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Briefing Notes

Group 62 - Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

20 July 2020

Afghanistan

COVID-19 pandemic

With the exception of the continued increase in cases, there are no changes compared to last week. Restrictions to fight the pandemic are still in place. In its recent report the World Bank predicts that the poverty rate will rise to over 72% in 2020, due to lower incomes during the Corona crisis and rising food prices. The prospects for the Afghan economy are bleak, the report says. President Ghani assumes that an estimated 90% of the population is living below the poverty rate of \$ 2 a day.

Attacks, hostilities, civilian casualties

Reports of hostilities and attacks that also affected civilians continue to come in from many provinces. According to the New York Times at least 137 members of the security forces and 51 civilians have been killed in July 2020. The following events may be mentioned as examples:

At least 20 civilians were injured or killed in a firefight between Afghan and Pakistani soldiers on 15/16 July 2020 in the eastern province of Kunar (Sarkano district). According to the Afghan report, Pakistani armed forces tried to set up a checkpoint on Afghan territory. Pakistani forces are also said to have set up checkpoints on Afghan territory across from the Pakistan border in the province of Nangarhar.

During President Ghani's visit to Ghazni City (south-east) several rockets were launched at the city, injuring four civilians. A representative of Ghazni Provincial Council said six of the province's nine districts were under siege.

On 19 July 2020 two district police chiefs were killed and several police officers were injured in attacks in Zabul and Paktika provinces.

Attacks on places of worship and clerics

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has documented 17 attacks on religious institutions in the past nine months, in which 170 people were killed and 272 injured. The AIHRC said that special mention should be made of the attacks on two mosques in Kabul, Sikh temples in Kabul and Jalalabad, as well as on clerics in Takhar, Parwan, Laghman, Paktia and Helmand. The Taliban is said to have tortured and killed an imam in Kohna Masjid village (Dahana-e-Ghori District, Baghlan province) for holding a funeral ceremony for a local police commander.

US troop withdrawal

As agreed in the Taliban peace accord the United States has started withdrawing troops by recalling soldiers from Helmand, Uruzgan, Paktika and Laghman provinces. At the same time, the US government is insisting on the fulfilment of further agreements, such as completing the release of prisoners, reducing violence and starting intra-Afghan talks. The prisoner exchange is sluggish. According to the Afghan government, 4,400 of the promised 5,000 Taliban prisoners have been released. The government has refused to release the remaining 600 prisoners because

they are detained for serious crimes and demanded that the Taliban should submit a new list. The Taliban have now released 600 out of 1,000 Afghan security forces.

Algeria

COVID-19 pandemic: curfews extended

On 16 July 2020 the government extended the curfews imposed on 10 July 2020 by ten days because the number of new infections is said to have reached a new peak. The capital Algiers and Blida are the hotspots. While restrictions last the night-time curfews apply between 8 p.m. and 5 a.m. Travel to and from the 29 affected provinces, including Algiers, is restricted.

Armenia/Azerbaijan

Fighting on the border

On 12 July 2020 a military incident occurred on the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Armenian region of Tavush. It is said that there were deaths and injuries on both sides. Both countries held each other responsible for the incident. Azerbaijani information claims that two people were killed and five injured in an attack by the Armenian military on Azerbaijani army bases. A counter-attack had also resulted in losses on the Armenian side. Armenia, on the other hand, accused Azerbaijan of an artillery attack aimed at taking Armenian positions. The Azerbaijani troops were pushed back and there were no victims on the Armenian side, Armenia informed. The fighting between the two hostile states has continued since then. By 17 July 2020 at least 17 deaths had been reported, including several officers, one of them an Azerbaijani general.

The fighting had a much stronger echo in Azerbaijan than in Armenia in recent days. On 14 July 2020 thousands demonstrated for going to war against Armenia in Baku and tried to storm the parliament. Dozens of opposition members and journalists were arrested.

The background to the conflict is a dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which is mainly inhabited by Armenians, but is also claimed by Azerbaijan, however, the current dispute occurred far from this area. More extensive armed conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan date back to the late 80s and early 90s. Since 1992 negotiations about a permanent ceasefire are ongoing.

Belarus

Over 250 arrests ahead of presidential election

On 14 July 2020 the Central Election Commission declared the candidacies of incumbent Alexander Lukashenko and four other candidates for the presidential election on 09 August 2020 to be admissible, but refused to register several opposition candidates. The most promising opposition politicians, Valeri Zepkalo and Viktor Babaryko, were not admitted. On the same evening the police arrested more than 250 people protesting against this decision in Minsk and other cities. In addition, at least 17 journalists reporting on last week's protests were arrested.

Central African Republic

COVID-19 Pandemic

So far, 4,373 infections have been reported among the country's approximately 4.7 million inhabitants and 53 people have died. The Ministry of Health expects the number of infections to increase sharply over the next few weeks. The health care system is in poor shape and the pandemic is likely to worsen it; basic health care is not guaranteed for the poorest sections of the population. According to the United Nations (UN) 2.6 million people are dependent on humanitarian aid. The economy is in recession because of the pandemic, food prices have risen sharply, poverty has increased. International air traffic has been stopped, the national borders were closed. Inland travel is not possible.

The spread of COVID-19 among the soldiers of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) complicates the peacekeeping mission in the country. At least 198 of the approximately 10,000 blue helmet soldiers are infected with COVID-19; one soldier has died. Rotations of contingents of the MINUSCA had to be stopped. Incoming UN soldiers and staff must be quarantined for 21 days. Since the beginning of the pandemic armed groups that already control large parts of the country have been expanding their spheres of influence. On 13 July 2020 a UN soldier was killed in an attack on a convoy in Nana-Mambéré prefecture in the north-west of the country. The attack was presumably carried out by the rebel group Retour, Réclamation, Réconciliation (3R). Presidential elections are planned for December 2020.

Egypt

Suspected COVID-19 outbreak in Egyptian prisons

Human rights organisations inform that corona outbreaks occurred in numerous Egyptian prisons and police stations, with at least 14 prisoners from ten facilities having died of a COVID-19 infection (as of 15 July 2020). Other inmates are said to have been infected. According to international organisations, conditions of detention and medical care in Egyptian prisons are poor and the facilities are overcrowded.

Draft amendment for the Criminal Code: Protection of the identity of victims of sexual violence

The government's proposed amendment to the Criminal Code is designed to protect the identity of victims of sexual crimes. The government wants to encourage more women to report sexual violence.

On 04 July 2020 a student was arrested and charged by the prosecutor for indecent acts, rape and extortion. Thereafter a large number of women shared their experiences of sexual abuse on social media.

According to a 2013 UN study 99% of Egyptian women are affected by verbal or physical sexual harassment. Sexual harassment was for the first time defined as a crime in June 2014, it can be punished by a fine and/or imprisonment between six months and five years. Non-governmental organisations criticize that it remains difficult to convict the perpetrators for sexual harassment, since victims of sexual violence often fail to contact the security authorities for fear of social stigma or the risk of being punished themselves.

Numerous women are on trial in Egypt on charges of inciting debauchery and prostitution on the social media. At the end of June 2020 the well-known dancer Sama el-Masry was sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of EGP 300,000 (EUR 1,660) by a Cairo court for inciting excess and immorality in the form of her contributions on social media. El-Masry denied the allegations maintaining that the content had been stolen from her mobile phone and released without her consent.

Ethiopia/Eritrea

Prime Minister Ahmed concludes visit to Eritrea

The Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed visited Eritrea for talks on 18 and 19 July 2020. It was Ahmed's first visit abroad since the state of emergency had been imposed in Ethiopia because of the corona virus in early April 2020. According to the Eritrean information ministry, Ahmed and Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki held talks about the bilateral relations and regional developments. It was also said that an agreement was reached to strengthen the existing diverse cooperation between the two countries. However, no details have been released. Despite the peace treaty of September 2019 and several rounds of talks, the last time in May 2020 in Ethiopia, many issues remain unresolved. Such as the course of the border, a permanent trade agreement or an agreement on entry and exit conditions.

India

COVID-19 pandemic

On 17 July 2020 the confirmed number of COVID-19 infections exceeded one million. According to the Red Cross the virus' spreading in South Asia is alarming. While mainly the Indian metropolises had been affected so far, the pandemic has meanwhile also spread widely in smaller towns and rural areas. The surge in recent weeks has

prompted some local governments to order restrictions. Thus the eastern state of Bihar has imposed a two-week curfew. In the western state of Goa a night-time curfew has been ordered until 10 August 2020. Local restrictions also apply in the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu as well as in the north-eastern state of Assam.

Police violence against Dalits

An outcry was caused across the country by a video released on social media on 14 July 2020 showing several police officers mistreating two farm workers of the lowest caste (Dalits) in the central state of Madhya Pradesh in front of their children. The victims were to leave the land they had farmed because of construction works. After the public reaction, six of the police officers were suspended.

Population growth and the resulting increase in demand for land and the expansion of infrastructure especially affect the members of the lowest castes. These are often expelled because of construction projects.

Iran

Persecution of the Baha'i intensified

According to a report by the Baha'i Spiritual Council in Germany of 9 June 2020, the Iranian authorities are said to have intensified the persecution of members of the Baha'i community. A high number of arrests and prison terms, coupled with a media hate campaign created an alarming atmosphere, the report says. A total of 71 Baha'i were given prison terms. The authorities intend to mentally wear down the members of the community. The report says that they are first arrested, then released on bail against payment of large sums. It takes months, even years, until a court hearing is held which is later followed by an appeal hearing and finally conviction and imprisonment.

Death sentences overturned after national and international protests

The death sentences handed down for three participants in the protests against the gasoline price hikes in November 2019, initially confirmed by the highest court, have been annulled following national and international protests. According to the reports, the protests began on 16 July 2020 in the city of Behbahan in the province of Khuzestan and are said to have reached Shiraz, Isfahan, Rasht, Mashhad, Tabriz and Urmia by noon on 17 July 2020. The protests are still ongoing. In the meantime, more than eleven million tweets have been published under the relevant hashtag. The increase in gasoline prices had led to several days of rioting during which security forces used violence against the protesters. In a joint statement issued on 19 July 2020 the lawyers of the convicts announced that the judgement had been set aside. The case would be tried again in the Iranian Supreme Court, they said.

Second wave of COVID-19 infections

Iran is severely affected by a second wave of COVID-19 infections. Currently no tourist or pilgrim visas are issued due to the Corona pandemic; other types of visas are not affected by this restriction.

Iraq

Green Zone missile attack

On 19 July 2020 three rockets landed in the Green Zone in Baghdad; no more detailed information on their type and size is available, no victims were reported. No group claimed responsibility for the attack, but the general view is that it is related to the tensions between the government and Iran-supported militias. It is the second attack since the security forces launched extensive operations against the Kata'ib Hezbollah on 26 June 2020 and it took place during a visit by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

ISIS attack on Brigadier General

On 17 July 2020 Brigadier General and Commander of the 59th Iraqi Army Brigade Ali Hameed Ghayda died in an attack north of Baghdad. IS took responsibility and described the attack as retaliation for various Iraqi army operations against IS positions in recent months which are code-named "Heroes of Iraq". The fourth phase of the operation, with a focus on Diyala, had been announced just before the attack.

Troop movements in Salah-ad-Din and Diyala

As part of the fourth phase of Operation "Heroes of Iraq", several Iraqi army brigades were deployed to regions whose legitimate control is contested between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Autonomous Region (KRG). The KRG issued statements that these movements had not been agreed, while the army leadership publicly emphasized that any form of troop movement in controversial areas was coordinated with the Kurdish authorities.

Kosovo / Serbia

Talks resumed

Serbia and Kosovo have resumed their dialogue on the normalisation of their relationship. On 16 July 2020 President Aleksandar Vucic represented Serbia and Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti represented Kosovo in an EU-mediated meeting in Brussels. It was the first meeting of top politicians from both countries in over 20 months. This was preceded by a video conference on 12 July 2020, in which, in addition to Vucic and Hoti, the EU's External Representative Josep Borrell and the EU's Special Representative for the Balkans, Miroslav Lajcak, also took part. Observers do not expect these talks to yield any quick results. Since the former Serbian province declared its independence in 2008 Serbia has refused to recognize Kosovo, which is now almost exclusively inhabited by Albanians. An EU-mediated dialogue between the two countries began in 2011, but has been interrupted since November 2018. One of the aims of resuming the talks is a further rapprochement with the EU. Serbia has been a candidate for EU membership since 2012, Kosovo is trying to achieve this status.

Lebanon

Protests continue

The nationwide protests against the government are continuing. On 17 July 2020 several hundred people rallied on the Martyrs' Square in Beirut, demanding a radical change of the system including a transitional government with extraordinary powers.

Economic situation

Dollars were again available for purchase on the black market at a ratio of around 1: 6,000 Lebanese pounds (official exchange rate: 1: 1,500, exchange rate for private customers: around 1: 3,800). Some observers and politicians interpreted this as a result of emergency measures, while other observers pointed out that Lebanon, with around five million inhabitants, is a very small economy where even relatively small amounts of newly available cash can significantly impact market prices. The return of exiled Lebanese, especially from the dollar area, could be responsible for the temporary price stabilization.

Libya

GNA prepares for the battle for Sirte

According to media reports the troops of the Government of National Unity (GNA) have moved further east near the city of Sirte, preparing for a battle with the Libyan Arab Army (formerly the Libyan National Army) (LNA) for the city and the surrounding oil fields. Sirte is the home-town of Libya's ex-leader Muammar Gaddafi and was conquered by General Haftar's troops in January 2020.

Montenegro

Release of a cleric of the Serbian Orthodox Church

According to recent media reports bishop Joanikije of Budva and Niksic and another seven clerics of the Serbian Orthodox Church have been released. They had been taken into custody for violating the protective measures against the COVID-19 pandemic. The charges read that the spiritual dignitaries had held a service for an Orthodox

saint in Ostrog Monastery near Niksic which was attended by a large number of faithful, despite the ban on the meeting. Protests against their arrest had been held in several cities.

Call for unification of Albanian parties ahead of the parliamentary elections

According to current media reports, the call for a union of the Albanian parties aiming for a common list of candidates for the next parliamentary elections on 30 August 2020, is getting louder. However, such an alliance, which according to analysts would best protect the interests of the approximately five percent Albanian minority of Montenegro, would be obstructed by the political rivalries between the small Albanian parties, the reports say. The Albanian representative body, the so-called Albanian National Council, created in 2008 and publicly funded, called on the Albanian political parties to unite in the run-up to the elections to prevent the loss of important Albanian votes for securing their parliamentary minority representation.

Nigeria

Katsina: Casualties in ambush of soldiers

According to press releases soldiers were ambushed by bandits in a vast wooded area near Shimfida (Jibia Local Government Area, north-western Katsina) on 18 July 2020. The soldiers were on their way to the bandit's Dangote camp on foot as part of Operation Sahel Sanity. According to the various press releases between 16 and 23 soldiers were killed in the attack. According to official military information 17 bandits and three soldiers were killed. More than 300 people have been killed by bandits in Katsina in 2020.

North Macedonia

Outcome of parliamentary elections

The parliamentary elections that had been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, took place in North Macedonia on 15 July 2020. According to current media reports of 16 July 2020 the vote was extremely tight. After counting almost 94% of the votes, the election commission had announced a preliminary result saying that the turnout was just under 51% and approximately 36.8% of the votes were for the alliance "We can" of the Social Democratic League of Macedonia (SDSM) and approximately 36% for the centre-right Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). Both parties had briefly ruled jointly in a transitional technical government after the Zaev government resigned in January 2020. The Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) came in third place with just under 11% of the vote. The reports state that the preliminary figures announced by the election commission indicate that neither of the two major parties will reach the required threshold of 61 seats to form a government by itself and would therefore be dependent on a coalition partner. The report went on to say that shortly after the election, the head of the Social Democrats and former Prime Minister Zoran Zaev announced his party's victory and promised rapid reforms in order to give new impetus to the accession negotiations with the European Union and to stimulate the weakened economy.

Pakistan

Religious intolerance, blasphemy

Opponents of blasphemy legislation have mobilized as a result of the current report on religious freedom in Pakistan issued by the US State Department. The small National Christian Party (NCP) called for the legislation to be revised at a protest in front of the Karachi Press Club.

Recently due to religious intolerance a complaint for blasphemy had been lodged by a member of the governing Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party against the opposition leader and former Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif of the Muslim League (PML-N) after he had called all religions equal.

Critics of the Pakistani blasphemy law have often been victims of hostility. In May 2020 the brother-in-law of the Pakistani Christian Asia Bibi was murdered. Bibi was the first woman to be sentenced to death under the blasphemy law, the Supreme Court overturned the 2018 ruling and she was allowed to leave the country.

Russian Federation

Supporters of detained journalist arrested

On 13 July 2020 police arrested about 20 supporters of the prominent journalist and adviser to the chairman of the State Space Agency Roskosmos, Ivan Safronov, in front of the Moscow detention centre where Safronov is held in custody. Safronov had been arrested on 07 July 2020 on charges of passing on secret information about Russian arms sales in the Middle East to the Czech government. Human rights organisations are working to get him released.

More than 140 arrests in protests against constitutional reform

On 15 July 2020 hundreds of people demonstrated against the constitutional reform that came into force on 04 July 2020 in Moscow and other cities. Participants called for President Putin's resignation. The police arrested more than 140 people. The reform allows Putin to extend his tenure, expands his powers and provides for supremacy of Russian law over international law; however, it also contains guarantees by the welfare state. According to the Central Election Commission the recent referendum resulted in a majority vote for the reform. However, election observers reported violations of the freedom of choice and other irregularities in the conduct of the election.

Somalia

Al-Shabaab claims attack on soldiers

In the Bula Gadud region, about 35 kilometres from the coastal city of Kismayo, violent fighting broke out on 14 July 2020 between Jubaland forces and al-Shabaab fighters. The trigger was a bomb attack on a military convoy. According to al-Shabaab ten soldiers were killed in the subsequent fighting. The security forces, on the other hand, claim that they fended off the attack and inflicted heavy losses on the militants. No independent reports on the incident are available yet.

Mogadishu: Army chief survives suicide attack

General Odowaa Yusuf Rageh, Supreme Commander of the Somali Armed Forces, remained unharmed in an assassination attempt in the Hodan district in Mogadishu. A civilian died when a suicide bomber attempted to steer a bomb-laden car into the general's convoy. Al-Shabaab acknowledged the attack on 13 July 2020.

Sudan

Judicial reform

Minister of Justice Nasredeen Abdulbari announced far-reaching reforms on 11 July 2020. Public flogging, the ban on alcohol for non-Muslims, the apostasy law, which punishes apostasy from Islam with death and the death penalty for homosexual acts will be abolished. Judicial reform is seen as an important step, even if it will take time for the reforms to take effect in a country that has been ruled in an authoritarian way for 30 years.

Syria

Attack in Azaz: Five dead, 85 injured

Turkish state media and local activists unanimously report the explosion of a car bomb on 19 July 2020 in the province of Azaz, which has been under Turkish occupation since 2016. At least five people are said to have been killed and several dozens injured. The attack occurred in the village of al-Salameh (also: Sudji), not far from the Bab al-Salameh border crossing. Some of the seriously injured victims were taken to Turkey for treatment.

No one has yet claimed responsibility for the crime. The pro-opposition Syrian Human Rights Observatory suspects IS and Turkish media point to the history of the attacks by Kurdish rebels in the region.

Attack on Turkish-Russian patrol in Idlib

The Russian Ministry of Defence reported a bomb attack on a military convoy on 14 July 2020, in which three Russian soldiers were injured. Two Turkish vehicles were damaged and the patrol ended its assignment prematurely.

Russian fighter jets are said to have retaliated against targets in rebel-controlled areas which injured five civilians according to reports by local activists.

General election in areas under government control

After being postponed twice because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has now called for the election of the largely powerless parliament on 19 July 2020. It is certain that the Baath MPs, together with their de facto associated parliamentary allies, will once again hold an undisputed majority.

In addition to the ongoing armed conflict in the north and the COVID 19 pandemic, inflation, fuelled by US sanctions and the serious situation in Lebanon, is perceived as a crisis by the people.

Tunisia

Blogger sentenced to six months in prison

On 14 July 2020 blogger Emna Chargui was sentenced by a court in Tunis to a six-month prison sentence and a fine of EUR 610 for a post on social media. The post warned people against the corona virus in the form of a Koran verse and urged them to always wash their hands. As a result, she received death threats on social media. According to the court the blogger had thereby insulted Islam and instigated religious hatred.

Prime Minister resigned

On 15 July 2020 Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh submitted his resignation letter after the Ennahda party had withdrawn its confidence in him in parliament because of corruption allegations, thus Fakhfakh lost the parliamentary majority. A government statement said that Fakhfakh had resigned to serve the national interest and because he wanted to spare Tunisia further difficulties during the on-going state of emergency. The statement said that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the economic crisis in the country and could lead to further social unrest. For weeks there have been repeated demonstrations and clashes with the local security forces in the southern city of Tataouine. The protesters are calling for the creation of new jobs in the oil and gas sector (see BN of 22 June 2020).

Turkey

Deniz Yücel sentenced

On 16 July 2020, the German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel was sentenced to two years, nine months and 22 days in prison by a court in Istanbul in absentia for propaganda for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The journalist had been remanded in custody in Turkey for almost a year before he was released and left for Germany in February 2018. The indictment was mainly based on articles that he had published as the correspondent in Turkey for the German newspaper *Die Welt*. According to media reports the court acquitted him of charges of incitement and propaganda for the Gülen movement. The verdict is not yet legally binding. Yücel said he wanted to appeal. The court also announced that two further investigations had been initiated against Yücel, accusing him of insulting the President and the Turkish state.

Venezuela

New report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

On 15 July 2020 the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) presented her latest report on Venezuela entitled „Independence of the justice system and access to justice in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, including for violations of economic and social rights, and the situation of human rights in the Arco Minero del Orinoco region“. The report deals in detail with the situation of the indigenous population and the continued exploitation of national resources on indigenous territories, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown in large parts of the country. Essentially, the report says that one cannot assume that there is an independent judiciary in Venezuela and that there is no access to legal protection against human rights violations that are extensively committed by the state. In relation to the illegal mining activities trafficking in human beings and child labour have been proven, the youngest known victim was nine years old.

Yemen

UN condemns air strikes in the north

During an air raid by the Saudi-led coalition on residential areas in the northern province of al-Jawf at least 25 people were killed on 15 July 2020. Already on 12 July 2020 ten civilians had been among the victims of an air raid in the Washhah district in the north-western province of Hajjah. A military spokesman said that the attack had been targeted at a meeting of Houthi rebels. An official investigation into the incidents has been promised. The United Nations (UN) condemned the air-strikes and urged the warring parties to use ceasefire options in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The attacks in July 2020 continue to escalate violence, with the number of civilian casualties tripling from May to June 2020. In the first six months of 2020 the number of bombings by the coalition under the leadership of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) increased by almost 140% compared to the last six months of 2019.

Army reports of rebel commander's death

The Yemeni military reports the death of rebel commander Ali Mohamed Ali al-Zarqi, saying that he was killed in an attack on 19 July 2020 in the city of Qa'taba along with a number of Houthi rebels. The rebels have not commented so far.

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