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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

15 June 2020

Afghanistan

COVID-19 pandemic

The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 continues to rise. People have tested positive for coronavirus in all 34 provinces. Kabul has the highest number of cases, followed by Herat, Balkh, Nangarhar and Kandahar.

The provincial governments are implementing the guidelines to contain coronavirus which were issued by the government on 06.06.20 (cf. BN of 08.06.20) according to the prevailing situation in the respective provinces. In the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Ghazni, Badakhshan, Khost, Paktya, Kunduz and Takhar the stringent measures have been eased somewhat. In the eastern provinces of Laghman and Kunar the severe restrictions remain in force. In Nangarhar the rules have been further tightened, following an increase in the number of infections.

The borders with Iran in Nimroz province and in Islam Qala in Herat province are open for commercial traffic and for Afghan nationals. Some 12,300 Afghan returnees from Iran passed through the two border crossing points in the period from 31.05.20 to 06.06.20 - over two and a half times more than in the previous week. Of these 12,300 people, approx. 4,400 returned of their own accord and approx. 7,900 were forced to return. The borders with Pakistan are closed to non-commercial traffic, while for goods traffic they are open daily except on Saturdays. A limited contingent of Afghan returnees can cross these borders once a week. Each Saturday, a maximum of 500 people are allowed to cross the border in Torkham in the province of Nangarhar and 300 people at most are permitted to cross in Spin Boldak in the province of Kandahar.

Attacks, hostilities, civilian casualties

In recent weeks there have been reports of attacks by the Taliban on security forces and military facilities in various provinces, also resulting in civilian casualties. According to information from the Afghan interior ministry, the Taliban have carried out over 200 attacks since the end of the ceasefire on 26.05.20. One of the most serious attacks occurred on 05.06.20 in Zabul province, where the Taliban attacked a military base near Jaldak, killing at least two dozen members of the Afghan security forces. In a further attack on 05.06.20, eleven police officers were killed in Badakhshan province. Two soldiers and a Taliban commander were killed in another attack on a military base in this province on 11.06.20. Further attacks have been carried out by the Taliban in various cities and provinces, including Kabul, Ghor, Takhar, Sar-i-Pul, Uruzgan, Loghar, Balkh, Badghis, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Paktika. In the course of the agreed exchange of prisoners, the Taliban have released Afghan police officers and soldiers which they had held captive in the provinces of Farah, Nimroz and Baghlan.

On 12.06.20 an explosive device which had been placed in the Sher Shah Suri mosque in the west of the capital, Kabul, exploded during Friday prayers. Four people were killed and at least eight injured. The Taliban have condemned the attack, for which no-one has claimed responsibility. Prior to this, an attack was carried out near the Wazir Mohammad Akbar mosque in Kabul (see BN of 08.06.20) on 02.06.20.

Albania

Protests against sexual violence

On 04.06.20 several hundred people demonstrated in the capital, Tirana, against sexual violence and a mindset widespread in society which blames such offences on the victims instead of the perpetrators. The protests were sparked by reports about the alleged abuse of a teenager. According to media reports, graffiti vilifying the victim appeared after the incident became known. Such comments were also posted in social media.

No amendments to electoral law for the time being

A deadline which the government and opposition parties had set themselves for agreeing on amendments to electoral law expired on 31.05.20. These amendments represent an important precondition stipulated by the EU for the opening of accession negotiations. Albania has been an official candidate country for accession to the European Union since 24.06.14. The next elections are planned for June 2021. Amendments to electoral law must take place at least six months before the elections. The government and opposition parties have already indicated that they intend to continue their negotiations on the issue.

Bangladesh

COVID-19 pandemic

The highest death rate resulting from coronavirus was recorded in the country on 14.06.20. High-ranking government officials are said to be among the dead. According to media reports, the number of daily new infections has been falling for around 14 days now.

Bolivia

Study investigating presidential election: No electoral fraud

Almost eight months after president Evo Morales was toppled (cf. BN of 11.11.19), US daily newspaper The New York Times cites a report by an independent commission of inquiry which refutes claims of electoral fraud by the country's first indigenous president. In its report, the US non-governmental organisation Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) asserts that the original report by the Organization of American States (OAS), which was intended to present proof of electoral fraud in the presidential elections, was based "on false information and unsuitable collection methods for statistical data" and that the OAS has failed to present any compelling evidence of irregularities relating to the election result.

It was ultimately the OAS report which forced Morales to resign under pressure from the military and police, after 13 years in office. During the initial counting of the votes, there was every indication that neither Morales nor the candidate fielded by the opposition alliance, former president Carlos Mesa, would win through in the first round. The election authority interrupted the count, however, declaring Morales the winner 24 hours later. Mass protests and clashes between supporters of the two camps ensued throughout the country. Morales' supporters accuse the OAS of being closely linked to the US government and thus biased. Morales himself declared that he recognised the OAS's investigation report as binding, however. Since Morales' resignation, opposition politician Jeanine Áñez has led an interim government. New elections were originally scheduled for 03.05.20, but had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The election authority is now aiming to hold elections on 06.09.20.

Burundi

President Nkurunziza dies

According to official information, incumbent president Pierre Nkurunziza died of a heart attack on 09.06.20. The 55 year-old had been in office since 2005. He plunged the country into crisis by running for a third term in the 2015 election, contrary to the constitution. His tenure would have ended in August 2020. He no longer ran in the presidential election of 20.05.20, although an amendment to the constitution would have enabled him to do so. His

successor in office is Evariste Ndayishimiye of the governing party Conseil National de Défense de la Démocratie – Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie (CNDD-FDD) (cf. BN of 08.06.20).

China

Chinese propaganda accounts removed from microblogging service

The Twitter microblogging service has announced that it has deleted 23,750 user accounts which allegedly disseminated false information on a large scale in the interests of the Chinese government, covering subjects such as the situation in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the COVID-19 pandemic. Some 150,000 additional accounts which shared or endorsed such news have also been removed.

While the online service is prohibited for the Chinese in the People's Republic, experts observe that the government uses it for the international dissemination of propaganda and disinformation.

Hong Kong: Arrests at demonstrations

On 12.06.20 thousands of people took part in non-approved demonstrations commemorating the beginning of the protests against planned amendments to the law on extradition a year ago. The police made 35 arrests.

Colombia

People injured and others missing after attacks by state security forces

Twelve people were injured when state security forces attacked a group of small farmers in the Bajo Guayabero region on 04.06.20. According to media reports, flash grenades, tear gas, rubber bullets and rifle fire were deployed. A number of people have also reportedly gone missing in connection with the incident, which continued over a number of hours. The attack was allegedly carried out by the Omega combined task force, which comprises units from the army, the counter-narcotics police, the ESMAD riot police and other state security forces. Observers see the farmers' refusal to allow their coca plantations to be destroyed as the background to the attack. There is also speculation that the actual aim may have been to drive the local population out of the area concerned. Similar incidents in other regions were reported in May 2020. Citing information from the security forces, leading Colombian media present the incidents in the Bajo Guayabero region in a quite different light. According to these reports, the army was the victim of attacks by the coca farmers in the region. An armed group led by FARC dissident Gentil Duarte is allegedly behind the attacks and is forcing the population to attack the security forces.

Côte d'Ivoire/ Ghana

Increase in child labour

Despite assurances by the cocoa processing industry that it was taking steps to substantially reduce child labour in West Africa, the problem has continued to grow in the past ten years. This emerges from current media reports citing the results of an as yet unpublished study by the University of Chicago. The draft version of the study, which is conducted every five years on behalf of the US Department of Labour, states that 2.26 million children are currently working on the cocoa plantations in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, two million of whom are exposed to special danger. This constitutes a 10% increase over the past ten years in the number of children performing child labour, despite the fact that the major chocolate producers pledged back in 2001 to eliminate child labour from their supply chains – initially by 2005, then by 2008 and finally by 2010.. The latest target – a 70% reduction in child labour by 2020 – also remains well out of sight. Ivorian and Ghanaian children often work on their parents' or relatives' farms. According to a study from 2019, carrying heavy loads for many hours is the most common form of child labour. It results from a range of social wrongs which themselves are rooted in complex causes, including poverty, corruption and a lack of any provision of basic services by the state, such as good schooling. Côte d'Ivoire is by far the leading producer and exporter of cocoa beans worldwide. Ghana ranks second, ahead of Indonesia, Nigeria and Cameroon.

Eritrea

President Isaias proves rumours of his death wrong

Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, president Isaias Afwerki did not appear in public for some weeks, leading to speculation about his state of health. There were reports of his death and rumours that he was undergoing medical treatment in Saudi Arabia. Isaias appeared in public again for the first time on 07.06.20 at Bole Airport in Addis Abeba, where prime minister Abiy Ahmed welcomed him on a two-day working visit.

Ghana

Organiser of vigil charged

On 06.06.20 the police broke up a vigil in remembrance of the Afro-American George Floyd, who died in a police operation in the USA. According to official sources, the event had not been approved. The organiser of the event, the head of the non-governmental organisation Economic Fighters League, Ernesto Yeboah, was temporarily detained. On 11.06.20 he was charged with a breach of the law on public order, but has been released on bail.

India

COVID-19 pandemic

The last two weeks witnessed a steep rise in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases. India is now among the countries most severely affected by the pandemic. The Supreme Court has expressed concern at the inhumane treatment of patients in hospitals and the manner in which the deceased are handled. A sustained exponential increase in new infections is expected to continue until the end of July 2020. Hospitals in the major cities of Delhi and Mumbai are overstretched (see BN of 08.06.20).

Iran

Poverty threshold raised

According to information from the Iranian parliament's research centre, the poverty line for a four-person household rose from 135 to 245 euros per month between the end of 2017 and the end of 2019, representing a good 80% increase.

The research centre states that the inflation rate is responsible for the rise in the poverty threshold in Teheran and other parts of the country. According to the IMF, the inflation rate stood at 41% last year, and at 31.2% in 2018. Experts expect prices to rise by 34.2% in the current year. Citing the parliamentary research centre's report, the Fars news agency stated that Iranians' purchasing power had consequently shrunk in 2019 by around 1/3 in comparison to 2011. In order to attain the per capita income of 2011, the economy would have to grow by 8% for at least six years.

COVID-19 pandemic

For two weeks now, the national statistics have again been showing more than 2,000 new infections daily. The figure most recently stood at over 3,100, and is now level with the peak during the first wave of infections in February and March 2020. Health experts see the easing of restrictions in recent weeks as the main reason for the increase. Almost all sectors of the economy returned to work at the end of May 2020.

Over one third of all academics are out of work.

The deputy director of the planning and households organisation, Hamid Asghari, announced on 14.06.20 that more than 35% of Iranian academics are unemployed.

Iraq

Protests

07.06.20 witnessed demonstrations in various provinces, including Najaf, Muthanna, Diwaniyah, Dhi-Qar and Babil. The protests were aimed at alleged corruption, among other things. Clashes between demonstrators and security forces gave rise to a number of fires. One demonstrator was killed on 09.06.20.

Security situation

Security incidents unrelated to the protests continue to be reported, with casualties among both the civilian population and the security forces. IS fighters remain active. The provinces of Diyala, Ninive, Kirkuk and Salahaddin have been particularly severely affected.

Iraqi security forces and Kurdish Peshmerga have carried out security operations against IS fighters.

COVID-19 pandemic

As per 01.06.20, the World Health Organisation (WHO) had confirmed 6,439 cases of COVID-19 infections, 205 deaths and 3,156 patients who had recovered from the disease in Iraq. Around 11% of the cases have been recorded in the Kurdistan-Iraq (KR-I) region.

Turkish air raids

According to a dpa bulletin of 15.06.20, Turkish jet fighters have attacked positions of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) in Iraq and destroyed caves used by PKK fighters. Operation Claw Eagle reportedly focused on targets in the Qandil Mountains near to the Iranian border and positions in Sinjar.

The Turkish military had already carried out air raids on 10.06.20, killing eight members of the PKK. The air raids were aimed at the Zap and Haftanin regions, close to the Turkish border in the Kurdistan-Iraq region.

Libya

Tarhuna: Mass graves discovered

According to media reports, troops belonging to the Government of National Accord (GNA) have discovered at least eight mass graves in and around the town of Tarhuna, to the south of the capital, Tripoli. The exact number of bodies in the graves is as yet unclear. From April 2019, Tarhuna and the surrounding area were under the control of militia allied with general Khalifa Haftar and served as a strategically important base for Haftar in the offensive on the Libyan capital. According to a GNA spokesperson, troops loyal to the GNA captured Tarhuna on 05.06.20.

Mali

Protests against president Keïta

Around 20,000 demonstrators reportedly took to the streets in the capital, Bamako, on 05.06.20 to protest against the government of president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and call for his resignation. A newly established opposition platform had called for the protests.

Leader of AQIM terrorist group killed

According to media reports, the French army killed the leader of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Abdelmalek Droukdal, and a number of his allies in the north of Mali with the support of the US armed forces on 03.06.20. The AQIM terrorist group has been carrying out attacks in the countries of the Sahel region for some years now.

Civilians killed in attacks on villages

43 people have been killed in armed attacks on two villages. The first attack took place on 03.06.20 in Niagassadiou (Mopti region), reportedly claiming the lives of 14 civilians. In a second attack on 05.06.20 in the village of Binedama (Mopti region), armed attackers reportedly killed at least 29 people, including women and children. All the victims

allegedly belong to the Fula ethnic group. Eye witnesses have reported that the armed attackers were wearing military clothing. According to various media reports, it has yet to be verified whether the attackers were actually soldiers of the Malian army. The government has ordered an investigation.

Nepal

COVID-19 pandemic: Call for better protection measures

On 11.06.20 hundreds of people demonstrated in the capital, Kathmandu, demanding that the government step up measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic and increase the numbers of tests carried out. They also called for arrangements to enable migrant workers abroad to return to Nepal. The police used tear gas and water canon against the demonstrators, who were initially peaceful. A number of people were arrested.

The day before, prime minister Khadga Prasad Oli had announced that the lockdown which had been in force since the end of March 2020 would be eased in phases. According to the official figures, there are more than 4,300 cases of corona in Nepal. Officially, 15 people have died as a result of becoming infected.

Nigeria

Double attack by ISWAP in Monguno and Nganzai

In the late morning of 13.06.20, fighters of the jihadist group Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a splinter group of the Boko Haram terrorist organisation, attacked the strategically important garrison town of Monguno in the federal state of Borno, using weaponry which included rocket launchers. According to security forces and local residents, at least 15 people were killed in the attack, including nine soldiers. Some reports put the death toll among the soldiers at 20. The military eventually managed to repel the attack, officially killing 20 terrorists in the process. Representatives of 25 relief organisations providing humanitarian aid for around 150,000 internally displaced people are based in Monguno. Prior to this attack, the jihadists had attacked the village of Goni Usmani, some 60 kilometres away (Nganzai Local Government Area). According to villagers, 38 people were shot dead in the attack and a truck with passengers on board was set on fire.

Jihadists kill villagers

On 09.06.20 ISWAP fighters attacked the village of Felo (known locally as Faduma Koloram) in the Gubio Local Government Area in the federal state of Borno. According to information provided by the governor of Borno as per 10.06.20, 81 villagers were killed in the attack and a number of villagers were seriously injured. The terrorists also set homes on fire and stole some 1,200 cattle and camels. The attack was reportedly an act of revenge. According to varying sources, either the terrorists suspected the villagers of having passed on information about them to the security services or members of the local self-defence militia which have been formed to provide protection against thefts of cattle had killed several terrorists prior to the attack.

ISWAP has claimed responsibility for all three attacks.

Pakistan

COVID-19 pandemic

The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 continues to rise. People have tested positive for coronavirus in all provinces. The numbers of infections vary according to population density. Accordingly, the highest numbers of cases have been reported from the provinces of Punjab and Sindh, followed in declining order by the provinces of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, the capital, Islamabad, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Following the steep rise in new infections, the hospitals in the larger towns and cities are operating at almost full capacity. The situation is particularly tense in Peshawar (cf. BN of 08.06.20). Doctors fear a collapse of the health system. Six hospital beds are available per 10,000 head of population.

Russian Federation

Prison sentence for Jehovah's Witness

Jehovah's Witness Gennady Shpakovsky was sentenced to six and a half years in prison by a court in the city of Pskov, close to the Estonian border, on 09.06.20. In its statement of grounds for its judgement, the court referred to Shpakovsky as a leading member of a banned extremist religious group. In April 2017 the Russian Jehovah's Witnesses organisation was classified as extremist by the country's supreme court and its activities were banned.

Somalia

Al-Shabaab sets up COVID-19 treatment centre

On 12.06.20 Al-Shabaab announced that it had installed a treatment centre for people suffering from COVID-19 in Jilib, Middle Jubaregion, and set up a 24-hour hotline. Al-Shabaab is calling on people with symptoms to visit the new medical facility. No information is available regarding how many coronavirus cases there are in the territories controlled by Al-Shabaab.

Syria

Idlib: Air raids in response to rebel offensive

Local activists have reported attacks by the Islamist militia Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on government troops in the frontier region around the final rebel stronghold in Idlib on 08.06.20. The rebels reportedly took control of a number of villages for a short while, before the Syrian army launched a large-scale counter-attack with Russian air support.

Some 45 air raids on ten different localities were documented up to the following day. According to the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, one civilian died in these attacks. For their part, Syrian state media have confirmed the death of one soldier. An association of local relief organisations has reported that more than 5,800 civilians fled from the south-west of the embattled region in the provinces and Idlib and Hama in the space of 24 hours.

This represents the most serious escalation of violence since the ceasefire agreement of 05.03.20.

Economic and currency crisis, protests in As-Suwayda

The continuing erosion of the currency (cf. BN of 08.06.20) is increasingly leading to political instability. Demonstrations have taken place in As-Suwayda, a city with a majority Druze population in the south of the country, with hundreds of protesters calling, among other things, for the overthrow of president Assad.

On 10.06.20 Assad dismissed the prime minister, who had announced in the previous week that measures would be undertaken to strengthen the Syrian pound (SYP). One US dollar now costs SYP 3,500. At the beginning of the year, the exchange rate stood at around 1:700. According to media reports, people are already hoarding food and medicines, leading to further price rises and supply shortages. The UN estimates that eight out of ten Syrians are living in poverty.

Tanzania

COVID-19 pandemic: President declares virus defeated

President John Magufuli has declared his country free of coronavirus, claiming that the infectious disease "has been eliminated, thanks to God". Informed observers have substantial doubts, however, and accuse Magufuli of attempting to conceal the number of infections and deaths. The government's most recent public statement on 29.04.20 put the number of infections at 509 and the death toll at 21. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has criticised the government for its lack of cooperation and transparency. US diplomats see an overstressed health system and the opposition cites medical documents which assume far higher numbers of infections.

Turkey

Arrests

According to media reports, on 09.06.20 the Turkish authorities ordered the arrest of a further 414 suspected government opponents who are accused of having links to the Gülen movement. A nationwide police operation reportedly targeted 191 suspects in 22 provinces, 160 of whom are now in custody. Independently of these arrests, a public prosecutor in Istanbul has reportedly ordered the arrest of 158 people, including members of the military, doctors and teachers. Raids are apparently being carried out on members of the air force and other security forces. Arrests were also ordered for 149 people on 08.06.20. Most of these are reportedly former or active police officers. The suspects are accused of having participated in the failed military coup of 2016 and of having links to the Gülen movement. 118 arrest warrants were also issued against suspected Gülen supporters last week.

Ukraine

Investigations into former president Poroshenko

The public prosecutor's office in Kiev is investigating former president Petro Poroshenko. He is accused of having instructed the head of the military foreign intelligence service to appoint a confidant as his deputy in 2018. Poroshenko, who has led the European Solidarity party in parliament since the end of 2019, describes the actions against him as tantamount to the persecution of an opposition leader, claiming that they have nothing to do with jurisdiction, democracy or fighting crime. Rather, he has accused president Zelenski of having personally ordered the investigations.

Numerous investigations into Poroshenko, involving matters such as abuse of office, tax evasion, corruption and treason, have been initiated since he lost the presidential election in the spring of 2019 and was forced to hand over power to president Zelenski. President Zelenski fulfilled one of his election promises by lifting the immunity of all members of parliament with effect from 01.01.20.

Yemen

COVID-19 pandemic: Houthi rebels withholding information

According to news reports, the Houthi rebels are continuing to withhold correct information on the number of deaths caused by coronavirus in the territories which they control in the north of Yemen. People who have died of the virus are reportedly buried in secret and families and gravediggers are not allowed to talk about the cause of death. Officially, there are still only four confirmed cases of infection in northern Yemen. A spokesperson for the Houthi rebels' health ministry has stated that the number of deaths is not publicised in order to avoid negative psychological effects on the public. The Houthi rebels have also punished civilians who have spoken out about coronavirus.

Internally displaced persons

The UNHCR announced on 11.06.20 that more than 94,000 people had been forced to flee their homes on account of hostilities since the beginning of the year.

Zimbabwe

MDC activists arrested again

According to information from the largest opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), MDC MP Joanna Mamombe and the two MDC members Cecilia Chimhiri and Netsai Marova were arrested once again in their lawyers' offices on 10.06.20 under accusation of falsely claiming to have been tortured in police custody following

their initial arrest. On the same day, nine UN human rights experts cited the case of the three women in a joint statement calling on Zimbabwe to immediately stop the practice of enforced disappearance and torture, which was evidently aimed at suppressing protests and dissent. The three MDC opposition activists were stopped and arrested at a police checkpoint in Harare on 13.05.20. They were on their way to a peaceful protest event which had been organised on this day by the MDC's youth organisation against the official measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant spread of famine in the country. The three women "disappeared" from police custody on the same day. They claim to have been subjected to sexual assaults and torture during their abduction. Two days later they were released in the town of Bindura, 87 kilometres north-east of Harare. After being found, they were admitted to hospital to have their injuries treated. On 26.05.20 the police charged the activists with having breached the COVID-19 rules for public gatherings and with intent to promote public violence and affray.

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