

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1545
Land:	Afghanistan
Kilde:	Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF)
Titel:	Briefing Notes
Udgivet:	29. januar 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	21. maj 2024



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

29 January 2024

Afghanistan

Persecution

A report released by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) on 22.01.24 on the human rights situation highlighted in particular the violent and arbitrary enforcement of decrees against women, among other things. The report also addressed incidents of violence against the Hazara community, the expulsion of Afghan nationals from Pakistan and the associated risk of persecution people who have fled the Taliban face.

According to media reports, a former interpreter for US troops was arrested and killed by the Taliban in Asadabad, Kunar province, on 20.01.2014. The Taliban arrested two former soldiers, who had recently returned from Iran, in Takhar province on 22.01.24. According to media reports issued on 23.01.24, a former soldier from Panjshir province had been arrested by the Taliban two weeks earlier.

According to reports issued on 23.01.24, the Taliban arrested two journalists in Kabul and in Ghazni province. The organization Nai, which has campaigned for freedom of the press in Afghanistan, announced on 26.01.24 that it would be suspending its activities due to the political situation.

On 25.01.24 and 26.01.24, the Taliban flogged a total of 22 people, including seven women, in Takhar province, punishing them for offences such as having extramarital relationships or "fleeing from home", sentencing them to prison terms.

According to media reports released on 23.01.24, the Taliban are urging Ismaili families in Badakhshan province to send their children to specially established Sunni religious schools where they will undergo religious re-education.¹

Situation along the border with Pakistan

The Torkham border crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan was reopened for trucks from Afghanistan on 23.01.24 following an 11-day closure. Pakistan had closed the border because a large number of truck drivers were not in possession of a visa allowing them to enter Pakistan as per the requirement introduced in November 2023. Following negotiations with the Taliban, the Pakistani authorities extended the deadline for obtaining visas until 31.03.24. The Taliban closed the second border crossing at Spin Boldak on 24.01.24. The number of Afghan nationals entering Afghanistan from Pakistan has dropped. On 22.01.24, UNHCR reported that around 600 Afghan nationals were crossing the border daily. The main reasons they give for leaving Pakistan include fear of arrest, restricted freedom of movement and reports of people's belongings being confiscated.²

Security situation

According to their own sources, the National Resistance Front and the Afghanistan Freedom Front killed a total of six Taliban insurgents in the provinces of Parwan, Kapisa and Kabul on 23.01.24.³

Humanitarian situation

So far, the winter has been unusually dry and warm, exacerbating the ongoing drought and humanitarian situation. The WHO reports a substantial rise in Acute Respiratory Infections (ARI), claiming that 292 people have died from

respiratory infections since the beginning of the year, with 63% of infections affecting children under the age of five.⁴

Angola

HRW: annual World Report on the human rights situation

On 11.01.24, the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) published its World Report on the human rights situation in Angola and other countries for the 2023 reporting period. According to HRW, security forces continued to be implicated in serious human rights abuses, including forced evictions and illegal demolitions, as well as violations in respect of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and the rights of women and girls.

Security forces have allegedly been responsible for extrajudicial executions, unlawful killings, arbitrary detentions and the unnecessary use of force against peaceful protesters (cf. BN of 12.06.23 and 16.10.23). The reports say that the authorities have continued to forcibly evict people and conduct demolitions without the necessary procedural guarantees or the provision of alternative adequate housing or adequate compensation for those evicted (cf. BN of 20.03.23). Strict media laws have made it possible to suppress journalists, and activists have been arrested and sentenced to prison for spreading anti-government propaganda (cf. BN of 27.02.23 and 16.10.23). In May 2023, the Angolan parliament took the initial steps towards drafting a bill to restrict the rights of NGOs. The government has reportedly rejected all requests for peaceful assemblies submitted by the Cabinda independence movement. Police officers have carried out physical assaults and have abused and harassed local women street traders, also known as "zungueiras", as well as migrant women.

However, the report says that Angola's efforts to build peace in the Central African region, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo, are commendable.⁵

Benin

Military announces successes in the north

According to media reports, the Beninese military successfully neutralised one individual at the end of December 2023 and another on 18.01.24, both of whom had been involved in the planting of explosive devices in the northern region and both of whom had been actively sought. As recently as 12.12.23, two military personnel were killed when they drove over an improvised mine not far from the border with neighbouring Niger (cf. BN of 18.12.23).

The military is also celebrating the fact that in the meantime 3,500 newly qualified recruits have been deployed as part of the extraordinary recruitment offensive launched in 2023 (cf. BN of 19.06.23). Security in northern Benin is considered to be under threat from jihadist groups, among others. Benin's defence and security forces are conducting offensive operations against armed groups in northern Benin (cf. BN of 13.11.23).⁶

Burkina Faso

HRW: airstrikes kill dozens of civilians

According to a document published by HRW on 25.01.24, at least 60 civilians were reportedly killed and wounded in a number of drone strikes carried out by the Burkinabe military in the north of Burkina Faso between August and November 2023. The deaths occurred in military drone strikes aimed at armed groups, inter alia, at crowded markets and another at a funeral. In doing so, HRW claims the Burkinabe military has violated the provisions enshrined in international humanitarian law. In the wake of the drone attacks, the Burkinabe military government also announced that several members of Islamist groups had been killed but did not provide any information on the number of civilian casualties. The victims are reportedly people from both Burkina Faso and Mali. HRW has urged the Burkinabe government to impartially investigate the war crimes, to hold those responsible to account and to provide support to victims and their families.⁷

NGO calls for the release of dissidents; further arrests

In a letter dated 22.01.24, Amnesty International (AI) called for the release of the secretary general of the Coalition Against Impunity and Community Stigmatization (CISC), Daouda Diallo. The NGO is also calling for an end to the general mobilisation of journalists, members of the opposition and people who are critical of the current military government to fight terrorism. Security forces abducted Diallo in Ouagadougou on 01.12.23. According to media reports, a photo showing him in military uniform was published on social media a few days later. According to HRW, at least a dozen activist civilians and members of opposition parties have been conscripted to participate in government security operations in the fight against jihadism (cf. BN of 13.11.23).

There has been an increase in the number of kidnappings and arrests of prominent opposition figures in Burkina Faso recently. On 24.01.24, unknown individuals arrested and abducted the coordinator of the political movement SENS (Servir et non se servir) and lawyer, Guy-Hervé Kam, at the airport in Ouagadougou. According to media reports, there was no apparent reason for his arrest. A month earlier, on 24.12.23, unknown individuals had arrested and abducted the former Foreign Minister Ablassé Ouédraogo in Ouagadougou (cf. BN of 08.01.24).⁸

Burkina Faso / Mali / Niger

Withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

On 28.01.24, the military governments of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger announced their immediate withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The reason given for the move was that ECOWAS was "under the influence of foreign powers" and was betraying its founding principles. They said the body was becoming a threat to its member states. ECOWAS said in a statement that it had not yet been notified of the countries' decision to quit the bloc.

ECOWAS had imposed heavy sanctions against the three countries following the military coups that took place in Burkina Faso (in 2022), Mali (in 2020 and 2021) and Niger (in 2023). Relations with the three countries have been very tense ever since. ECOWAS is a regional organisation founded in 1975 whose original aim was to provide regional economic cooperation. Before the withdrawals were announced, ECOWAS had 15 member states.⁹

Colombia

Ceasefire with ELN and Estado Mayor Central extended

According to a statement issued by the High Commissioner for Peace, Otty Patiño, on 23.01.24, the ceasefire with the National Liberation Army (ELN), which was due to expire at the end of January 2024, is to be extended by a further six months. The ceasefire with the FARC dissident group Estado Mayor Central had already been extended by six months on 16.01.2024. The new agreement will now run until 15.07.24.¹⁰

Democratic Republic of the Congo

North Kivu: rebel attacks claim civilian casualties

The rebel group Mouvement 23-Mars (M23) has killed at least 19 people, most of them civilians, in attacks carried out on the town of Mweso in the province of North Kivu since 23.01.24. According to media reports, the town had been under rebel control for several months. The latest fighting that erupted between M23 and the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) reportedly included heavy artillery bombardments. Both warring factions have been trading blame for the deaths. The peacekeeping troops of the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) reportedly patrol the area surrounding their mission base in Nyanzale to protect the civilian population. According to MONUSCO, they managed to secure an escape corridor. More than 1,000 people who were forced to flee their homes have found accommodation at emergency shelters. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which is currently supporting the hospital in Mweso, reported considerable difficulties in rescuing civilians and treating the injured. In this context, MSF have called for compliance with international humanitarian law in relation to hospitals, healthcare centres and civilian areas. It says around 8,000 people have fled to the hospital, which is considered to be safe, since the fighting began.¹¹

Ecuador / Colombia

Arrest of the leader of a FARC dissident group in Ecuador

According to police reports issued on 22.01.24, the leader of the Colombian FARC dissident front Oliver Sinisterra, Carlos Arturo Landázuri Cortés, alias El Gringo, has been arrested in Imbabura in northern Ecuador. This splinter group of the Segunda Marquetalia is said to be involved in cross-border drug trafficking, among other things. Landázuri is to be extradited to Colombia.¹²

Egypt

More than 4,100 prisoners pardoned

According to media reports, Egypt's Ministry of the Interior pardoned 4,187 prisoners on the occasion of National Police Day and the anniversary of the revolution of 25.01.11.¹³

Activist sentenced to a one-year suspended sentence

According to media reports, a court in Cairo sentenced the political activist Yahia Hussein Abdel-Hady to a one-year suspended sentence on 18.01.24. Abdel-Hady, one of the founders of the opposition Democratic Civil Movement, has been accused by the prosecution of spreading fake news online and of misusing social media platforms.

Abdel-Hady had been arrested in January 2019 and sentenced to four years in prison in May 2022 for spreading fake news. Shortly afterwards, in June 2022, the president pardoned Abdel-Hady, releasing the activist.¹⁴

Gambia

Insufficient child protection

According to media reports, the Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Emmanuel Joof, has acknowledged the government's commitment to promoting and protecting children's rights. He has also described the legal framework protecting the rights of children as satisfactory. This enables effective action to be taken to protect children in cases of violence, exploitation and abuse, including measures against harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage.

However, violations of children's rights are an ongoing reality, and issues such as sexual abuse and exploitation are a social taboo. Children face other challenges, including inadequate access to healthcare services and inadequate nutrition. Joof reiterated the NHRC's criticism voiced in 2021 that current laws and regulations for the protection of children are not being effectively applied and implemented (cf. BN of 05.07.21). He said law enforcement officials are not sufficiently trained or sensitised to handle gender-specific violence and sexual violence against children.¹⁵

Ghana

AI: increase in violence against LGBTIQ individuals

In January 2024, the human rights NGO Amnesty International (AI) released a report on discriminatory laws against LGBTIQ individuals in selected African countries. With regard to Ghana, AI observed an increase in violence in the 2023 reporting period. AI is working with a local NGO that documented over 70 human rights violations against members of the LGBTIQ community between January and September 2023. According to the NGO, many affected LGBTIQ individuals do not report assaults to the police out of fear. It says these individuals fear further harassment, intimidation and criminal prosecution. The attacks are not isolated to a specific geographic area but are alarmingly widespread in all parts of the country. According to Ghanaian LGBTIQ activists, homophobia and homophobic rhetoric are becoming more mobilised and organised. LGBTIQ organisations also report to Amnesty International that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find safe spaces to carry out their human rights work because a lot of doors are being closed to organisations that are seen or perceived as LGBTI organisations.

According to AI, some LGBTI organisations have already observed that since The Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill was introduced in parliament on 02.08.21, there has been an increase

in violence against LGBTI people. The bill is still pending in parliament and aims to criminalise LGBTIQ activity and activism more severely. Human rights organisations have sharply criticised the bill, while the majority of members of the Ghanaian parliament and major religious and civil society associations have expressed their support for it (cf. BN of 15.05.23 and 24.07.23).¹⁶

India

Consecration of newly built Ram temple in Ayodhya

On 22.01.24, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party inaugurated the newly built Hindu Ram temple in Ayodhya. The temple was built on the grounds of a mosque which was destroyed in 1992 during riots involving Hindu nationalist groups. In his ceremonial address, Narendra Modi said it was "not just a date on the calendar" but "the dawn of a new era", saying that it marked the beginning of "the expansion of consciousness – from the divine to the nation, from Ram to the entire nation". He said that on that day the foundation for India's next 1,000 years had been laid. Modi's words welcoming the advent of "Ram Rajya" (divine rule) in India blatantly contradicted the secular principles enshrined in the country's constitution.

The Hindutva ideology embraced by Hindu nationalist parties and groups promotes discrimination and attacks against religious minorities. Members of the Muslim faith in particular are regularly attacked by radical Hindu groups.¹⁷

Iran

Several executions carried out

According to media reports issued on 23.01.24, a 23-year-old man was executed following an announcement made by the judiciary. He had been sentenced to death in November 2022 for allegedly running over and killing a police officer with his car during a protest rally near the capital Tehran in September 2022, injuring several other people. Human rights organisations claim the trial against the man was unfair, among other things, because he was suffering from a mental illness and was allegedly physically abused in custody. There were also reports of inconsistencies in the outcome of appeal proceedings in the case. According to the man's lawyer, the Supreme Court had overturned the death sentence in July 2023. According to judicial sources, appeals had in turn been rejected twice by the Supreme Court.

According to media reports, a further four death sentences were carried out on 29.01.24. Four imprisoned men of Kurdish descent were executed in Qezel Hesar prison (near Karaj, Alborz province). The men had been accused of espionage, among other things, for allegedly being involved in the sabotage of a factory producing military equipment in the province of Isfahan (central Iran). Family members deny the allegations and say the defendants were forced to make a confession.

It has also been reported that a man of Kurdish origin who had been imprisoned for 14 years was executed for murder on 23.01.24.¹⁸

Activist sentenced to three years in prison: presumably to put pressure on journalist uncle living abroad

According to media reports issued on 24.01.24, a 47-year-old activist who campaigns for women's and children's rights was sentenced to three years in prison in the city of Khorramabad (Lorestan province). The charges include propaganda against the regime and endangering national security. The woman was reportedly arrested on 30.07.23 and had already been temporarily detained before this.

According to the organisation Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Iranian government is trying to exert pressure on her uncle, who lives in Germany, by arresting and sentencing the activist. The woman's uncle is an Iranian actor and journalist who works as the editor-in-chief of Iran Journal (IJ) in Berlin, a German-language website that covers developments in Iran. He also worked for the Persian edition of the news portal Deutsche Welle (DW) for several years.

In connection with his niece's conviction (see above), RSF reported, citing information provided by the journalist himself, that he had received threats from Iranian authorities via WhatsApp, urging him to cease working as a journalist. He therefore suspects that his niece's arrest can be attributed to his work as a journalist. The journalist

also told DW that he had received similar threats in a telephone call. His statements cannot be independently verified.¹⁹

Iraq

Death penalty

On 24.01.24, HRW reported that at least 150 people who have been sentenced to death are awaiting execution in Nasiriyah High Security Prison in Dhi Qar Province. Most recently, on 25.12.23, a total of 13 people were executed in Nasiriyah prison. In this context, HRW has urged Iraq to immediately declare a moratorium on all executions. Furthermore, HRW accuses the Iraqi authorities of violating the inmates' basic rights, as the executions are reportedly being carried out without warning and without informing family members.

It is estimated that around 8,000 people across Iraq are currently on death row, with the majority of them facing terrorism charges. The principles governing the rule of law are often disregarded, particularly in terrorism-related trials.²⁰

Suspected killing of a kolbar

The Kurdistan Human Rights Network (KHRN) reported on 25.01.24 that a kolbar (transborder porter) had been shot dead by Iraqi border guards on 22.01.24. The kolbars are porters who haul smuggled goods mostly on foot across the mountainous region between Iran and Iraq. Iranian security forces regularly arrest, physically assault and sometimes kill kolbars. According to reports issued by human rights organisations and journalists, Iraqi security forces have been increasingly using heavy handed measures to crack down on kolbars, particularly since the end of 2023.²¹

Conflict between Türkiye and the PKK

On 24.01.24, suspected Turkish airstrikes were carried out in the east of Dohuk governorate (Kurdistan Region of Iraq). According to reports, these took place near residential areas. However, there were no reports of casualties or damage to property. According to eyewitness reports, clashes had already erupted between the Turkish military and PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) fighters in the same area on 23.01.24.²²

Fighting between the PKK and Peshmerga

The Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of the Interior announced on 24.01.24 that a checkpoint of the Peshmerga in the Amedi district (Dohuk province) had come under rocket attack by the PKK. The statement came several hours after PKK-affiliated media said that several fighters had been injured in an ambush carried out by Peshmerga units. The Ministry of the Interior of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq said that the media report was false, adding that no casualties had been inflicted on either side.²³

Attack on gas field

On 25.01.24, the Khor Mor gas field in Sulaymaniyah province came under attack, meaning that no gas could be supplied to the power plant for a whole day. This led to a widespread power outage in the Kurdistan Region. It is not yet clear whether the attack was carried out using missiles or drones. The Khor Mor gas field is operated by a company from the UAE and has already come under fire several times, most recently in August 2023. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack to date, but there are some indications to suggest that pro-Iranian militias were behind it.²⁴

Jordan

Drone attack on US military base

Three US military personnel were killed and at least 34 others were injured in a drone attack carried out against a US military base in Jordan on 28.01.24.

According to official sources, the drone apparently came from Syria and was fired by a militia supported by Iran. It is still being determined which militia is specifically responsible. The Iranian government has denied any involvement in the attack, as the state news agency IRNA reported, citing the country's permanent mission to the

UN. The Iranian government denied involvement after the "Islamic Resistance in Iraq", an umbrella organisation comprising several Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, announced in a statement on 28.01.24 that it had carried out several drone attacks along the border between Jordan and Syria, including on the Al-Rukban camp, which is located near the US base.²⁵

Lebanon

Situation along the border between Lebanon and Israel

Regular exchanges of fire continue unabated between Hezbollah and the Israeli army.

Hezbollah announced on 25.01.24 that it would also be using Fajr-1 missiles (unguided air-to-ground missiles of Iranian origin with a range of around 10 km) in future. This led to an intensification of attacks with dozens of attacks being carried out on Israeli territory that were met by corresponding counterattacks from the Israeli side the following day. The political debate is focusing on the plight of the civilian population and the damage to the infrastructure in the south. Furthermore, the political consensus is that Lebanon itself should be kept out of the war between Hezbollah and Israel.

Attacks from the Israeli and Hezbollah sides are a daily occurrence. In the meantime, on the Lebanese side, at least 206 people have been killed, including around 20 civilians and more than 150 Hezbollah militants, one Lebanese soldier and fighters of various other militant groups; on the Israeli side, over 19 people have been killed so far, seven of them civilians.

According to aid organisations, around 76,000 people inside Lebanon and according to press reports, 115,000 people in Israel remain internally displaced by the escalation along the border.²⁶

Montenegro

Judicial reforms: parliament elects new Supreme State Prosecutor

According to the latest media reports, Montenegro's parliament elected the legal expert Milorad Markovic as the new Supreme State Prosecutor on 27.01.24. The election by the legislature came after the latest EU progress report from autumn 2023 called specifically for a cross-party and transparent agreement to speed up reforms towards EU membership and ensure the proper functioning of the judicial system. More than two years after the resignation of his predecessor Ivica Stankovic, Markovic was elected to office with the required two-thirds majority, supported by the governing majority and the opposition parties Civic Movement URA, Social Democrats and Bosniak Party. During the hearing in parliament on 17.01.24, Markovic, who had previously worked as an expert for EU and OSCE projects without any previous prosecutorial functions, emphasised that he would insist on independent, professional and impartial prosecution. Prior to the appointment, the NGO watchdog "MANS" criticised Markovic's lack of experience in the fight against corruption in his biography. According to media reports, the appointment of the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office is another important step towards lifting the judicial blockade, following the appointment of constitutional judges in spring 2023 (cf. BN of 06.03.23) and new members of the Judicial Council in December 2023.²⁷

Nigeria

Plateau State: intercommunal violence claims lives

In the Mangu Local Government Area (LGA) of the central Nigerian state of Plateau, a total of around 50 people were killed in an outbreak of intercommunal violence on 23.01.24 and 24.01.24. According to media reports, the violent clashes began when armed actors attempted to steal livestock from people of the Fulani ethnic group. In addition, around six mosques and at least two churches were destroyed. The state's governor had imposed a 24-hour curfew on 23.01.24 to stem the violence. However, according to media reports, further clashes erupted the following day despite the curfew. Nine people were reportedly arrested by Nigerian security forces. Plateau State lies between the Muslim north of Nigeria and the predominantly Christian south. Violent clashes between nomadic herdsman and sedentary farmers have already occurred there in the past. As recently as the end of December 2023, armed groups killed almost 200 people and destroyed a number of houses in at least 20 attacks on various villages

in the Bokokos and Barkin Ladi LGAs in Plateau State (cf. BN of 08.01.24). The background to the acts of violence could be conflicts over land, grazing and water rights, but also the desire for retribution for earlier acts of violence or – or at the same time – smouldering ethnic rivalries. The nomadic people involved are usually of Muslim faith and the sedentary people are often Christians.²⁸

Katsina State: multiple kidnappings

Over 100 armed men described as bandits attacked a village in Batsari Local Government Area (LGA) in Katsina State on 21.01.24, kidnapping around 30 people. According to media reports, the armed men were disguised as security forces. A number of residents reportedly tried to flee. Kidnappings and attacks on communities by armed groups have already occurred in Katsina State in the past. A week earlier, more than 100 gunmen attacked a military base in Batsari LGA and set fire to a number of vehicles and valuables. On 11.01.24, violent assailants killed around 10 people in Jibia LGA (cf. BN of 13.11.23, 15.01.24 and 22.01.24).²⁹

Economic growth and inflation

Nigeria's gross domestic product is expected to grow by 3.5% in 2024. This is according to media reports referring to forecasts that were published by the Nigerian Economic Summit Group on 24.01.24. According to the group, various reform programmes introduced by the government are likely to trigger an upturn in economic growth as investment backlogs are eliminated and the low productivity in some sectors is remedied. The group says the services sector will remain the main driver of the economy, but the expected recovery of the oil sector will also lead to stronger growth in 2024. Furthermore, the group forecast an annual average inflation rate of 21.5% for 2024, compared to an annual average of 24.5% in 2023, which, to date, has also merely been an estimate. It said that one of several price-driving factors was the abolition of fuel subsidies in 2023 (cf. BN of 05.06.23 and 16.10.23).³⁰

Pakistan

Arrests at Pashtun Tahafuz Movement protest

According to media reports, security forces have arrested dozens of participants at a protest rally organised by the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement. They were demanding the release of the detained leader of the movement. The movement is critical of the Pakistani military and campaigns for the rights of the estimated 35 million ethnic Pashtuns in the country, most of whom live in the areas along the Afghan border.³¹

Arrests at Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf election rally in Karachi

According to agency reports, at least two dozen supporters of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party were arrested at an election rally in Karachi on 28.01.24. News agencies reported that around 2,000 supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan's party had gathered.³²

Statement on the Pakistani nationals killed in Iran

On 28.01.24, the government condemned the killing of nine Pakistani nationals who are suspected to have been killed by militants in the neighbouring Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan on 27.01.24 and called for an immediate investigation by the Iranian authorities.³³

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

War in Gaza: current developments

On 23.01.24, the Israeli military surrounded Khan Younis, according to its own sources. In the largest city in the south of the Gaza Strip, Hamas fighters are reported to be engaged in heavy fighting with the advancing Israeli army. According to an ICRC spokesperson, many residents have fled the fighting on foot to Rafah, which is about four hours away and where, already, more than four times as many people are said to be living as before the war. On 24.01.24, the Israeli army ordered the evacuation of a district of Khan Younis, where two hospitals with a total of more than 600 beds are reported to be located.

A total of 20 Israeli armed forces personnel were killed on 23.01.24 during an attempt to carry out the controlled demolition of a residential building in the Gaza Strip near the border with Israel. According to media reports,

controlled demolitions of infrastructure along an approximately 800 m wide "security strip" along the border area are intended to make future potential infiltrations into Israel more difficult. UN representatives criticise Israel's actions because Palestinian homes that pose no immediate threat are systematically destroyed in the process.

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, the war has claimed more than 26,000 lives and injured at least 63,000 Palestinians. According to UN figures, more than 60% of all houses in the Gaza Strip have now been damaged or destroyed. Israel claims to have killed around 9,000 armed Palestinians.

On 26.01.24, the UN dismissed 12 of its employees in the Gaza Strip and launched an investigation after the Israeli government presented evidence of the alleged involvement of the accused in the planning and execution of the Hamas attack on 07.10.23. Some donor states, including the US and Germany, suspended their funding for the Palestinian refugee relief organisation UNRWA in the wake of the allegations. However, in a joint statement issued by the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development on 27.01.24, it was confirmed that the current humanitarian aid would continue. It was only temporarily, until the incidents had been clarified, that no new funds would be made available for UNRWA in the Gaza Strip.

On 28.01.24, the Israeli military declared the area on the Israeli side near the Kerem Shalom border crossing a restricted military zone after Israeli protesters had increasingly blocked the flow of aid supplies into the Gaza Strip after 24.01.24. The protesters were family members of the more than 100 hostages who are currently still being held by Hamas and their circle of supporters. They demanded that humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip be stopped until Hamas releases the Israeli hostages. The military's action came two days after the International Court of Justice in The Hague ordered Israel on 26.01.24 to provide more humanitarian aid to the Palestinian civilian population.³⁴

Senegal

No decriminalisation of homosexuality; no blessing of same-sex couples

On the occasion of his participation in the Universal Periodic Review of Senegal by the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the Senegalese Minister of Justice ruled out the legalisation of homosexuality and the recognition of LGBTIQ rights. Same-sex sexual acts are punishable as "improper and unnatural acts" under Article 319 (3) of the Senegalese Penal Code.

On 18.01.24, the Archbishop of Dakar and the other bishops in Senegal also declared their refusal to pastorally bless same-sex couples without a liturgical rite, as the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith had allowed in its Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* issued on 18.12.23. In their joint declaration, the bishops described homosexuality as, among other things, the moral deviation of our time.³⁵

HRW: repression ahead of the presidential election, human rights situation

Shortly after the publication of its critical annual World Report on the human rights situation (cf. BN of 22.01.24), HRW reported on repression against the opposition, media and civil society as well as on the restriction and violation of various human and basic rights in the run-up to the presidential elections which are scheduled for the end of February 2024. President Macky Sall's promise to hold free and fair elections is at odds with the fact that the authorities have been filling the prisons with hundreds of political prisoners for three years, according to a senior Sahel researcher at HRW.

The crackdown began in 2021 with the prosecution of popular opposition leader Ousmane Sonko and fears that President Sall would run for a controversial third term in office. Since then, civil society groups and opposition parties estimate that up to 1,000 opposition members and activists have been arrested across the country. In recent months, there has been a wave of arrests against the opposition and dissidents. The judiciary is being instrumentalised and used against political opponents and dissidents.

The report also addresses problematic detention conditions, the significantly worsening situation for journalists since 2021, arbitrary arrests and other human rights violations. HRW has received reports of ill-treatment and torture in detention and upon arrest, as well as unfair and fabricated trials of individuals who were arrested in connection with opposition protests. HRW has documented the use of excessive and lethal force by security forces against protesters in 2021 and 2023. At least 37 people have been killed during violent clashes since March 2021. Those responsible have not yet been held accountable.

For the report, HRW conducted interviews with 34 people between November 2023 and January 2024, including members of opposition parties and civil society groups, journalists and university professors, and legal representatives of activists, and it also reviewed other sources.³⁶

Somalia

Clan clashes in Galmudug and attack in Mogadishu

According to local reports, at least seven people died in retaliatory attacks carried out by clans in Balanbale and Faragoy (Galmudug) on 22.01.24. It is not known which clan members were involved and what triggered the clashes. According to reports, at least two civilians were killed and others injured in a suicide attack. The attack occurred near the stadium in Mogadishu on 24.01.24. Al-Shabaab has already claimed responsibility for the attack.³⁷

Attacks on military bases

On 24.01.24, five military bases located in Caad district in northern Mudug province (Galmudug) are reported to have been attacked by al-Shabaab. Unconfirmed reports stated that over 190 Somali military personnel and allied militias were killed. Numerous weapons and military vehicles were stolen by the terrorist militia during the attack.³⁸

South Sudan

Intercommunal clashes

On 27.01.24, dozens of people were reportedly killed in clashes that erupted between rival groups in the border region of Abyei. Reports on the number of fatalities vary, ranging from 42 to 52. The dead are said to include both civilians and a blue helmet soldier from the UN peacekeeping mission. The clashes were reportedly triggered by intercommunal conflicts.³⁹

Sudan

Ongoing fighting

On 22.01.24, eight to 11 people were reportedly killed and others injured in airstrikes. The targets of the attacks were Rapid Support Forces (RSF) locations, and the bombings had accidentally hit the villages of Um Sukina, Batikha, Taiba and Um Samoua in West Muglad (West Kordofan State), according to a report. It said that heavy fighting had continued in West Kordofan State in the days following 22.01.24, particularly in Babanusa.⁴⁰

Humanitarian situation

Since the increase in fighting in December 2023 and the attack on the once-safe haven of Wad Madani (cf. BN of 18.12.23), the country has had around 6.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). In addition, there are more than 3.8 million people who were already counted as IDPs prior to the conflict. With a total of over 9 million IDPs, Sudan is currently the country with the highest number of internally displaced persons in the world. Almost half of the IDPs who are affected by the current conflicts are minors. Up to 14 million children across the country are dependent on humanitarian aid, and almost 7 million children have no access to educational facilities due to the conflict. A large proportion of the total population is affected by a severe malnutrition crisis.

The Sudanese Journalists Network has expressed concern about targeted attacks on, and arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings of, journalists by the Sudan Armed Forces and the RSF.⁴¹

Syria

South: eight ISIS fighters killed

According to reports issued by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), eight ISIS-linked militia members were killed in clashes with local armed groups on 28.01.24. A high-ranking militia leader was reportedly also among those killed in the Dar'a Governorate in southern Syria. The Syrian state news agency reported the elimination of

eight ISIS members in the village of Nawa. Among them was the ISIS leader of the Horan region, which extends across southern parts of Syria and northern parts of Jordan.⁴²

Cessation of WFP food assistance

As announced in December 2023 (cf. BN of 11.12.23), the WFP discontinued all food aid programmes in Syria at the beginning of 2024. According to its own sources, the WFP is unable to maintain the previous year's level of aid due to funding shortfalls.

As far back as July 2023, aid to Syria was cut on a large scale for the same reasons, as a result of which around 5.5 million Syrians lost their access to support measures (cf. BN of 03.07.23).

According to the WFP, even before the most recent cuts, the scope of its services was unable to meet demand. The WFP is primarily dependent on donations from state governments, which have decreased significantly in recent years and months.⁴³

Türkiye

Attack at Catholic church in Istanbul

On 28.01.24, two masked men carried out an attack in the Santa Maria Church in the Sarıyer district of Istanbul, according to the Ministry of Interior.

According to Turkish authorities, it was a targeted assassination of an individual. The attack took place during a church service attended by around 40 people. According to the governor of Istanbul, no other people were injured. According to the Ministry of Interior, the police arrested two suspects as they fled the scene.⁴⁴

Ukraine

Situation for civilians: war casualties, cyberattacks, economy, language in occupied territories

Large-scale Russian attacks on the country's two largest cities, Kyiv and Kharkiv, claimed the lives of a total of at least 18 people on 23.01.24. More than 130 people were injured and 139 residential buildings were hit, it was further reported, citing President Volodymyr Zelensky. According to later reports, the number of fatalities in Kharkiv alone rose to 11. According to local reports, on 27.01.24, two people were killed in the Sumy region by a Russian reconnaissance and sabotage group. Also on 27.01.24, Russian attacks killed one person in Kherson Oblast and two in Donetsk Oblast.

According to media reports, several Ukrainian state institutions have been the target of a wave of cyberattacks. The gas network operator Naftogaz and the postal service Ukrposhta have been among those affected. It is reported that other organisations have also been the target of attacks, for example in the banking and financial sector. Specific victims are reportedly only named if their services are interrupted. Ukrainian business representatives have criticised the government and security authorities after the banker Ihor Mazepa was temporarily detained. Mazepa is accused of having illegally acquired land; he was released on bail on 23.01.24. Zelensky has responded to the criticism by setting up a council for entrepreneurship.

In Russian-occupied territories, the Ukrainian language has been stripped of any status for official use, representatives of the occupying authorities have themselves announced.⁴⁵

Embezzlement in the procurement of ammunition

Five people have been charged in connection with the embezzlement/misappropriation of funds intended for the procurement of mortar shells that were ultimately never delivered. Reports citing information provided by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) further state that the individuals in question are officials of the Ministry of Defence and employees of a Lviv-based arms company. One of them was reportedly detained at the border while trying to escape. The embezzlement is said to amount to almost UAH 1.5 billion (approximately EUR 36.6 million, as at 29.01.24). If convicted, the accused face up to 12 years in prison.

Similar cases have also been reported in the past. Corruption and embezzlement in the state apparatus are considered to be a major problem. The government has declared that it will take action against this.⁴⁶

Crash of a transport plane on the Russian-Ukrainian border

Questions are being raised about the crash of an Ilyushin Il-76 transport plane on Russian territory on 24.01.24 in view of the lack of evidence to support either side's claims. According to media reports, the crash occurred to the northeast of the city of Belgorod; Belgorod Oblast borders the Ukrainian oblast of Kharkiv, among others. The exact cause of the crash remains unclear, but it is assumed that the plane was shot down.

According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, there were a total of nine crew and accompanying personnel on board, as well as 65 Ukrainian soldiers who were to have been brought to Ukraine as part of a prisoner exchange. The Russian side said Ukraine was responsible for the crash. The latter in turn stated that there had been no prior communication between the two sides, which was essential given the proximity to a combat zone. The Russian side then stated that Ukraine had been warned 15 minutes before the flight. The list of people on board that was provided by the Russian Federation raised doubts. It reportedly contained the names of prisoners of war who had been able to return to Ukraine in an earlier exchange. Ukraine stated that an exchange of prisoners had been planned for 24.01.24, but it had not taken place. The Il-76 was presumably transporting S-300 missiles for later attacks on Kharkiv.

President Zelensky, who accused the Russian Federation of playing with the lives of Ukrainian prisoners, called for an international investigation into the crash. The UN Security Council dealt with this on 25.01.24 at Russia's request. The aircraft's flight recorders have reportedly since been found and taken to a testing laboratory in Moscow.⁴⁷

Venezuela

Supreme Court confirms ban on Machado running for political office

On 26.01.24, the Supreme Court (TSJ) confirmed the ban on María Corina Machado from the Vente Venezuela party running for political office. This means that it will not be possible for Machado, who clearly won the opposition primaries in October 2023, to run in this year's presidential elections. According to the opposition, this violates the Barbados Agreement of October 2023, which, among other things, provides guarantees for free and fair elections. The US has announced a review of its sanctions policy in connection with the judgement and the recent numerous arrests in connection with conspiracy allegations.⁴⁸

Conspiracy charges and new arrests, launch of the "Furia Bolivariana" campaign

On 22.01.24, Attorney General Tarek William Saab issued arrest warrants for 14 people who were critical of the government or were opposition members as part of Operation Brazalete Blanco, including journalist Sebastiana Barráez, human rights defender Tamara Suju, YouTuber Norbey Marín and a number of retired military officers. The previously named defendants all live in exile abroad. According to Saab, the arrests of three members (Guillermo Lopez, Luis Camacaro and Juan Freites) of the Vente Venezuela party on 23.01.24 are also related to this. The persons in question are being investigated for, among other things, the attempted intentional killing of President Maduro and the governor of the state of Táchira, Freddy Bernal, as well as treason and terrorism. However, Saab has not yet provided any evidence for these accusations, and the accused have denied the allegations. President Maduro repeatedly addresses alleged conspiracies against his person or government in public, most recently in his annual address to the nation on 15.01.24. According to Attorney General Saab, a total of 32 people, including civilians and military personnel, have been arrested in connection with five different conspiracy allegations between May 2023 and January 2024.

Numerous NGOs, media and members of the political opposition have rejected the accusations as criminalisation of opposition and human rights activism and see them as politically motivated. One analyst describes this mechanism as a tactic that has repeatedly been used in the past by Chavismo in critical phases to take action against people critical of the government under the pretext of a coup d'état. Following the announcement of the arrest warrants, Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino López also declared his loyalty to President Maduro, and several similar video messages from military officers were published. On 23.01.24, the armed forces also published a list of 33 military personnel who had been dismissed from the military on alleged conspiracy charges.

On 22.01.24, the vice president of the ruling PSUV party, Diosdado Cabello, also ordered the activation of the civil military "Furia Bolivariana" (Bolivarian Rage) campaign previously announced by Maduro, which aims to "neutralise terrorist attempts to oust him from power". As part of this campaign, numerous buildings belonging to opposition

parties, NGOs and trade unions were graffitied on Democracy Day, 23.01.24, and there were also reports of individual attacks during demonstrations that day as well as an attempted kidnapping.⁴⁹

Yemen

Human rights situation

In its World Report 2024, HRW reports on numerous human rights violations in Yemen, including the restricted freedom of movement for women in Houthi areas, but also in the south, which is under the control of the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC).

Yemeni women face restrictions on movement in areas under Houthi control, where the Houthis have created a legal basis requiring them to be accompanied by a mahram (male relative) in order to cross governorate borders. There is no such legal basis in areas under STC control, but women without a mahram are reportedly denied passage through checkpoints. HRW also accuses the Yemeni government and the Houthis of hampering the work of aid organisations by imposing access restrictions, thereby exacerbating the precarious humanitarian situation in the country.

On 19.01.24, HRW also reported that the Houthis had, since 2015, deliberately blocked water from entering the public water network in the city of Taizz, most of which is controlled by the Yemeni government. As a result, the water shortage that prevails throughout Yemen is particularly pronounced in Taizz, and the supply of other goods has been severely restricted.⁵⁰

Situation in the Red Sea

The situation in the Red Sea remains, by and large, unchanged. Between 22.01.24 and 27.01.24, the Houthis fired several missiles at cargo vessels and at least one US warship. Meanwhile, the US-led coalition has continued to carry out attacks on Houthi military targets in Yemen, including Houthi military targets near the capital Sanaa.⁵¹

Zambia

Zambian government passes new refugee law

According to press reports, the Zambian parliament passed a new refugee law on 19.01.24. The UNHCR welcomed the adoption of the new law. It aligns Zambia's refugee policy with the key objective of the UNHCR Global Compact on Refugees Programme. The aim is to provide greater support to countries that include refugees in their national systems and plans and integrate them into their societies and countries. The new refugee law is intended to improve the legal status of refugees and find regional solutions for forcibly displaced persons. According to the UNHCR, Zambia currently offers protection to 95,518 refugees and other displaced persons in the refugee settlements of Meheba, Mayukwayukwa and Mantapala as well as in urban areas such as Lusaka.⁵²

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