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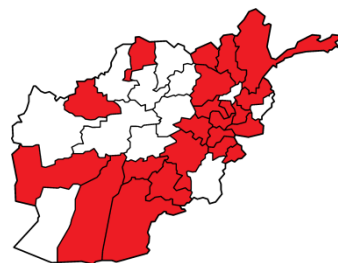
Briefing Notes

8 May 2017

Afghanistan

Armed clashes

Fights are continuing, with cleansing campaigns and raids carried out by the security forces as well as attacks and assaults by the insurgents, in which civilians are killed or wounded. According to press reports, the following provinces were affected during the last two weeks: Takhar, Kunduz, Badakhshan, Baghlan (northeast), Logar, Kapisa, Parwan, Maidan Wardak (centre), Zabul, Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan (south), Laghman, Nangarhar (east), Ghazni, Paktia, Khost (southeast), Jawzjan, Faryab (north; here, fights between IS and Taliban insurgents have claimed the lives of over 90 combatants on both sides) and Farah (west).



In the beginning of May, numerous Islamists were killed in fights between Taliban and IS insurgents in several districts of eastern Nangarhar province. These fights also claimed the lives of one nine-year-old girl and of five more civilians. Seven houses were burnt down, and numerous families have left the area.

On 6 May 2017, Taliban insurgents recaptured Qala-i-Zal district (northern Kunduz province) after two days of fierce fighting. In Khanabad district, fighting is continuing, with the Taliban controlling the Kunduz-Khanabad highway. Thousands of civilians have fled the area of intense fighting, many of them have gone to Kunduz city. In neighbouring Badakhshan province, Taliban insurgents captured Zibak district on 6 May. Last weekend, government troops launched an operation to recapture the areas. In eastern Nuristan province, Taliban have been besieging Want Waigal district for several days now.

On 5 May, clashes between Afghan and Pakistani border forces near Spin Boldak (Kandahar) and Chaman (Balochistan) claimed the lives of soldiers and civilians on both sides. There is inconsistent information both on the reason for the fighting and on the number of victims.

Attacks and assaults

On 27 April 2017, a bomb attack in Batikot district (eastern Nangarhar province) killed 15 civilians. On 1 May, an attack was launched on US forces troops in the same district, injuring no-one.

On 28 April, Taliban insurgents kidnapped seven travellers in Herat.

On 2 May, Taliban members destroyed four construction vehicles of a private road building company in central Logar province.

On 3 May, at least eight individuals were killed and 25 others injured in a suicide attack launched near the US embassy in Kabul.

On 7 May, the Kandahar governor's media advisor was shot dead by unidentified gunmen.

On 8 May, a bomb attack in southeastern Khost province killed one civilian and wounded three others.

Albania

New President – opposition protests

On 28 April 2017, Albania's parliament speaker Ilir Meta was elected as the country's new president, in spite of protests from the opposition. Meta leads the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), which is junior

partner to the government of Socialist leader Edi Rama. The opposition Democratic Party (DP), which has been boycotting parliament since February, abstained from voting. They announced to also boycott the parliamentary elections scheduled for 18 June.

Opposition forces demand Prime Minister Rama's immediate resignation and the formation of an all-party government, accusing his government of being entangled in organised crime and widespread corruption (see BN of 24 April 2017). EU attempts at mediation to find a solution to the crisis have failed so far. While the socialist government under Rama claims to have made additional concessions, the opposition forces continue to insist on his immediate resignation.

Algeria

Parliamentary elections

According to the preliminary final results published on 5 May 2017, the party of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the National Liberation Front (FLN), gained 164 out of a total of 462 seats (57 less than in 2012) on 4 May. The Rally for National Democracy (RND) gained 97 seats (27 more than in 2012). Again, the two parties have won a clear parliamentary majority. The bloc of Islamist parties won a total of 67 seats; several small parties gained one or two seats each. Elections were overshadowed by accusations of corruption, by enormous economic difficulties and also by the political sullenness felt by many citizens. Voter turnout was as low as 38 percent (a decline in 5 percent compared to the last elections).

Cameroon

Journalist jailed for ten years

On 24 April 2017, a military tribunal sentenced Ahmed Abba, a correspondent of Radio France International's Hausa service, to 10 years in prison and a fine of 55 million Central African Francs (around 85,000 euros). Pursuant to Cameroon's anti-terrorism legislation, he was found guilty on 20 April of non-denunciation of terror attacks planned by Boko Haram and of laundering proceeds of terrorist acts. Amnesty International said that Ahmed Abba's conviction was handed down after torture and an unfair trial.

Central African Republic

Civilians targeted by rebel groups

On 2 May 2017, Human Rights Watch reported that the two enemy rebel groups 'Union for Peace in the Central African Republic' (UPC) and 'Popular Front for the Renaissance in the Central African Republic' (FPRC) have targeted civilians in reprisal killings over the past three months in the Ouaka province. The attacks have left at least 45 people dead and at least 11,000 displaced, HRW reported. Since late 2016, clashes over the control of the central part of the country have been continuing between the UPC, consisting mostly of ethnic Peul, and the FPRC, which has aligned itself with the anti-Balaka group. The UN peacekeeping force MINUSCA has deployed approximately 1,000 of its members to the region, but the attacks persist, the report went on.

Chad

Life sentence for ex-dictator Habré upheld

On 27 April 2017, former dictator Hissène Habré was convicted by final judgement in an appeal process for war crimes, crimes against humanity and torture, and sentenced to life imprisonment. With this judgement, the special court of the African Union in Senegal's capital Dakar upheld the first instance verdict of May 2016, which had been appealed by the lawyers of 74-years-old Habré. The former dictator had not attended the appeal hearing. In 2016, the special court had ordered compensation payments amounting to the equivalent of 80 million Euro for the victims of rape and sexual slavery who were to receive 30,000 euros each. At the time, human rights activists had called the sentence for Habré a milestone of international justice.

China

Tibet: Self-immolation

On 2 May 2017, a Tibetan set himself on fire in the Tibetan region of Gansu. Initially, it was unclear whether he survived the suicide attempt. This has brought to 149 the number of self-immolations in China since 2009.

Egypt

Al-Azhar university president dismissed

On 6 May 2017, the German broadcaster Deutschlandfunk reported that the president of the Al-Azhar university has been dismissed from his duties after he had accused a reform-oriented Islam scholar of apostasy. The university, located in Cairo and founded already in the 10th century, is renowned as one of the most prestigious centres of Islamic learning worldwide. The university is financed by the Egyptian state. Its president, who is referred to as Sheikh al-Azhar, Grand Sheikh or Grand Imam, is considered to be among the highest authorities in Sunni Islam. In recent times, criticism has increased of the university's clerics, with both members of parliament and media accusing them of insufficient action against Islamist extremism.

Christian man shot dead

In al-Arish, the northern part of Sinai, a member of the Christian minority has been found shot dead. He had belonged to a group of more than hundred Coptic Christians who had fled from the peninsula in February following a series of murders. Reportedly, he had returned a few days ago. At the time, the Egyptian authorities had blamed IS insurgents for the killings on Sinai.

FYR Macedonia

Violence in parliament

On 27 April 2017, fighting erupted in Macedonia's parliament in the capital of Skopje after demonstrators, partly masked and armed with knives or baseball bats, stormed the building and injured more than 100 individuals in protest against the election of Talat Xhaferi, an ethnic Albanian, as parliament speaker. Xhaferi had gained the majority of votes by a party alliance between the opposition Social Democrats SDSM and ethnic Albanian parties. Apparently, police forces did not prevent the protesters in time from storming the parliamentary building. It was only two hours after the attack that special forces entered the premises. Meanwhile, several individuals have been arrested, among them a high-rank secret service officer. The interior ministry has published a wanted list containing the names of 20 people.

Meanwhile, the newly elected parliament speaker has taken over office and said he expected President Ivanov to respect the parliamentary majority and to act in accordance with the constitution.

Background

Since March, President Gjorge Ivanov has refused to mandate the opposition Social Democrats SDSM to form a government despite the fact that they enjoy a majority in coalition with the ethnic Albanian parties. Ivanov fears that a government participation of the ethnic Albanian parties, who are to receive more powers, would undermine the country's unity. According to his point of view, the ethnic Albanian parties would seek to federalise and eventually split Macedonia, with the help of a 'platform controlled by Tirana' (see also BN of 20 March 2017). For weeks now, large-scale rallies have been staged by supporters of the national-conservative former ruling party VMRO-DPMNE who want to prevent a change of power which they see as a danger for the unity of the country. In particular, they refuse to have Albanian introduced as a second official language (20-25 percent of Macedonia's 2.1 million citizens are ethnic Albanians).

Many observers, however, think that underlying the disputes is the fear of long-term head of government Nikola Gruevski and his party VRMO-DPMME to be held criminally responsible for the wiretapping scandal. For this reason, they are trying to stir nationalist resentment in order to stay in power. Also, many observers believe that Gruesvski himself is behind the new violent eruptions.

Special prosecutor investigates against former members of government

Meanwhile, the Macedonian special prosecution office (SJO), which had been set up only under pressure from both EU and the US, is preparing the charges in the wiretapping scandal. They involve systematic

abuse of authority by politicians and senior civil servants, electoral fraud and organised corruption at national level. Apparently, a total of, 20,000 had been wiretapped. Numerous VMRO representatives, members of the former government and civil servants are now facing trial.

Iran

Military warns President against discussing strategy issues

After President Hassan Rouhani voiced criticism of Iran's missile programme, Iran's armed forces have warned him against discussing the country's defence programme. The President had criticised tests with two ballistic missiles bearing anti-Israel slogans. „There are people in the country who are trying by all means to disrupt the nuclear deal, for instance by writing slogans on missiles”, he said in a TV debate ahead of the first round of presidential elections scheduled for 19 May. Already in March 2016, the Pasdaran had carried out missile tests, with the slogan “Israel must be erased” written in Hebrew on two of the missiles. This had led to worldwide criticism and hampered Rouhani's endeavours to get rid of the perception that Iran is posing a regional security threat.

Mali

Extremists killed or captured by French forces

On 29/30 April 2017, the French armed forces launched a major operation, killing or capturing around 20 Islamic extremists, the French chief of staff stated. He said that the operation was conducted with fighter jets and helicopter gunships as well as parachutists and mine-cleaners, with the fighter jets attacking several supply depots. The ground forces found large quantities of weapons including ammunition, rocket launchers and explosives. The operation was launched in an area southwest of Gao city which is considered a major place of retreat for armed extremists.

Attack on UN peacekeepers

On 3 May 2017, the UN peacekeeping mission said that at least nine peacekeepers were wounded in an attack on its camp in the north of the country with rockets or mortar shells. So far, no-one has claimed responsibility for the attack. However, al-Qaida-linked extremists are operating in the area, continually targeting UN peacekeepers and local security forces.

Montenegro

Parliament ratifies NATO membership

Despite protests from the opposition, the country's parliament voted on 28 April 2017 in favour of becoming NATO's 29th member, with pro-Russian lawmakers boycotting the session. Before Montenegro's entry into the western alliance becomes final, Spain will have to ratify the accession protocol. Russia is not delighted about Montenegro joining NATO and tried for a long time to prevent the accession.

Nigeria

82 Chibok schoolgirls released

On 6 May 2017, the Boko Haram terror group released 82 schoolgirls from a group of 276 they had abducted in the town of Chibok in April 2014. President Buhari's office said that the girls had been freed in exchange for several detained suspected Boko Haram militants. The girls were rescued from the northern town of Banki close to the border with Cameroon, and brought to the country's capital Abuja, where they were received by the President. 21 girls had been freed in the first negotiated release in October 2016. Apparently, 113 girls are still missing. It is feared that some of them were forcefully sent on missions as suicide bombers.

Pro-Biafra IPOB leader released on bail

On 28 April 2017 Nnamdi Kanu, president of the separatist Indigenous People of Biafra movement IPOB, was released from Abuja's Kuje prison, after fulfilling the stringent bail conditions the Federal High Court in Abuja had set.

Kanu, who was also the director of the illegal broadcaster Radio Biafra, had been arrested in October 2015 in Lagos by officials from the Department of State Services DSS and is now charged in Abuja's Federal High Court for treason and other crimes. The trial is scheduled to continue in July 2017.

Boko Haram: Several suicide attacks in Borno state

On 3 May 2017, three suspected female suicide bombers tried to gain access to the premises of the military outpost of Gontanamo in Muna Garage district near Maiduguri, capital of the northeastern Borno state. They were shot dead by security officers, which led to the explosion of their concealed IEDs.

Also on 3 May, three female suicide bombers were intercepted by security personnel on duty along Maiduguri/Mafa road when they attempted to enter Maiduguri town. The three bombers detonated their IEDs, killing themselves and wounding one soldier.

On 27 April, a suicide attacker drove his explosive-laden vehicle into a military convoy on its way to the town of Damboa (Borno state), killing five soldiers and wounding another 40. The incident took place near the village of Mangazum.

In the early morning of 26 May, three suicide attacks in different locations of Maiduguri's Muna district killed four of the suicide bombers and a member of the security volunteer group. Another 11 people were injured in the attacks.

Somalia

Fighting

On 2 May 2017, al-Shabaab fighters attacked an AMISOM base in the Lower Shabelle region, about 30 km west of Mogadishu. AMISOM repelled the attackers and killed at least six of the insurgents. Al-Shabaab, in turn, claims to have killed at least ten AMISOM soldiers.

On 3 May, Ethiopian troops serving with AMISOM in Somalia recaptured without a fight the town of Halgan in the Hiran region which had been controlled by al-Shabaab. On the following day, heavily armed extremists attacked the AMISOM units with Bazookas. There is no information on the number of fatalities.

On 4 May, one US soldier was killed and two more were injured during an operation against al-Shabaab by the U.S. Navy SEALs special force in the town of Barire (Lower Shabelle region). The U.S. forces 'neutralised' all of the extremists, including the al-Shabaab leader in the Lower Shabelle region. At the end of April 2017, the USA had sent troops to Somalia for the first time since the 1990ies. Approx. 40 men have been deployed to provide advice and support to the Somali National Army. President Trump has authorised his ministry of defence to target al-Shabaab fighters more aggressively. Also, parts of Somalia have been declared an 'area of active hostilities', allowing the local commander to decide on his own on air operations without having to wait for the consent of higher authorities. Prior to that point, the U.S. military could conduct airstrikes in Somalia only on the condition that the target was a threat to American citizens.

Minister killed accidentally

On 3 May 2017, bodyguards for Somalia's auditor general shot down the minister of construction and infrastructure near the President's palace in Mogadishu. They had mistakenly regarded the minister's vehicle as a threat and opened fire.

Hunger crisis

According to UNICEF estimates, the number of Somali children suffering from acute malnutrition will increase to 1.4 million in 2017. About 275,000 of them will have severe life-threatening symptoms. These estimates show an increase of 50 percent compared to the beginning of the year.

Since November 2016, a total of 615,000 people – mostly women and children – have apparently fled the drought. Should the oncoming rainy season be short or not occur at all, the number of people seeking help in crowded emergency camps will continue to rise. Even now, the cases of malaria and cholera are on the increase.

Syria

Attack on refugee camp

On 2 May 2017, IS insurgents attacked a Syrian refugee camp and killed more than 37 people, the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports. Apparently, at least five suicide bombers were involved in a series of suicide attacks both within and outside the refugee camp in Hasakeh province (northeastern Syria). After the attacks, fights erupted between IS insurgents and members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Establishment of ‘safe zones’

On 6 May, four safe zones were established in Syria after an agreement was concluded between Russia, Iran and Turkey in the Kazakh capital Astana two days before. Apparently, the agreement had been reached with 27 different rebel groups.

The safe zones include the northern province of Idlib and adjoining districts of Latakia, Aleppo and Hama, the northern part of Homs province, Eastern Ghouta and the southern provinces of Deraa and Quneitra. In these zones, both the Syrian government forces and their opponents have to ‘discontinue the use of all sorts of weapons, including those carried by aircraft.’ Checkpoints are to ensure that unarmed civilians will be able to move freely and that humanitarian aid will arrive on location.

However, certain groups are not included in the ceasefire arrangement. For instance, it will be possible to continue the fight against the terrorist militia IS and other terrorist groups.

Turkey

Arrests and dismissals

On 26 April 2017, the Turkish government ordered the arrest of more than 1,000 people in all provinces, mainly police officers. They are accused of being part of a network of Fethullah Gulen within the police force. According to media reports, a total of 3,224 arrest warrants were issued and 1,009 individuals detained. On the same day, police also suspended over 9,100 of their officials for alleged links to Gulen’s network.

On 29 April, a new decree led to the dismissal of more than 4,000 officials from the civil service, including more than thousand employees from the ministry of justice and over a thousand army members. With the decree, 236 people were able to return to work. On 5 May, a total of 107 more judges and prosecutors were dismissed from office. Apparently, arrest warrants have been issued for them.

Since the attempted coup in July 2016, about 145,000 employees in the public sector have been dismissed or suspended, among them over 4,200 judges and prosecutors. More than 40,000 people have been arrested. They are accused of links with exiled cleric Fethullah Gulen who is considered by the Turkish government in Ankara to be the mastermind behind the coup attempt.

Constitutional referendum

The constitutional referendum conducted on 16 April was highly controversial. According to the official final result, a majority of 51.4 percent had voted in favour of the constitutional changes to introduce a presidential system of governance. The main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) is not willing to accept the refusal of its request that the constitutional referendum be annulled by the electoral commission, and has lodged a petition to Turkey’s council of state. Also, the CHP plans to file a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Before, both the pro-Kurdish HDP and the CHP had requested the electoral commission to annul the referendum because they considered inadmissible the decision taken during the voting process to count ballot papers that lacked official stamps.

The constitutional changes adopted with the referendum will be implemented step by step. For the time being, the prime minister and the government will remain in office. It is only after the elections scheduled for November 2019 that the President will become both head of state and government.

President Erdogan has already started to restructure the political system. In a solemn ceremony held on 2 May, he re-joined the AKP party he had founded, and he is due to be elected again as party leader in a special convention on 22 May. So far, the President has not been allowed to be the member of a political party. With the constitutional reform, the President can now re-join his party. Unlike most other constitutional amendments, this particular provision entered in force immediately.

Western Balkan countries

Refugees on the Balkan route – human rights abuses

The so called Balkan route remains a main transit line for migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq on their way to (western) Europe. Between 30 January and 17 February 2017, Oxfam (in co-operation with the Belgrade Centre of Human Rights BCHR and the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association MYLA) interviewed 140 individuals who had tried to reach Europe via this route last winter and who took refuge in Serbia and in the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia.

The organisations criticize the Serb, Macedonian, Croatian, Hungarian and Bulgarian authorities for their way of dealing with the refugees. The refugees report beatings, robbery and electric shocks administered by the officials. Apart from these abuses, the report ('A Dangerous Game') documents numerous cases of unlawful expulsions. Also, refugees were denied access to fair asylum procedures. Serbia currently hosts approx. 7,800 refugees. 6,500 of them have been registered and provided with regular accommodation. A minority is left without shelter, living under dire conditions in Belgrade or along the Hungarian border.

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ivs-anfragen@bamf.bund.de