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Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

18 February 2019

Afghanistan

Suicide bombings and attacks

Combat operations and attacks have been reported in the following provinces: Uruzgan, Kandahar (southern Afghanistan), Faryab, Sar-e-Pul (northern Afghanistan), Takhar, Kunduz (north-eastern Afghanistan), Nangarhar, Laghman (eastern Afghanistan) and Badghis (western Afghanistan).

UN findings on the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan

According to the UN, the eastern provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar, Nuristan and Laghman are strongholds of ISIS. The number of fighters is estimated to be between 2,500 and 4,000. In addition, there are several training camps and cells in various cities, including Kabul. The current leader of the group is Mawlawi Ziya ul-Haq (alias Abu Omar Al-Khorasani). For the year 2018, ISIS has been blamed for 38 terrorist attacks in Afghanistan including some so-called “high profile” attacks, also in Kabul. Prime targets are Afghan security forces, Taliban, NATO troops, diplomats, employees of UN organisations, non-governmental organisations and medical institutions, journalists and members of religious minorities. In northern Afghanistan, ISIS have reportedly suffered major setbacks, particularly in the province of Yovtzyan. However, around 170 fighters remain in Faryab, 100 in Sar-e-Pul and 50 in Balkh.

Taliban nominate representatives for peace talks

On 12 February 2019, the Taliban nominated their 14 representatives for the next peace talks to be held with the USA in Doha/Qatar at the end of February (see Briefing Notes of 28 January 2019). Meanwhile, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg emphasised that the aim of the peace talks was to find a solution for Afghanistan’s future. To this end, he said the framework conditions need to be created through assistance, training and support for the Afghan security forces. He said the complete withdrawal of foreign troops, as demanded by the Taliban, is not compatible with this objective.

Albania

Violence erupts at protest rally

On 16 February 2019, a large protest rally took place against the government led by Prime Minister Edi Rama of the Democratic Party (DP) in which thousands of people took part. In some cases violent riots broke out. The police used water cannons and tear gas against protestors attempting to storm the seat of government. Right-wing and left-wing opposition parties had called for the demonstration. They accuse the government of corruption and having links with organised crime and are calling for new elections. The demonstration was the culmination of months of protests by various social groups. In recent months, students had regularly taken to the streets to protest against high tuition fees and social hardship. (cf. Briefing Notes of 14 January 2019).

Algeria

Protests against fifth term for President Bouteflika

On 16 February 2019, young people in particular took to the streets in several large cities to protest against the renewed candidacy of the ailing 81-year-old President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for the presidential election planned for 18 April 2019. Several activists were arrested in Ain Beida and Bordj Bou Arrerdj but were released a few hours later.

China

Xinjiang: database used to monitor Uyghurs

According to media reports, an Internet expert recently discovered a database on the Internet that was probably accessible to everyone for months, representing a major data security flaw, in which a Chinese IT company stored, among other things, movement data of more than 2.5 million Uyghurs in Xinjiang. In addition to the name, ID number and other pieces of personal information, data on the current whereabouts of the persons in question were collected and stored in real time using surveillance cameras in public spaces. The company is to cooperate with the police in several cities in Xinjiang and will also be represented in other Chinese provinces.

India/Pakistan

Kashmir: dozens killed after attack on Indian security forces

On 14 February 2019, a vehicle loaded with explosives blew up on a main road near Lethpora in the Pulwama district of Kashmir, India, when members of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) paramilitary unit were travelling in a convoy of unarmoured buses to the Jammu and Kashmir state capital, Srinagar, some 20 kilometres from the site of the attack. At least 42 Indian security forces were killed in the explosion. Indian media say this has been the deadliest attack on Indian security forces to be carried out in Kashmir to date. The Pakistan-based Islamist militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) has claimed responsibility for the attack. It was presumably a suicide attack carried out by a 20-year-old insurgent from the region. The Indian government accused Pakistan of letting militant groups operate from its soil and called on it to take action. The US condemned the attack and called on the Pakistani government to end all support for terrorist organisations immediately. Pakistan also condemned the incident and, in a government statement, rejected suggestions it was linked to the attack without further investigation by India. In response to the attack, there have been reports of frequent attacks on Kashmiri students in various educational institutions in northern India. More than 100 students have therefore returned to Kashmir.

Iraq

Security situation

On 11 February 2019, Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary for the new United Nations Counter-Terrorism Office, warned that the influence of ISIS remains despite having suffered losses of income and control. ISIS still has control over about 14,000 to 18,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria. The group continues to undermine any attempts at stabilisation.

On 15 February 2019, a soldier was killed in an attack carried out by armed gunmen in northern Baghdad.

On 15 February 2019, Iraqi security forces foiled a kidnapping ring in Kerbala. The group is reported to have carried out ransom kidnappings in the Baghdad area.

On 17 February 2019, security forces detonated a car bomb in Mosul. According to media reports, the unit defused about 66 detonators used by suicide bombers in the greater Mosul area.

Villagers flee from airstrikes in the Kurdistan region of Iraq

According to media reports, residents of twelve villages in Dohuk province fled in the wake of Turkish airstrikes. Turkey carries out airstrikes on PKK targets in Kurdistan Autonomous Region (cf. Briefing Notes of 28 January 2019).

Iran

Suicide attack on bus carrying members of the Revolutionary Guard

On 13 February 2019, at least 27 troops were killed in a terrorist attack carried out on a bus carrying members of the Revolutionary Guard (Pasdaran) in the south-eastern Iranian province of Sistan and Balochistan. The province is located on the border to Pakistan and Afghanistan where pro-Sunni groups are fighting against the Shiite regime in Iran. The members of the Revolutionary Guard were on their way back from a border crossing when a car filled with explosives blew up beside the bus. A statement issued by the Revolutionary Guard states that the terrorists are separatists and spies of foreign secret services. On the evening of 13 February 2019, the armed group Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice) claimed responsibility for the attack on social media. Jaish al-Adl describes itself as a pro-Sunni group fighting for the rights of the Baluch living in Iran. Iran classifies the group as terrorists and accuses Pakistan of providing protection.

Yemen

Yemeni humanitarian worker freed

Awfa Al Naami, the country manager for Saferworld, a UK-based organisation, who was summoned for questioning at the Houthi national security office in Sanaa on 28 January 2019 and had not been heard from since, was freed on 16 February 2019. The Houthi rebels have been repeatedly accused of persecuting human rights activists, journalists and humanitarian workers.

Houthi rebels attack Saudi-Arabia

Since 15 February 2019, the Houthi rebels have repeatedly attacked Saudi Arabian troops in the southern provinces of Najran, Jazan and Asir in Saudi Arabia. Several Saudi Arabian soldiers were reportedly killed.

Clashes in Dhale

Houthi rebels and tribal groups clashed in the Al-Husha district (Dhale Governorate) on 9 February 2019 when the Houthi rebels destroyed the house of a local leader. He was accused of supporting the Saudi coalition. This was the first incident since the outbreak of war in which Houthi rebels invaded the al-Husha district. On 11 February 2019, clashes also erupted between the Houthi rebels and government troops supported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Dhale Governorate.

Attacks by Al-Qaeda

According to reports, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claims to have attacked the Houthi rebels in Dhi Na'im district, al-Bayda Governorate, on 12 February 2019.

AQAP also reported that on 13 February 2019 it attacked government troops from the Security Belt Forces, supported by the UAE, in the al-Mahfad region, Abyan Governorate.

Cameroon

Main opposition leader accused of rebellion

In the late evening of 12 February 2019, Maurice Kamto, president of the opposition party Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon (MRC), was accused of rebellion and seven other crimes by the prosecutor's office of Yaoundé military court. According to Emmanuel Simh, Vice-President of the MRC, the same accusations were subsequently made against more than 150 supporters of his party. They were arrested at the end of January 2019 when they protested against the official result of the presidential election held in October 2018.

Kazakhstan

Activist fined for operating an unregistered organisation

On 13 February 2019, a court in Almaty sentenced the leader of the group Atazhurt Eriktileri (Volunteers of the Fatherland), which is working for the interests of ethnic Kazakhs in China, to a fine of 252,000 Tenge

(EUR 590) for illegally leading an unregistered organisation. In recent months, Serikzhan Bilash and his group had pointed out that ethnic Kazakhs, among others, were being held in so-called re-education camps in the Chinese border region of Xinjiang. He said that he would appeal against the verdict and that his organisation would continue to defend the rights of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang. According to Bilash, the group has been active since spring 2017 and has already tried twice in vain to register with the Ministry of Justice.

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyz opposition politicians released on parole

On 12 February 2019, two Kyrgyz opposition politicians who were jailed on charges of attempted power seizure were released on parole after their lawyers' motion to grant them early release was accepted by Kyrgyzstan's Supreme Court. Kubanychbek Kadyrov and Bektur Asanov were arrested in March 2016 along with Ernest Karybekov, another opposition politician, after an audio recording that featured voices similar to theirs discussing ways to overthrow the government circulated on the Internet. In April 2017, they were found guilty of planning to seize power by force. Karybekov was sentenced to 20 years in prison, while Kadyrov and Asanov received sentences of 12 years. In June 2018, the Supreme Court shortened the prison terms of Kadyrov and Asanov to eight years, and Karybekov's prison term was cut by six years. He remains in prison.

The three have insisted that their convictions are politically motivated.

Lebanon

Refugee tents bulldozed near the River Litani

Lebanese authorities have destroyed about 30 refugee tents in the Zahrani area. They say the demolition was based on a court order. According to media reports, about 40 Syrian refugee families were left without shelter. Not all of them were resettled in other refugee camps.

Libya

Clashes in the south

After the Libyan National Army (LNA) forces led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar brought the Sharara oil field under control, a spokesperson announced on 14 February 2019 that plans to continue to advance militarily south and take control of Sabha are continuing. The "Defence Brigades of Tripoli", the union of the four largest militias in Tripoli, then accused Haftar of seeking a military dictatorship. Haftar was a war criminal who did not want a democratic process in Libya.

Construction work at Tripoli International Airport

According to a report issued by the Ministry of Transport on 13 February 2019, construction work has resumed at Tripoli International Airport, which had been unusable for years. Work had been suspended in September after fighting erupted in the south of Tripoli. The International Airport is located south of the city and was fought over several times during the battles. The road to the airport is an important route in the region, where there are also several camps for IDPs.

Situation in Derna

A great deal of uncertainty remains about the situation in Derna, where fighting between units of the LNA and the local DPF (Derna Protection Forces) broke out once again several weeks ago. Videos of LNA soldiers partially exhuming and setting fire to corpses of DPF fighters surfaced on social media. The LNA's repeated reports that Derna had been "taken" or "pacified" have not been confirmed.

Human Rights Solidarity Report on Libya 2018

Human Rights Solidarity (HRS) issued its annual report on Libya on 13 February 2019 providing verified numbers of casualties in the armed conflict, namely 3,719 casualties, 1,567 of whom were killed. It says fighters made up 79 percent of the total number of casualties, with Derna which is greatly over-represented, topping the report with the most casualties - that is 30 percent of the total number of casualties in Libya. The number of victims only concerns verified numbers. It can be assumed that the number of unreported cases is significantly higher, especially in remote regions.

Morocco

Suspected terror cell uncovered

Moroccan security authorities have arrested five men between the ages of 21 and 36 in the city of Safi. They are said to have founded a terror cell and sworn allegiance to ISIS. One of the detainees is said to have already been convicted of terrorism and been detained. Electronic devices, knives and documents with extremist contents were confiscated.

Moldova

Important parliamentary elections

Parliamentary elections will be held on 24 February 2019, which many observers consider to be a crucial election that will determine the country's fundamental geopolitical orientation. The current ruling alliance of nominally pro-European Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) is considered unlikely to succeed. The same applies to the extra-parliamentary pro-European opposition alliance Acum (Now). By contrast, the pro-Russian Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) could reach a 35 percent majority.

The republic has been in crisis since 2014. A corruption scandal and an unstable party system have shaken the country's previously successful democratisation and European integration process. A corruption scandal in the pro-European camp led to a division of the pro-European parties and strengthened the anti-Western camp. Since then, the country has experienced a regression in democratic development, with illiberal and authoritarian tendencies.

Nigeria

Presidential and parliamentary elections postponed by one week

At 2 am on 16 February 2019, the Nigerian Electoral Commission INEC decided to postpone the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for the same day by one week. The elections of the governors and parliaments of the federal states scheduled for 2 March 2019 have also been postponed by one week to 9 March 2019. The delay is being blamed on logistics issues. The INEC cited problems with the distribution of ballot papers and results sheets owing to bad weather in parts of the country as well as sabotage, after three INEC offices were burnt down in the states of Abia, Anambra and Plateau in the last few weeks. A large number of electoral materials were reportedly destroyed. The main competitors in the upcoming presidential election are the former incumbent 76-year-old Muhammadu Buhari of the ruling party All Progressives Congress (APC) and the 72-year-old former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar of the largest opposition party People's Democratic Party (PDP). Both are Muslims and belong to the Fulani ethnic group.

Many killed in fighting between Fulani and Adara in Kaduna

According to official sources from 15 February 2019, 66 bodies were discovered in eight villages of the Kajuru Local Government Area of the Kaduna state. According to Maisamari Dio, leader of the predominant Christian Adara ethnic group in the Kujuru region, Muslim Fulani attacked an Adara village and killed several people on 10 February 2019. The Adara had then made retaliatory attacks on Fulani.

Attack on Borno Governor's car convoy by ISWA fighters

On 12 February 2019, fighters of the ISWA group (Islamic State in West Africa), a branch of the terrorist organisation Boko Haram, attacked the car convoy of the Governor of Borno, Kashim Shettima. He was

travelling from Maiduguri on Dikwa-Ngala Street to an election campaign in Gamboru-Ngala (headquarters of the Ngala Local Government Area). According to Shettima's spokesperson, three people were killed in the convoy during the attack. Some press reports say up to ten persons were killed and several were kidnapped. According to ISWA, who claimed responsibility for the attack on 13 February 2019, 42 persons were killed.

North Macedonia

Name change takes effect

With effect from 12 February 2019, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) is now officially called the "Republic of North Macedonia". The citizenship of the renamed citizens and the official language remain Macedonian. Official travel documents now state: "Macedonians / citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia". The country code will change to NMK. New passports will not be issued until the end of the year at the earliest. The new name is part of the implementation of the so-called Prespa Agreement concluded with Greece in June 2018.

The agreement puts an end to decades of Greece blocking rapprochement with the EU. The country is expected to start negotiations with the EU as soon as possible. The accession protocol allowing the country to join NATO was signed in Brussels on 6 February 2019. North Macedonia is expected to become a full NATO member with all the rights and duties this entails next year.

Russian Federation

Anti-corruption activist beaten to death

Russian anti-corruption activist Dmitry Gribov was beaten up by masked men in the village of Vingradovo on 11 February 2019. He later died in hospital. Gribov had been head of a local group of the Centre for Action Against Corruption in the Moscow administrative district. According to a leading member of the NGO, Gribov was attacked for his activities in the fight against corruption. The investigative committee has launched an inquiry into his death. The activist was attacked four years ago by unknown assailants who set fire to his car.

Activists and journalists who try to uncover corruption within the Russian authorities are at major risk of attacks.

Human rights organisation blacklisted as "foreign agent"

On 13 February 2019, the Russian Ministry of Justice announced that it had classified the movement "For Human Rights" as a foreign agent. According to the movement's chairman, Lev Ponomarev, this classification is due to his criticism of Russia's domestic intelligence service. According to a law adopted in 2012, organisations that are partially or fully funded from abroad must register as "foreign agents". According to media reports, 69 NGOs have been listed as foreign agents in Russia since 2012.

Saudi-Arabia

Saudi women monitored via smartphone app

Saudi women are only allowed to travel if they are accompanied by a so-called male "protector". To make it easier for the men to monitor them, the Saudi government is offering a smartphone app distributed by Google and Apple that allows them to track the movements of their relatives. The "Abshere" programme is integrated into the state border control system and informs the user when "protected persons" try to leave the country, for example. Time and again Saudi Arabian women try to leave the country against the will of their families. Most recently in January 2019, 18-year-old Raaf Muhammad al-Qunun managed to escape during a family outing. She was granted asylum in Canada.

Serbia

Protests have been going on for weeks - new elections?

Since December 2018, tens of thousands of people have been taking to the streets every Saturday throughout the country. This was again the case on 16 February 2019 when anti-government protests took place (cf. Briefing Notes of 28 January 2019). Meanwhile, President Aleksandar Vučić has responded to the ongoing protests and declared his willingness to meet with citizens for discussions. He is also said to want to bring forward the elections, which are actually not scheduled until 2020. It is not yet clear whether they will actually take place. According to polls, Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) are expected to win the election once again.

Opposition boycotts Parliament

On 11 February 2019, the opposition alliance Alliance for Serbia (SZS) declared a boycott of parliament, which is to continue until conditions for free and fair elections have been met. The SZS has parties of different orientations. The party alliance accuses Vučić of having brought most of the media under his control. Their demands coincide with those of the civic movement that has been demonstrating every Saturday for ten weeks.

Somalia

Attacks

On 12 February 2019, a policeman was killed in a targeted IED attack in the Hodan district of Mogadishu and a Somali soldier was killed in the Dharkenley district of the city. On 13 February 2019, the chauffeur of an MP of South West State was killed in an attack in the Hodan district of Mogadishu.

Hostilities

Eleven and four extremists were killed respectively in two airstrikes carried out by the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) near the city of Janaale (Lower Shabelle region) on 11 February 2019, according to U.S. sources. No civilians are said to have been harmed, despite Al-Shabaab claims to the contrary.

Somali military units and Jubaland state security forces attacked Al-Shabaab bases near the town of Jamame (Lower Juba region) on 12 February 2019.

(Gedo region) during which at least 13 Al-Shabaab militants were reportedly killed.

The extremists claim three US troops were killed in an Al-Shabaab attack on the Baledogle Airbase near Wanlaweyne (Lower Shabelle region). AFRICOM refuted this. Puntland security forces arrested several people who seeking to join the IS as part of an operation against ISIS northeast of the city of Boosaaso on 11 February 2019.

Tajikistan

Arrest warrant issued for journalist in absentia

In mid-February, the Tajik authorities issued an arrest warrant for the independent journalist Khairullo Mirsaidov in absentia. Mirsaidov is in Georgia to undergo medical treatment and had already been sentenced to eight months' imprisonment in absentia in January 2019. He is alleged to have violated parole and left the country illegally. The journalist who had been arrested for embezzlement, false testimony and incitement to hatred on religious and ethnic grounds was released from prison in August 2018. A Tajik court had converted the 12-year prison sentence into a fine and community service. Mirsaidov himself rejected the accusations as politically motivated. (cf. Briefing Notes of 16 July 2018; 27 August 2018 and 21 January 2019).

Thailand

Broadcasting licence suspended

According to media reports on 13 February 2019, the state media supervisory authority NBTC suspended the broadcasting licence of Voice 21 for two weeks because “provocative content” had repeatedly been broadcast. Voice 21 has close links to Thaksin Shinawatra, the former prime minister. The Shinawatra camp wanted to run in the planned elections with Princess Ubolratana, the King’s elder sister, as the top candidate for the Thai Raksa Chart Party. King Maha Vajiralongkorn opposed her candidacy, the Election Commission declared her candidacy inadmissible on 11 February 2019 and appealed to the Constitutional Court.

Tunisia

Sentenced for homosexuality

A court has sentenced a 26-year-old to eight months in prison under Article 230 of Tunisia’s penal code. In early January, he reported two young men who had robbed and raped him after he had arranged to have sex with one of the men. The two perpetrators were each sentenced to six months in prison for homosexuality, 15 days for physical assault and one and a half months for theft.

Turkey

Hundreds of Kurds detained

The Turkish state news agency, Anadolu, reported that on 15 February 2019, Turkish police detained 735 people accused of having links to or supporting Kurdish militants in 156 operations carried out on Friday. The police raids took place on the 20th anniversary of the capture of Abdullah Öcalan, a founding member and leader of the PKK. Those detained were accused of planning mass protests to mark the anniversary of Öcalan’s capture or of planning to “create chaos” before the local elections due to be held on 31 March. The agency reported that 226 people had been released the same day and 61 had been formally arrested, adding that legal procedures against 448 detained suspects were ongoing. It said that during the raids, police had found guns, rifles, ammunition and explosive material, including improvised explosive devices.

Adil Demirci released

On 14 February 2019, the German-Turkish national Adil Demirci, who faces charges in Turkey of belonging to a leftist terrorist group, was conditionally released from an Istanbul jail after spending some ten months behind bars. Under the conditions of his release, he is, however, required to stay in the Istanbul area. The social worker and journalist, who lives in Cologne, was arrested during a family vacation. Together with 22 other people, he is accused of being a member of a terrorist organisation. The accused are alleged to have attended funerals of members of the banned far-left MLKP (Marxist-Leninist Communist Party) and of the Kurdish YPG militia in 2013, 2014 and 2015 and are therefore suspected of being members of the MLKP. After his arrest, Demirci admitted attending the funerals of Kurdish fighters, but rejected the charge of belonging to a terrorist organisation. A further hearing has been scheduled for 30 April 2019 in Istanbul.

Hunt for Gülen supporters continues

The Turkish judiciary is continuing its crackdown on suspected Gülen supporters. Prosecutors issued more than 1,100 arrest warrants on 12 February 2019. The suspects are alleged to have systematically cheated during police examinations. According to media reports, the police carried out raids in 76 provinces and arrested over 600 people. The arrests were mostly focused on the capital, Ankara. Those targeted are alleged to have cheated in exams in 2010 for police officers seeking promotion to the rank of deputy inspector. The Gülen movement is alleged to have procured exam questions for police officers seeking promotion on a large scale in advance in order to help its supporters gain positions in the civil service and thus infiltrate the Turkish state.

Venezuela

Volunteers sign up to distribute aid

The president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, has repeatedly announced that the distribution of relief supplies will begin on 23 February 2019. So far, international aid deliveries (mainly from USAID) have not been let through at the border. A truck drivers' union announced that it would participate in the distribution. It is not possible to predict at present how the soldiers at the border will react, should there be an attempt to bring relief supplies into the country on 23 February 2019.

His opponent Maduro has announced that he will have the deliveries stopped militarily, if necessary. Maduro's supporters suspect that the deliveries are an attempt to pave the way for US intervention in Venezuela, saying that the deliveries are intended to test the military's loyalty.

Venezuela Aid Live

The British billionaire Richard Branson is organising a big charity concert for the people of Venezuela, which is to take place on 22 February 2019. Different sources have already indicated that Carlos Vives, Juanes, Luis Fonsi, Lele Pons, Maluma, Fonseca, Rudy Mancuso, Alesso and various other international and regional Stars will perform. The concert is to take place in Cúcuta on the border between Colombia and Venezuela. Its local popularity, the social media presence and the obvious reference to the Live Aid concert of 1985, which the film "Bohemian Rhapsody" has just brought back into the public consciousness, considerably increases the pressure on Maduro on a cultural level.

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