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Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

3 February 2020

Afghanistan

Increase in enemy-initiated attacks – number of civilian casualties fell in the fourth quarter of 2019

According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), NATO reports that enemy-initiated attacks in Afghanistan during the fourth quarter of 2019 were the highest for that quarter in any year. The number of attacks was particularly high during the presidential election held in September 2019, with NATO claiming there were 1,878 civilian casualties in the fourth quarter, 20% fewer than in the fourth quarter of 2018. NATO puts the total number of civilian casualties in 2019 at 9,189, which is roughly the same as in 2018 (9,214). Kabul and Nangarhar provinces continued to experience the highest number of civilian casualties in 2018 and 2019. Other high casualty figures were recorded last year in the provinces of Ghazni, Kandahar, Helmand, Herat, Kunduz and Baghlan. Relatively few civilian casualties were recorded in the provinces of Badakhshan, Nuristan, Panjshir, Jowzjan, Samangan, Baghlan, Daykundi and Nimroz. The report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) on civilian casualties in the conflict is expected to be issued by mid-February 2020. Experience shows that the figures on civilian casualties there are higher than those of NATO. Amnesty International claims 8,239 civilians were killed or injured in the period between 01.01.10 and 30.09.19.

Algeria

Protestors arrested

Demonstrations have continued even since the election of the new President Abdelmadjid Tebboune on 12.12.19. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), several arrests have reportedly been made, although Tebboune promised to enter into a dialogue with the demonstrators after the election. Activists say that more people were arrested back in December 2019 a few days before the election.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Ex-chief prosecutor tried for abuse of office

According to the latest press reports, the trial against the former chief prosecutor Goran Salihovic opened in Sarajevo on 28.01.20. He is charged with abuse of office. The court accuses him of having misappropriated funds amounting to approximately EUR 41,000 between 2013 and 2016. According to prosecutor Amra Mehmedic, witnesses report that the defendant acted arbitrarily and arrogantly in the exercise of his office. The defendant himself rejects the accusation of abuse of office and describes the accusations against him as a witch-hunt.

Burkina Faso

Around 60 killed in terrorist attacks

Heavily-armed jihadists attacked the village of Lamdamol (municipality of Bani, northern province of Séno), killing almost 20 civilians in the early hours of 01.02.20.

According to government sources, an Islamist terrorist group attacked the village of Silgadji (northern province of Soum) on 25.01.20, killing 39 civilians. A villager reported that the terrorists had separated men and women. He said the men had been executed, while the women had been ordered to leave the village.

China

Coronavirus continues to spread

The respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus 2019-nCoV continues to spread. To date, 17,205 infections have been officially confirmed and 361 people have died. Public transport has been suspended in the city of Wenzhou (Wuhan province) which has a population of nine million. Schools and universities have been closed; the population has been called upon to leave their homes only to pick up groceries. Several cities in Hubei province had already been placed under a lockdown. Chinese experts expect the epidemic to peak in China around mid-February 2020. 180 cases have been confirmed so far outside the People's Republic in more than 20 countries, and ten in Germany. The WHO declared the situation a global health emergency on 30.01.20. This enables internationally coordinated measures to be taken against the disease.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

ADF rebels kill a large number of civilians; army makes sweeping progress

On 01.02.20, the government announced that suspected rebels of the Islamist Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) had killed at least 62 civilians during the week. According to the NGO Centre for Studies to Promote Peace, Democracy and Human Rights (CEPADHO), at least 74 civilians were killed in ten villages within the space of just 48 hours. According to the Kivu Security Tracker, this brings to 312 the number of civilians killed by terrorists in the eastern Congolese region of Beni since the army's offensive to drive the ADF out of the forests near the Ugandan border, which began on 30.10.19. According to the army, the government soldiers managed to take the ADF headquarters in Madina in the first half of January, killing around 40 rebels, including five high-ranking officers.

Gambia

Government bans protest movement

The government has banned the protest movement 3 Years Jotna (which means "enough" in the local Wolof language) following anti-government demonstrations. The organisation is a subversive and violent movement that wants to overthrow the President. For weeks, people have been taking to the streets to protest against President Adama Barrow. On 26.01.20, clashes erupted between demonstrators and security forces in the capital Banjul. According to physicians, three demonstrators were killed and more than two dozen people were injured. The news agency AFP claims that almost 140 people were arrested, including the leader of the protest movement Njie. Two radio stations accused of inciting violence during the demonstrations have been temporarily suspended. Barrow has faced major challenges since his election in 2016, his inauguration on 18.02.17 and amid the associated mood of optimism that has prevailed since the end of the Jammeh dictatorship. Barrow had announced that if he was elected President, he would form a transitional government for three years in which all parties of the opposition alliance would be represented. After Barrow refused to honour his campaign promise to resign by this month, declaring that the Constitution required him to serve a full five-year term, demonstrations increased. Hundreds of Jammeh supporters protested earlier this year, demanding that former head of state Yahya Jammeh be allowed to return to The Gambia from exile in Equatorial Guinea.

India

Shots fired at protestors in New Delhi

Demonstrations against the controversial amendment of the citizenship law continue unabated in the capital New Delhi.

On 30.01.20, a gunman fired shots at protestors near the Muslim Jamia Millia Islamia University, injuring a student.

On 01.02.20, shots were fired at participants of a sit-in in the Muslim district of Shaheen Bagh. Nobody was injured, the assailant was arrested.

Kashmir: some Internet access restored

In Kashmir, access to the Internet has been gradually restored since 25.01.20, albeit to a limited extent. Indian authorities are only allowing access to certain “whitelisted” websites. Social media remain blocked. The Internet in Kashmir Valley was shut down completely at the beginning of August 2019.

Iraq

Allawi appointed prime minister

After President Barham Salih issued Parliament with an ultimatum to appoint a new prime minister, Mohammad Tawfiq Allawi was appointed on 01.02.20. Allawi had already been communications minister under Nouri al-Maliki. He now has one month to form a new government. Shortly after his appointment, anti-government protests erupted in Baghdad and other parts of Iraq. At the same time, Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the largest political bloc in parliament, declared his support for Allawi and instructed his supporters, known as blue hats, to assist the security forces in maintaining public order. The blue hats had mingled among the anti-government demonstrators until 24.01.20 in order to form a kind of protective force between them and the Iraqi security forces. After al-Sadr officially withdrew his support for the protests, the blue hats left the protest camps which were attacked by the security forces shortly afterwards (cf. BN of 27.01.20).

On 01.02.20, the blue hats took control of the Turkish restaurant, an empty multi-storey building in the centre of Baghdad, which has become the landmark of the anti-government protests. Despite al-Sadr’s calls to end the protests and strikes, hundreds of students marched across the city on 02.02.20 to denounce the nomination of Mohammed Allawi and to protest against road blockades in Baghdad and other cities. Observers warn of an escalation between al-Sadr’s supporters and the anti-government protesters who have been peaceful so far.

Resumption of joint anti-ISIS operations with the help of the US-led coalition

On 30.01.20, the US-led international coalition against Islamic State resumed joint military operations with the Iraqi forces. These military operations had been suspended on 05.01.20 after missiles had been fired at Iraqi military bases accommodating American troops. According to media reports, military operations have resumed because of the ongoing military activities of ISIS.

Mauritania

French language banned in Parliament

Since 31.01.20, MPs are only allowed to communicate in the National Assembly in Arabic or one of the three other national languages (Pulaar, Soninke or Wolof). Although the President of the National Assembly has installed a system of simultaneous interpretation (Arabic-French), black African MPs feel discriminated against, claiming that French is the working language under the Mauritanian Constitution. Although the black Mauritians understand the three other national languages, they are often not understood by the Bidhan (white Moors), who form the majority in the government, or the Haratin (black Moors). They are rather united by the Arabic dialect Hassaniyya.

The measure is a clear signal against the black Mauritanian population, which is still clearly under-represented in the government, holding only about five of the ministerial posts out of a total of 27, although it represents 30% of the population. In all other areas of Mauritanian life, such as administration, the economy and the judiciary, either few or no persons from this population group are represented in the hierarchy. It is also

disproportionately affected by “modern slavery”. Local NGOs assume that around 600,000 people in Mauritania live under slavery-like conditions. The Global Slavery Index 2018 ranks Mauritania 6th out of a total of 167 countries. This makes the proportion of “modern slaves” in the total population the highest in the world.

Montenegro

Government critics detained

According to media reports, the journalist Igor Damjanovic was temporarily detained by the police on 24.01.20 over his conversation on Facebook with another person who then filed a case against him. Damjanovic claimed the real reason for his detention was not his verbal exchange on Facebook but his long record of anti-NATO activism, which has irked the government.

The journalist Milija Goranovic had been briefly arrested on 23.01.20. According to media reports, she had insulted the country’s police chief by making a critical comment below one of his Facebook posts. In the meantime, she has been sentenced to a fine of EUR 500.

On 28.01.20, the public prosecutor ordered the activist Vesko Pejak to be put into custody for 72 hours because he allegedly predicted an outbreak of war in Montenegro in a Facebook post. The prediction had reportedly caused panic and disorder.

The arrests occurred at a time when social tensions were running high. Nationwide protests against the so-called Law on Religious Freedom have been taking place since the end of 2019 (cf. BN of 13.01.20). Observers see this development as a bid to step up pressure on the media in Montenegro, which has been exerted for some time. Three journalists had already been temporarily detained in the first half of January (cf. BN of 20.01.20).

Opposition leader’s mother arrested

Police in Montenegro arrested the mother of the leader of the opposition Milan Knezevic on 31.01.20. According to media reports, the 70-year-old is accused of violating the Law on Public Order and obstructing police officers during a house search. She was released the same day.

Knezevic suspects that his mother’s arrest is linked to the opposition’s protest against the Law on Religious Freedom (cf. BN of 13.01.20).

North Macedonia/Albania

Talks on EU accession negotiations remain open

According to recent press reports, talks on the opening of accession negotiations with the candidate countries North Macedonia and Albania will continue in 2020, as both countries have fulfilled the requirements from the EU Parliament’s perspective. North Macedonia will also be backed by Croatia, which currently holds the EU Presidency, as Prime Minister of Croatia Andrej Plenkovic announced at a joint press conference with President of the European Council Charles Michel in Zagreb in mid-January 2020. North Macedonia deserves to start negotiations after changing its name, according to Plenkovic. President Michel of the European Council says a “complicated debate” is expected to ensue on the question of EU enlargement. France’s veto at the EU summit in October 2019 was mainly due to procedural objections. When he visited Skopje on 15.01.20, EU Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Várhelyi also stressed in the presence of President Stevo Pendarovski that North Macedonia is a reliable partner for the EU and that its reform efforts are proving to be effective. He said the ongoing work processes should therefore be accelerated in view of the EU summit in May 2020 and have a real impact on the region.

Pakistan

Additional PTM members arrested

The arrest of the leader of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) (cf. BN of 27.01.20) triggered nationwide protests on 28.01.20. At least 20 additional members as well as a member of parliament of the PTM have been arrested. The PTM is a social movement for Pashtun human rights in Pakistan. With a share of 15% of the total

population, they represent the largest ethnic minority in Pakistan and live along the border with Afghanistan, especially in the former tribal areas, which, following a territorial reform, now belong to the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The Pakistani military has been conducting operations against Islamist militias in this region for years. In this context, the movement accuses the military of violating human rights of the civilian population caught between the fronts. It calls for the clearance of landmines and the establishment of an independent commission to probe possible offences committed by the army and the secret service. Reporting on the PTM is largely censored by the Pakistani government.

State of emergency due to invasion of locusts

The government declared a state of emergency on 01.02.20 in response to swarms of desert locusts in the eastern part of the country that spread across the entire country and into the north where they have been ravaging crops since June 2019. The Pakistani government fears it will be the worst locust infestation in more than two decades.

Somalia

Somalia declares national state of emergency over locust swarms

Somalia is the first country in the Horn of Africa to declare a national emergency because of swarms of locusts. The swarms of desert locusts pose a major threat to Somalia's fragile food security situation as they consume large amounts of vegetation which provide sustenance for people and animals. It is the worst locust infestation in 25 years, and neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya are also affected. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warns that the swarms could become even larger if they are not successfully controlled and has initially appealed for three million dollars to tackle the infestation.

Executions by al-Shabaab

According to local news, al-Shabaab publicly executed three men in the village of Kamsuma, Lower Jubba region, on 25.01.20. One man was accused of being a member of an army brigade trained by the United States. The second man was accused of being a member of the regional Jubaland security forces and the third man was accused of spying for the Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF).

Sudan/South Sudan

People killed in attack on a village in the Abyei Area

32 villagers were reportedly killed and 25 injured in an armed attack on a Dinka village in the Abyei Area on 22.01.20. Some people, including children, are still missing. Armed men are suspected to have been behind the attack, who are said to belong to the ethnic group of nomadic Misseriya herders. Since November 2019, there has been a repeated outbreak of violence in the region and conflicts between members of the Dinka and Misseriya. Clashes between Dinka and Misseriya are said to have occurred in Kolom on 20.01.20, in which three people were killed.

The Abyei Area lies on the border between Sudan and South Sudan; so far no agreement has been reached on the final status of the region.

Syria

Clashes in Idlib

According to the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least ten civilians were killed and dozens injured in air strikes on a hospital in the city of Ariha and other rebel areas around the city of Idlib on 30.01.20. The attack is believed to have been carried out by Russian warplanes. However, the Russian Ministry of Defence denies the claim.

In addition, in the Russian-backed offensive, Syrian troops reportedly captured Maaret al-Numan, the second-largest towns in Idlib province and took control of strategically important parts of the city.

According to the Turkish government, the Syrian army killed four Turkish soldiers and injured nine others during its advance. The Turkish troops responded with a counter offensive. The military operation is still ongoing. According to Turkish sources, up to 35 Syrian soldiers have been killed. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says six soldiers were killed and more than 20 were injured.

Turkey has twelve military observation posts in Idlib, which were established on the basis of an agreement concluded between Russia and Turkey in September 2018.

Rebel attacks near Aleppo

According to media reports, rebels supported by Turkey tried to open a new front over the weekend by carrying out several suicide bombings and new attacks on government troop positions around the city of Aleppo east of Idlib.

Tajikistan

Suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood arrested

In January 2020, a total of 113 people were detained for alleged membership of the Muslim Brotherhood. Among those arrested were reportedly more than 20 university professors and one official. Tajik authorities banned the Muslim Brotherhood as an extremist group in 2006.

Journalists arrested

A court in the capital of Dushanbe ordered that the independent journalist Daler Sharifov be placed in pre-trial detention for two months on 30.01.20. He is accused of inciting ethnic, racial, and religious discord. He is said to have published more than 200 articles and commentaries containing extremist content between 2013 and 2019. Sharifov could face five years in prison if found guilty of the charges. As an independent journalist, Sharifov writes about domestic politics in his home country and criticises the authorities, among other things.

Turkey

Kavala remains in prison

On 28.01.20, a Turkish court once again refused to release the intellectual Osman Kavala, who has been imprisoned for more than two years on the grounds of urgent suspicion of a committing a criminal offence and at risk of fleeing. The court thus continued to oppose a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) calling for his release in December 2019. The judges stated that the judgment of the ECtHR was not yet final. Kavala is head of the cultural institute Anadolu Kültür and sits on the board of several civil society organisations. He and 15 other defendants are accused of trying to overthrow the government during the Gezi Park protests of 2013.

Venezuela

One of the highest murder rates worldwide

According to the NGOs Insight Crime and Venezuelan Violence Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia (OVV)), the rate of homicides in 2019 fell from over 80 per 100,000 inhabitants to just over 60 per 100,000 inhabitants with the decline being attributed to the fact that several major drug trafficking conflicts may have been decided between actors and affect groups that frequently become perpetrators. In addition, security forces have taken action against brutal gangs. However, allegations remain that a significant proportion of the fatalities included extrajudicial killings by these very police forces.