

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1296
Land:	Irak
Kilde:	BAMF
Titel:	Briefing Notes
Udgivet:	4. maj 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	7. september 2020

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

4 May 2020

Afghanistan

Hostilities, attacks, civilian casualties

The media reported fighting and attacks in numerous provinces once again last week. Both NATO and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA - cf. BN of 27.04.20) have reported a marked drop in the number of civilian casualties in the first quarter of 2020. NATO has since stopped publishing information on attacks by the Taliban, however, so as to avoid hampering the political negotiations which are currently in progress between the USA and the Taliban. According to reports in the press, there have been more than 4,500 attacks by the Taliban since the peace accord with the USA (29.02.20), claiming the lives of more than 900 soldiers or police officers and 610 Taliban fighters. Rather than attacking towns or provincial centres, the Taliban have focused on villages in the provinces of Herat, Kabul, Kandahar and Balkh. According to information from the Afghan National Security Council, at least 66 civilians were killed in Taliban attacks in the first week of Ramadan (24.04. to approx. 30.04.20).

At least three people were killed and 15 injured in a suicide attack near the Afghan special forces base in the south-west of the capital, Kabul (police district 7) on 29.04.20, for example.

First Hazara appointed Taliban district chief

The Taliban have appointed a member of the Hazara ethnic group as shadow district chief for the first time in the Balkhab district of the northern province of Sar-e Pul, in the guise of Shiite Mawlawi Mahdi. Observers see this as a step towards adopting more members of the predominantly Shiite Hazara ethnic minority into the Taliban's ranks. Tajiks and Uzbeks have been recruited in the past and there have been a number of Tajik field commanders, but a Hazara has never assumed a leading position. There have long been reports of cooperation between the Taliban and Hazara groups in isolated instances.

Exchange of prisoners

On 02.05.20 the government released a further 98 imprisoned Taliban, bringing the total number to 748. The Taliban are calling for 5,000 people to be released. In return, the Taliban have released 112 of 1,000 captives whom it has promised to free.

COVID-19 pandemic

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

The Afghan health ministry expects that the largest wave of infections with COVID-19 is yet to come. The Afghan finance ministry forecasts a 50 % drop in revenue in the current financial year as a result of COVID-19. In addition, over 3.3 million people have lost their jobs in Iran, including a large number of day labourers, many of whom are Afghans. This means an end to money transfers by labour migrants to Afghanistan, where many families are dependent on these transfers as a means of subsistence.

On 02.05.20 the Afghan government ordered that all commercial domestic flights are to be suspended until the end of Ramadan (24.05.20). Exemptions apply for humanitarian purposes. The lockdown measures in Kabul are to remain in force until the end of Ramadan.

Algeria

Extension of restrictions due to COVID-19

The Algerian government has extended the lockdown measures until 14.05.2020. The measures include a nationwide curfew, the closure of mosques, schools and universities and the suspension of public transport services and flights. 50 % of public-sector employees have been given paid leave.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Preservation of national integrity in return for greater autonomy

According to a media report, Milorad Dodik, the highest representative of the Bosnian Serbs and a member of the multi-ethnic presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has stated in an interview that a break-away of Republika Srpska or the Serbian entity within the joint nation (cf. BN of 02.03.20) is not on the political agenda. Dodik asserted that the Bosnian Serbs would be prepared to preserve the national integrity and the borders of the joint nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina if they were to receive more autonomy rights in future.

China

Journalist sentenced to prison term

On 30.04.20 a court in the city of Guiyang (Hunan province) sentenced the journalist and blogger Chen Jieren to 15 years in prison and fined him seven million yuan (approx. 900,000 euros). He was charged, among other things, with inciting disputes, illegal business practices, blackmail and bribery. The former state media employee adopted a stance critical of the government in social media. In 2018 he was arrested together with several members of his family after having reported on corruption and fraud by regional party leaders. His brother, Chen Weiren, was sentenced to four years in prison and fined 10,000 yuan (approx. 1,300 euros).

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), more than 100 journalists and bloggers are in prison in China. In the Press Freedom Index which is published by RSF, China ranks 177 among 180 countries.

Colombia

Activists killed

Media reports cite the non-governmental organisation Somos Defensores as stating that some 50 activists have been killed since the beginning of 2020, including twelve in March. Some observers are referring to a systematic wave of murders. The most prominent victim is the internationally known human rights activist Marco Rivadeneira, who was abducted and shot dead by unknown assailants on 19.03.20. Rivadeneira's activities included work for the small farmers' organisation Coordinador Nacional Agrario (CNA), which is active throughout the country and forms part of the platform of social movements which goes by the name of Congreso de los Pueblos. At international level, Ravadeneira was active for Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos (CCEEU), an umbrella organisation of over 250 Colombian human rights organisations. His murder was most probably intended in part to intimidate less well-known activists. The quarantine measures which are currently in force in Colombia (cf. BN of 23.03.20) deprive these of the freedom of movement which otherwise affords them a degree of protection.

Ceasefire ended

The guerrilla group Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) will not be extending the temporary unilateral ceasefire declared on account of the corona crisis (cf. BN of 23.03.20) beyond 30.04.20. Media reports cite a statement to this effect released by the rebel organisation on 27.04.20. By way of explanation, the ELN asserts that president Iván Duque's government failed to accommodate it on the road to peace during the ceasefire. Attempts by Carlos Ruiz Massieu, the UN Secretary-General's special envoy in Colombia, to obtain an extension failed. The largest Colombian rebel group, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), concluded a peace treaty with the government in 2016 and laid down its arms. The smaller guerrilla organisation ELN remains active.

Côte d'Ivoire

Severe crop failures feared

For various reasons, experts forecast that the cocoa harvest in Côte d'Ivoire will be substantially below average this year. Côte d'Ivoire is by far the most important producer and exporter of cocoa beans worldwide.

Rampant diseases affecting cacao trees, such as cacao swollen shoot disease (CSSD), have combined with a lack of rain to destroy hopes of at least average harvest yields in most growing regions. Environmental experts point out that the spread of plant diseases such as CSSD are linked to climatic changes. A substantial proportion of Côte d'Ivoire's population works in agriculture and associated sectors – including numerous migrants from neighbouring countries.

Former prime minister sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment

On 28.04.20 Guillaume Soro, former rebel leader and prime minister of Côte d'Ivoire from 2007 to 2012, was sentenced to 20 years in prison, received a large fine and was deprived of his civil rights for five years for misappropriating of public funds. The outcome of the trial is politically charged, as presidential elections are due to take place in the west African country this autumn and the 47 year-old had been seen as having good prospects of succeeding the incumbent president, Alassane Ouattara. His conviction now prevents him from running for presidential office. His lawyers criticised the trial as being politically motivated, while Soro himself described the proceedings as a parody. As he has been living in exile since the end of 2019, he need not fear enforcement of the prison sentence. He is free to appeal against the judgement passed in his absence.

Egypt

Curtailed freedom of expression and freedom of the press during the corona crisis

According to media reports, an unknown number of political activists, lawyers and media representatives have been arrested in recent weeks for criticising the Egyptian government's handling of the corona crisis. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that Egyptian security forces arrested two women on 20.04. and 21.04.20. 35 year-old Kholoud Said has been accused of disseminating fake news in connection with the spread of coronavirus in Egypt and of belonging to a terrorist organisation. No information has emerged as yet on the grounds for arresting the second woman, Marwa Arafa.

Critic and film maker dies in prison

The Egyptian film maker Shadi Habash has died in a high-security prison in Cairo. His lawyer has stated that the cause of his death remains unclear. In a music video released in March 2018, the 24 year-old described Egypt's head of state, Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, as a liar. Shortly afterwards, he was arrested on charges of spreading false information and belonging to an illegal organisation and was held in custody without trial until his death. His lawyer has stated that the cause of his death remains unclear.

Violent clashes on the Sinai peninsula

The Egyptian interior ministry announced on 03.05.20 that 18 suspected IS members had been killed in an exchange of fire with Egyptian security forces near Bir al-Abd on the Sinai peninsula. On 30.04.20, ten soldiers were injured or killed when a booby-trap exploded to the south of the town of Bir al-Abd on the Sinai peninsula. So-called Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack on the following day. According to reports in the media, hundreds of Egyptian security personnel have allegedly died as a result of attacks on the Sinai peninsula since Egypt's head of state Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi assumed power in 2013. IS has claimed responsibility for the majority of these attacks.

El Salvador

Measures against gangs stepped up following rise in number of murders

Following weeks with lower numbers of murders, 77 people were murdered between 24.04 and 27.04.20. According to president Nayib Bukele, there are indications that the murders were ordered by imprisoned members of criminal gangs. The president claims that gangs have taken advantage of the fact that the police's attention was focused on fighting COVID-19. He has consequently ordered the most stringent security measures for all prisons in which gang members are serving sentences. They are now no longer allowed to leave their cells. In addition, members of mutually hostile gangs are to be imprisoned together. This has specifically been avoided to date, in order to prevent violence from erupting in prisons. The cells are also to be completely closed off, so that the inmates are no longer able to look outside. Bukele has furthermore authorised the police and military to use lethal force even where this is not necessary as a last resort in fighting criminal gangs.

Gangs of youths (maras) are a problem in El Salvador and other Central American countries. The largest gangs are the "Mara Salvatrucha" (MS-13) and "18th Street" (M-18). Gangs are believed to be responsible for a large proportion of violent crime in the affected countries. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 454,000 people were internally displaced as a result of conflicts and violence, including the activities of criminal gangs, in El Salvador in 2019.

India

COVID-19 pandemic

On 29.04.20 India confirmed a death toll of more than 1,000 as a result of coronavirus. The officially reported infection figures are not reliable, however. The most recently reported figures put the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases at approx. 42,400 and the number of infected people who have died at just under 1,400.

The Indian government has extended the nationwide lockdown by an additional two weeks, until 17.05.20. The lockdown measures are to be eased in regions with relatively few cases of infection, however. For this purpose, the government has divided up the national territory into three zones: Red zones for regions in which there is a substantial risk of the virus spreading, green zones for regions in which there have been no new infections over 21 days, and orange zones. In the red and orange zones, people are only allowed to leave their homes in medical emergencies and to buy food. The country's largest and densely populated cities are all classified red. Densely populated cities, such as Mumbai, are finding it particularly difficult to contain the spread of the virus. It is here that the biggest slum in Asia, Dharavari, is situated, where social distancing is practically impossible.

The agricultural sector, in which half of the working population is employed, is particularly severely affected. Air and rail transport have been suspended and suprarregional car traffic is also banned. Schools and higher education establishments, hotels, restaurants, large shopping centres and cultural sites all remain closed. Migrant workers, pilgrims, tourists and students are to be returned home on special trains.

On 28.04.20 the government released migrants who had been detained at overcrowded facilities in the north-eastern federal state of Assam because of the corona pandemic, following a ruling by the Supreme Court.

The use of hydroxychloroquine (HCQ), a medication which serves, among other things, to prevent malaria, has been approved in India for people who are at particular risk, such as healthcare employees or police officers. In Mumbai, as in other parts of India, these people have begun taking HCQ, although there is no evidence that the medication is actually suitable to prevent infection with COVID-19-

USCIRF annual report on religious freedom

In its annual report published on 28.04.20, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) names India for the first time among the countries with the highest levels of restriction of religious freedom ('countries of particular concern'). According to the report, religious minorities were subjected to restrictions on freely practicing their faith in 2019. It claims that the Hindu nationalist government led by the Bharatiya-Janata Party (BJP) and headed by prime minister Narendra Modi, which was re-elected in 2019, tolerates violence against minorities and places of prayer, for example. The prime minister is also alleged to allow hate speech and incitement to violence, as recently illustrated in New Delhi. Further concerns raised by the report are the new nationality act, which discriminates in particular against Muslims, and the revocation of

the special status for Jammu and Kashmir, which has a majority Muslim population. The Indian government considers the report's findings to be biased and to represent a new level of misinterpretation.

Calls for boycotts, attacks on Muslims

The tense situation for day labourers, street vendors and owners of small shops has sparked calls to boycott Muslim vegetable hawkers in the interests of protection from infection with the corona virus. The boycott is supported by the ruling Hindu nationalist party BJP in the federal state of Uttar Pradesh. Muslims are being blamed for the spread of coronavirus and accused of pursuing a conspiracy. In various parts of the country, radical Hindu groups are reported to have handed out saffron-coloured flags to vegetable hawkers who belong to the Hindu faith, so as to enable them to be distinguished from Muslim vendors. Posters prohibiting entry for Muslims have been put up in shops in some districts of New Delhi and in various towns in the federal states of Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Telangana. An attack was recently reported on a mosque in the district of Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh. There also appear to have been numerous attacks on Muslims in New Delhi.

Kashmir: Current situation

The situation is particularly tense in the Indian part of Kashmir in view of the lockdown which has been in force since August 2019.

The continuing lockdown has interrupted the education of some 1.5 million pupils and students, restricted access to medical facilities particularly in rural areas and brought life to a standstill in various sectors of the economy. Access to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and humanitarian aid is virtually impossible. Rural regions in particular are cut off from media coverage.

In conjunction with the continuing conflict situation in the region, the lockdown measures are having particularly severe negative effects on the population's mental health. A study from 2015 estimated that half of all Kashmiris had mental health problems. Nine out of ten people had already suffered conflict-related traumas at the time. According up-to-date information from a psychiatrist practising in Kashmir, the region had an average of 100 patients a week suffering from mental illness in 2019, while the corresponding figure currently stands at 500 a week, with only 60 psychiatrists practising in the region.

Five members of the security forces and two insurgents were recently killed in an exchange of fire on 03.05.20.

Iran / Saudi Arabia

An annual report published by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) on 28.04.20 highlights Iran and Saudi Arabia as countries which are particularly active in propagating their official state religion internationally, thereby fostering religious intolerance. This takes place above all through education - via the proliferation of corresponding school books or the establishment of links with religious schools (madrasas). In Iran, the authors also note an increase in the persecution of the Baha'i. The members of this religious community believe in the oneness of god, religion and humanity. In their country of origin, the Baha'i form the largest religious minority. They are suspected of collaborating with Israel, because the Israeli coastal city of Haifa is the community's world centre. According to the report, Christians - particularly converts to Islam - and supporters of Sufism are also subject to persecution. In Saudi Arabia, the report claims that the government prohibits any public exercising of religion apart from Islam - more precisely the Hanbalite school of jurisprudence which forms part of Sunni Islam. Shiites are not permitted to build mosques in areas in which they do not represent the majority.

Iranian writers' association on the situation regarding freedom of expression

In a statement to mark World Press Freedom Day on 03.05.20, the Iranian writers' association Sanaye Varaq-e Iran (SVI) described the situation regarding freedom of expression in Iran as "deplorable", noting that the standing of the press in Iranian society is being continually eroded, primarily as a result of state censorship. The latter is cited as the primary reason why the influence of the printed media in society is increasingly waning. The announcement, published on Facebook on 03.05.20, adds that censorship also leads to cultural decadence and corruption. According to the Press Freedom Index, which is published annually by the Reporters Without Borders organisation (RSF), Iran ranked 170th among 180 countries in 2019. This classification represents a drop of six places for the country in comparison to 2018.

Iraq

Adjustment of COVID-19 measures

The restrictions on movement, the night-time curfew (cf. BN of 27.04.20) and the complete lockdown at the weekend are expected to remain in force until 22.05.20.

The measures (cf. BN of 27.04.20) in the Kurdistan Region (KR-I) are to be extended provisionally until 10.05.20. In urgent cases, permits for travel between the provinces can be applied for using an online form.

Humanitarian organisations still have only restricted access to official refugee camps and unofficial refugee settlements. The primary obstacle is the authorities' refusal to issue passes and restrictions on movement. Deliveries of food supplies, e.g. by the World Food Program (WFP), have been resumed, however. Particularly problematic factors for people in refugee camps are the inability to pursue employment due to the restrictions on movement and the lack of access to financial assistance.

Coordinated IS attack on Iraqi security forces

A coordinated IS attack on Iraqi security forces belonging to the Popular Mobilisation Units took place in Salahaddin province on 02.05.20. According to media reports, the forces were attacked from several directions. At least ten fighters were killed and several injured. In recent months, so-called Islamic State (IS) has exploited security gaps in the territories which are disputed by Iraq's central government and the Kurdish regional government to launch attacks on villages and security forces.

According to Kurdish security sources, attacks in these territories have increased. IS has reportedly carried out 85 attacks since January 2020 alone, in the course of which 70 people have been killed and 161 injured. IS apparently also carries out abductions, primarily targeting civilians.

Political crisis in Iraq remains unresolved

Iraq is currently undergoing a political crisis. The country has been without a new government since prime minister Adel Abd al-Mahdi resigned at the end of 2019. The third candidate to since emerge for the prime minister's office, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, has been mandated to form a government. His proposals to date have been rejected in parliament, however. Al-Kadhimi has stressed that a swift political settlement is necessary in order to guarantee the population's security.

To date, it has proven impossible to achieve agreement between the Kurdistan Region (KR-I) and the central government in Baghdad on the coordination of security tasks in the disputed territories. The situation has been compounded by a renewed quarrel between the two governments over the national budget (cf. BN of 27.04.20). No resolution to this issue has been forthcoming to date, either. The financial strain puts the Kurdish regional government under pressure. A committee is to be established in Suleimanya province on 30.04.20 to detach financial and administrative tasks from the central regional government in Erbil. The local government in Suleimanya has warned the committee against any attempts at decentralisation. Suleimanya province is controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), while the provinces of Dohuk and Erbil are under the control of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The two parties agreed on this division of KR-I in the 1990s, in the wake of a civil war.

Kenya

COVID-19 – Africa's largest refugee camp sealed off

The Kenyan government has announced that the largest refugee camp in Africa, Camp Dadaab in the east of the country close to the border with Somalia, has been sealed off for fear of an outbreak of coronavirus. The CARE relief organisation, which is active in Dadaab, has expressed concern, stating that there is a lack of personnel and materials and that only a basic standard of healthcare can be ensured at present. CARE reported on 29.04.20 that only 110 hospital beds are available for over 270,000 people, describing the situation as alarming. No case of COVID-19 has been registered in Dadaab to date.

In addition to Dadaab, the Kakuma refugee camp in the north-west of the country, in which almost 200,000 people live, has also been sealed off. The most severely affected region around the capital, Nairobi, is also under quarantine, as are the second-largest city, Mombasa, and coastal regions.

Lebanon

Attempts to resolve economic crisis and protests

In view of the country's debt crisis and bleak economic situation, the cabinet resolved on 30.04.20 to request assistance from the International Monetary Fund. Protests against this decision took place in various towns and cities in Lebanon on 01.05.20. The protests remained largely peaceful, the night-time curfews imposed because of the corona crisis were largely observed and many people wore protective masks. The combination of high national debt, an economic crisis and a lockdown imposed because of the corona crisis is currently providing for a strong decline in economic output and soaring inflation, which is making it substantially more difficult for many Lebanese to obtain basic necessities.

Libya

General Haftar declares humanitarian ceasefire in fasting month Ramadan

On 29.04.20 Ahmed al-Mismari, spokesperson for general Khalifa Haftar, declared a humanitarian ceasefire for the whole of Libya. This means that all military operations by the Libyan National Army (LNA) are to be suspended during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. Al-Mismari said that any breaches of the ceasefire by the opposite side would meet with an immediate response.

In a statement on 30.04.20 the Government of National Accord (GNA) rejected the ceasefire announced by Haftar, stating that it did not trust the opposite side.

In a television address on 27.04.20, Haftar declared the agreement negotiated by the United Nations on the distribution of power in Libya to have failed and proclaimed that he had a "mandate from the people" to rule Libya. The GNA described Haftar's annulment of the UN agreement as a farce and a coup d'état.

Morocco

Mass outing of homosexuals via social media

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has reported on dating apps which expose homosexuals. These apps, such as Grindr and PlanetRomeo, enable photographs to be uploaded. These photographs are published in relevant Facebook groups, whereupon first and foremost gay and bisexual men are subjected to blackmail and bullying. Homosexuality constitutes a punishable offence in Morocco, but is generally only prosecuted by the state when reported to the police by third persons.

Mozambique

Around 130 Islamists killed by security forces in April

On 28.04.20 the interior minister announced that security forces in Mozambique's most northerly province, Cabo Delgado, had killed at least 129 extremists in April 2020. He said that this was a reprisal for the extremists' attack on the village of Xitaxi (Muidumbe district, Cabo Delgado province) on 07.04.20, in which 52 villagers were killed (cf. BN of 27.04.20). According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), over 700 civilians have been killed in the province since the Islamists referred to as Al-Shabaab began their insurgency in Cabo Delgado province in October 2017, with the period from January to April 2020 accounting for 200 of this death toll.

Pakistan

COVID-19 pandemic

The nationwide lockdown imposed because of the COVID-19 pandemic is to remain in force until 09.05.20 (cf. BN of 27.04.20). The officially reported infection figures are not reliable. The most recently reported figures put the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases at over 20,000 and the number of infected people who have died at 460. The government expects the numbers of cases to peak in mid-May. Emergency hospitals with a capacity for thousands of patients have been set up. Restrictions on inner-city bus transport have been

announced at weekends because the possibility of medical facilities becoming overstrained cannot be ruled out. Workers from out of town are not to be allowed to return to their native villages.

Somalia

Flooding claims a number of lives

Heavy rainfall has caused flooding in several regions of Somalia. It has been reported that six people died in the town of Quardo, Bari region on 27.04.20. Thousands of people throughout the country have lost their homes and farms.

Executions for spying

It has been reported that Al-Shabaab publicly executed three men in the town of El Bur, Galguduud region, on 28.04.20. The men were accused of having spied for western secret services.

AFRICOM acknowledges killing of civilians

In a new report assessing civilian fatalities as a result of American air raids, which is now to appear on a quarterly basis, United States Africa Command (US AFRICOM) admits that civilians were killed and injured in an air raid in February 2019. The targets of the air raid – two Al-Shabaab members – were also killed. AFRICOM has been accused in the past of having killed civilians in air raids. This is only the second time that such accusations have been officially acknowledged.

Sudan

Ban on female genital mutilation (FGM)

The foreign ministry announced on 01.05.20 that the Sudanese interim government had made female genital mutilation (FGM) a punishable offence. A corresponding paragraph in the country's criminal law is to be amended. Anyone convicted of FGM will face up to three years' imprisonment. According to information from the United Nations, 87 % of women and girls aged between 14 and 49 in Sudan have been circumcised.

Syria

Serious attack in Afrin

Dozens of people died in the city of Afrin, which is occupied by the Turkish military and associated Syrian Arab militias, when a fuel truck to which an explosive device had been fitted exploded on a busy street on 28.04.20. The Turkish defence ministry spoke of at least 40 dead and 47 people injured. According to unconfirmed reports in the Turkish media, security forces are blaming the attack on Kurdish insurgents. Afrin came under the control of the Turkish military in March 2018, since when there have been repeated attacks in the region, which are blamed on the Kurdish rebels. The Kurdish militia YPG denies carrying out any attacks on civilians, however.

Supply shortages in efforts to combat virus in north-east

Human Rights Watch (HRW) warned on 28.04.20 that the conflicts between the central government in Damascus and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the north-east of the country would lead to medical supplies to combat the spread of COVID-19 or treat infected patients failing to reach the SDF territories. HRW thus appealed to the UN Security Council to re-open the Al-Yarubiyah border crossing point to Iraq. Until the beginning of 2020, the crossing point was used by the WHO to transport medical supplies into the territories under Kurdish-dominated administration. In January the crossing point had to be closed for aid agencies at the insistence of Russia.

According to an HRW spokesperson, there are virtually no testing capacities in the region concerned and only ten respirators for adults and one for children to cover a total population of around two million people.

The government in Damascus reportedly transported relief supplies to Qamishli in the north-east in March and April. In contrast to the other towns and regions in the north-east, Qamishli is under the control of Damascus.

Bazaars re-open

The government in Damascus announced on 29.04.20 that the nationwide lockdown is to be extended for the time being. Further measures to ease the situation for traders and markets are to enter into force, however. Traders are only required to observe the official opening times which the government has stipulated for shops (8 a.m. to 5 p.m.). Market trading provides a particularly important means of economic support for many Syrians during Ramadan.

According to official information, a total of 43 cases of corona have been confirmed to date in Syria and three people have died of the virus.

Turkey

Lockdown

Turkey's president Erdogan has imposed a further extensive three-day lockdown for 31 cities and provinces from 01.05. to 03.05.20 because of the corona crisis. On 1 May supermarkets were allowed to open between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. Further lockdowns are planned at weekends at least until Ramadan finishes at the end of May.

Homophobic remarks in sermon

In his sermon to mark the beginning of the fasting month of Ramadan on 24.04.20, Ali Erbaş, the head of the Turkish religious authority, Diyanet, said that homosexuality gave rise to diseases. He described homosexuals as anti-Islamic heretics and also criticised adultery and unmarried couples living together. The Ankara law society and a Turkish human rights organisation consequently filed a complaint against Erbaş with Ankara's chief public prosecutor on grounds of homophobia and incitement of the masses. Turkish president Erdogan then weighed into the dispute, stating that Ali Erbaş' comments were absolutely correct, as homosexuality was a serious crime for Islam. He said that as Erbaş was the chairman of the religious authority, an attack on him was an attack on the state, adding that religious issues were a matter for the Diyanet and not for lawyers' associations. In this connection, the public prosecutor's office initiated investigations into the law society on the grounds that the lawyers' representative body had offended the people's religious feelings. Homosexuality is not prohibited in Turkey. Cases of discrimination are nevertheless regularly raised by activists.

Venezuela

Targeting of journalists

There are indications that the state is specifically targeting journalists covering the corona pandemic in Venezuela. According to the Redes Ayuda relief agency, ten journalists have been arrested since 13.03.20 and around two dozen have been threatened by representatives of the government or groups close to the government, such as the Colectivos. Consequently, it is not possible to obtain reliable information about the state of the corona pandemic in Venezuela. The reports filed by the journalists indicated serious shortcomings in the healthcare system which mean that medical treatment for the illness is only possible in a very small number of cases.

Prison riot against restrictions

A riot occurred at the Los Llanos prison in the city of Guanare on 01.05.20 due to the restrictions on visits which have been imposed in connection with the corona crisis. As per 02.05.20, 46 fatalities had been identified. Final figures are not yet available. Visiting rights have been suspended for the time being because of the corona crisis. As inmates at Venezuelan prisons are often dependent on assistance from relatives or friends, this measure may have represented an acute threat for some inmates at least.

Western Balkans

Pandemic endangering freedom of the press

According to current media reports there is a danger that some Balkan states could exploit the corona crisis to undermine the freedom of the press and the freedom of information. In its current worldwide ranking report, the organisation Reporters Without Borders (RSF) warns of the danger of growing pressure on the independent media in these countries and attempts to exert more control over public service broadcasters, for example.

Bosnia and Herzegovina ranks best among the Balkan states in the RSF index. The report notes that the collapse of public service broadcasting in Bosnia and Herzegovina nevertheless remains one of the main problems – along with highly nationalistic rhetoric. Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro follow in the rankings, with progressively worse index ratings. The report highlights a complete lack of progress in the latter country, pointing out that government authorities support pro-government online platforms while obstructing others. Journalists were apparently arrested in Montenegro recently on charges of scaremongering. The report also states that there are concrete examples of unexplained cases of violence against investigative journalists in Montenegro, adding that similar cases are also known to have occurred in Serbia and Kosovo. In Kosovo, the media landscape is seen as being split first and foremost along ethnic lines. In Serbia, an alarming increase in aggressive rhetoric by politicians against journalists is to be observed. In Albania, the situation is considered to have been exacerbated by the introduction of a new law which could make it easier for authorities to censor and take action against journalists. While progress is to be reported in North Macedonia, there are cases of restrictive actions against media institutions by local authorities, for example.

Yemen

First deaths from coronavirus reported

The first deaths from coronavirus were reported on 29.04.20. Cases have since been discovered in the administrative districts of Taizz, Aden and Hadramawt. The UN fears that the spread of the virus is going undetected, due to a lack of testing facilities. The healthcare system has collapsed on account of the war.

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