutrality, should RSF forces attack the cities of Al-Fashir (North Darfur) and El Daein (East Darfur) and cause any harm to civilians. Large numbers of people who have fled from the other three Darfur regions, which were recently captured by the RSF, are currently in these cities.³⁵

Humanitarian situation

Cholera has been spreading since the first cases were recorded in Gedaref State on 26.09.23. 2,525 suspected cases have since been established in 27 locations spread over seven states, including 78 deaths. UNOCHA estimates that up to 3.1 million people are at risk of infection. The first deliveries of vaccines are expected in the course of this month.

Since the second week in November, the RSF has reportedly been blocking the routes out of the country and into Chad for people fleeing the fighting. The sections of the border in the regions near the villages of Adikong, Makada, Mustardi und Tendelti are reported to have been closed by the RSF. Anyone who nevertheless tries to escape to Chad apparently faces very high fines.³⁶

Syria

Amnesties: Reduced sentences and commutation of death sentences into prison terms

The Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, has announced a further amnesty and reduced sentences for a number of criminal offences committed prior to 16.11.23.

Under the amnesty, persons who are guilty of having committed a crime are to be pardoned. Prisoners who are suffering from a life-threatening illness or who are over 70 years of age are to be released and death sentences are to be commuted into life prison terms, while life sentences imposed to date are to be ended after 20 years.

The decree excludes crimes such as arms smuggling and crimes which have led to a person's death. The decree further stipulates that people who are still on the run are to report to the authorities within three months. A number of such amnesties have been issued by the government in recent years.³⁷

North-west Syria: Russian media report at least 34 fighters killed

The Russian non-state news agency Interfax reports that more than 34 rebels were killed in Russian air strikes in the north-west of the country on 12.11.23. According to the director of the Russian Conciliation Centre for Syria, local armed groups had carried out seven attacks on Syrian government troops in the preceding 24 hours.³⁸

North-west Syria: Cross-border deliveries of aid from Türkiye extended

The UN announced on 13.11.23 that the Syrian government had extended its permission to use two border crossings from Türkiye into the territories controlled by armed opposition groups in the north-west until 13.02.23.

In July 2023, a resolution to extend the use of the border crossings failed to be reached on the UN Security Council for the first time since 2014, prompting the Syrian government to offer to permit use of the crossings subject to certain conditions.³⁹

Air strikes by US military on pro-Iranian targets: at least seven dead

The US military reported on 14.11.23 that more than seven people had been killed in air strikes in Syria on militias associated with Iran. The attacks are said to have targeted a militia training facility near to the city of Abu Kamal and a house near to the town of Mayadin. No specific information on those killed has been released as yet. The US military has reported that militia members were located in the vicinity of the targets and that no women or children were killed according to its examinations. Tensions between the US military and pro-Iranian armed groups had risen substantially since the beginning of the Gaza war (cf. BN of 13.11.23).⁴⁰

Togo

Two journalists detained

The journalists Loïc Lawson and Anani Sossou were arrested by the authorities in Lomé on 13.11.23 and taken into police custody. Lawson is the editor of the newspaper Flambeau des Démocrates, while Sossou works as a freelance journalist.

According to reports in the media, the two media representatives had claimed in social networks that money to the value of 400 million CFA francs (approx. 600,000 euros) had been stolen in a burglary at the home of the Togolese minister of urban planning. The minister himself had reported the theft without publicly stating the amount of money involved, and subsequently reported the two journalists to the police for making their allegation. The two journalists retracted their assertions on the same day, stating that the amount they had published was too high. After an initial hearing before an investigating judge, Lawson and Sossou were transferred to the prison in Lomé on 15.11.23. The two have been charged with libel and defamation of the minister and with incitement to revolt.

International organisations, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the International Francophone Press Union (UPF) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF), have joined the Togolese opposition in condemning the incident and demanding the two men's immediate release. Social networks are excluded from the purview of the Togolese Press and Communications Law. Sentencing would consequently take place under criminal law. According to CPJ, this allows punishment in the form of a suspended prison term of up to six months for defamation, a prison term of up to two years for spreading fake news and up to five years' imprisonment for incitement of insurrection.⁴¹

Ukraine

Course of the war

Fighting continues, among other places, around Avdiivka and other settlements in the Donetsk region in the vicinity of the regional capital of the same name. The Russian side has reportedly achieved small territorial gains at several locations here. On the other side, the media report that Ukraine has been able to reinforce its new positions on the left bank of the Dnieper in the Russian-controlled part of the Kherson region (cf. BN of 06.11.23). Analysts believe that the aim of this Ukrainian operation could be either to prepare for an offensive or merely to draw Russian forces away from other sections of the front.

Reports in the media citing representatives of the Ukrainian cyber defence organisation state that Ukraine has been the target of almost 4,000 cyber attacks since 24.02.22, representing a roughly three-fold increase in frequency compared to the period prior to this date. During a visit by the new British foreign secretary, David Cameron, president Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated that there had been a marked reduction in deliveries of artillery ammunition by western allies since the war in Gaza began in October 2023.⁴²

Civilian war victims and humanitarian situation

One person died in drone and artillery attacks on the district of Nikopol (Dnipropetrovsk oblast) on 14.11.23. It was reported on 17./18.11.23 that two people had been killed in the Ukraine-controlled part of the Donetsk region. Citing information from the Ukrainian authorities, it was also reported on 18./19.11.23 that two rescuers and seven other people were injured when Russian missiles hit the village of Komyshevukha (Zaporizhzhia oblast). A very similar report was published on 16.11.23; it is unclear whether this refers to the same incident.

Away from direct fighting, the Ukrainian-controlled part of the Kherson region currently appears to be a particular focus of Russian attacks. On 14.11.23 a hospital and residential areas were hit in the oblast capital of the same name, killing three people and injuring at least twelve. Two people died and at least twelve were injured in shelling of various areas in the region on 16.11.23. It was reported on 17./18.11.23 that at least nine people had been killed in attacks on residential districts, shopping areas and administration buildings in the city of Kherson. Five people reportedly incurred injuries from shrapnel following Russian shelling in the Kherson region on the morning of 19.11.23.

According to the Ukrainian government, several thousand residents of settlements close to the front in the east and south of the country were left without electricity after the Russian side had attacked the local energy infrastructure. In this context, president Zelenskyy was reported as having said on 18.11.23 that Ukraine had been able to bolster its air defences before the winter, thanks to western support. It appears that systematic Russian attacks on the infrastructure which began in October 2022 caused large-scale outages of power, heating and water supplies in the autumn and winter of 2022/2023 (cf. BN of 17.10., 24.10., 31.10., 21.11., 28.11., 19.12.22., 02.01., 30.01. and 06.02.23). Zelenskyy suspects that the delayed start to such attacks this year as compared to last year is due to the Russian Federation stocking up on weapons to be deployed for this purpose.

According to the Ukrainian government, some 3,000 trucks, including vehicles carrying fuel and humanitarian aid, are being forced to wait on the Polish side of the joint border because Polish truck drivers have set up a blockade of three crossing points in protest at Ukrainian competition.⁴³

Yemen

Houthi hijack merchant ship with link to Israel

On 19.11.23 the Houthis seized a British merchant ship by force and took the crew of 25 comprising various (non-Israeli) nationalities hostage. The ship was en route from Türkiye to India and was passing through the Red Sea at the time of the incident. The link to Israel stems from a company founded by an Israeli businessman which is a part owner of the ship. The Houthis' leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, announced on 14.11.23 that as part of the attacks against Israel ships with links to Israel would also be considered legitimate targets.⁴⁴

Houthi attacks on Israel and US navy

On 14.11.23 a Houthi spokesman said further missiles had been fired at Israeli territory, including the coastal city of Eilat. The Israeli military announced on the same day that it had shot down a missile over the Red Sea.

On 15.11.23 a US navy destroyer on the Red Sea intercepted a drone from Yemen which according to initial assessments was homing in on the destroyer. It is not known whether the drone was armed.⁴⁵

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