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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

18 March 2024

Afghanistan

Security situation

According to its own sources, the National Resistance Front (NRF) carried out three attacks on the Taliban in Kabul on 13.03.24 and 18.03.24, killing a total of three Taliban insurgents and injuring three others. The NRF also claims to have killed a Taliban insurgent in Parwan province on 15.03.24.

According to the Taliban, Pakistani airstrikes carried out in the provinces of Khost and Paktika on 18.03.24 resulted in the deaths of eight civilians. The attacks were reportedly aimed at members of the Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan).¹

Humanitarian situation

According to a statement issued by the Taliban on 13.03.24, at least 60 people have died in the past three weeks due to heavy rainfall. In Herat province alone, at least 250 houses were destroyed and numerous fields were flooded.

Deportations from Pakistan continue. According to reports issued in the Afghan media, the Pakistani government has announced that it will not only take action against unregistered Afghan nationals but that the operation to deport Afghan citizen card holders, who are hence registered, will also begin on 15.04.24.

The NGO Swedish Committee for Afghanistan has suspended its activities in Afghanistan for the time being due to difficulties it has encountered operating under the Taliban. The organisation ran two hospitals and supported more than 20,000 people with disabilities.²

Cameroon

Seventeen people charged with involvement in the murder of a journalist

According to media reports, 17 people have been charged with involvement in the murder of Cameroonian radio presenter and journalist Martinez Zogo following more than a year of investigations. Among the accused are the former head of Cameroon's General Directorate for External Investigations (DGRE), Maxime Léopold Eko Eko, and the businessman Jean-Pierre Amougou Belinga. The trial is scheduled to begin on 25.03.24.

Martinez Zogo was abducted by unknown assailants on 17.01.23 and found dead in a suburb of the capital Yaoundé on 22.01.23. His body bore the marks of extensive torture. Before his death, Zogo had uncovered acts of corruption which the government and businessmen were also allegedly involved in (cf. BN of 30.01.23).³

Colombia

Government suspends ceasefire with the EMC in three provinces

The government suspended the ceasefire with the FARC dissident group Estado Mayor Central (EMC) in the provinces of Nariño, Cauca and Valle del Cauca by decree issued on 17.03.24. The same decree orders the re-starting of military and police security operations against the EMC group in these provinces as of 20.03.24. The ceasefire agreement was last extended until July 2024. According to President Gustavo Petro, the reason for the current measure is the unilateral violation of the terms of the agreement by sections of the non-state armed group, whose members injured three people in an attack carried out on indigenous people in the community of Toribío in Cauca on 16.03.24, one of whom later succumbed to her injuries.⁴

Egypt

Report on amnesty for ISIS members

In a report released by the human rights organisations HRW and Sinai Foundation for Human Rights on 13.03.24, the Egyptian authorities are accused of having made questionable amnesty deals with local militants of an ISIS offshoot in the north of the Sinai Peninsula in recent years.

According to the report, an unknown number of local ISIS members have been granted amnesty because they allegedly laid down their arms and surrendered to the authorities. However, some of these individuals who have been found guilty of serious crimes, such as the deliberate killing of civilians, have not been prosecuted. The authorities have reportedly yet to comment on the allegations.⁵

Iran

Religious scholar and political activist arrested

Sedigheh Vasmaghi, a prominent Iranian religious scholar and political activist, was arrested by plainclothes security agents at her home in Tehran on 16.03.24 with what they said was a court order. In addition, media reports say they seized her laptop, medication, and her cane.

Vasmaghi had been summoned by the authorities in the past and is considered to be an outspoken critic of the clerical establishment and the compulsory hijab. She had appeared without a head scarf in recent months to protest the repression of women and has characterised the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a dictator. In a recent audio file shared on her Instagram, Vasmaghi continued her critique, particularly targeting Ali Khamenei's stance on hijab, asserting that he lacked the authority to dictate women's clothing choices and criminalise dissent.⁶

Iraq

Announcement of camp closures in Kurdistan

The Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displaced announced on 17.03.24 that it would cease financial aid for internally displaced persons on 30.07.24. This includes funding for the remaining camps in the Kurdistan Region as well as financial support for internally displaced persons returning to their home regions.

In September 2023, the Minister of Migration and Displaced announced her intention to close all camps for internally displaced persons by the end of July 2024 (cf. BN of 09.10.23). She cited the improved security situation as the main reason for this. The prospect of IQD four million (approx. USD 2,670) has been offered as a financial incentive to those willing to return. It is still unclear whether the camps will actually be closed, as high-ranking politicians in the Kurdish Regional Government have recently spoken out against any such move. The Kurdish Regional Government also states that it is currently covering most of the accommodation costs for internally displaced persons itself. The majority of internally displaced persons in the Kurdistan Region reside outside the camps, meaning that the closures would only affect a minority.⁷

Iraq bans PKK

On 14.03.24, the Iraqi National Security Council classified the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a banned organisation. The decision was taken after a high-level meeting between representatives of Iraq and Türkiye. For the first time, Türkiye and Iraq have decided to jointly act against PKK strongholds in northern Iraq. It remains unclear whether the ban on the PKK also extends to the Yazidi so-called Shingal Resistance Units (Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şingal, YBŞ), which Türkiye considers to be a PKK offshoot. This force has largely been integrated into the Popular Mobilisation Units and is therefore formally under the command of the Iraqi government.⁸

Iraq / Iran

Komala member assassinated

According to the exiled Iranian Komala party of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Shorshger), one of its members was assassinated south of the city of Sulaymaniyah on 16.03.24. The party suspects that a former member who defected to the Iranian state is behind the crime

Several Iranian-Kurdish opposition parties banned in Iran are based in the Kurdistan Region. Killings of members which the Iranian state is suspected of being behind are a regular occurrence.⁹

Libya

Chairpersons of the most important legislative institutions agree to form a unified government

According to media reports, the head of the country's Presidential Council, Mohammed Mnefi, the head of the High State Council, Mohammed Takala and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Aguila Saleh, met in Cairo on 10.03.24 to agree on the formation of a new unified government that would pave the way for nationwide elections. However, the meeting in Cairo took place without two other influential political players, the leader of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), Khalifa Haftar, and the acting Prime Minister of the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU), Abdul Hamid Dbeibah.

International observers are sceptical as to whether the declaration of intent made by the heads of the three most important legislative institutions to form a new unified government and hold national elections could ever be followed by action. After the elections scheduled for the end of 2021 were delayed, with the High State Council and the House of Representatives failing to reach agreement on a constitutional basis for the elections and rules for casting votes, a political stalemate was reached, resulting in the emergence of two rival governments. Several initiatives to agree on common legislation for the organisation of parliamentary and presidential elections have so far failed.¹⁰

Nigeria

Kaduna State: dozens more abducted

Armed actors kidnapped over 60 people from two localities in Kajuru Local Government Area (LGA) in the northern state of Kaduna on 11.03.24. According to media reports, the fact that soldiers were in the vicinity prevented a higher number of abductions. Women and children were allegedly among the abductees. Unidentified, armed actors stormed a school in the town of Kuriga in Chikun Local Government Area in Kaduna state on 07.03.24, kidnapping over 200 schoolchildren (cf. BN of 11.03.24). According to media reports, the authorities are seeking to negotiate with the kidnappers.¹¹

Southeast: armed forces report destruction of dozens of separatist camps

According to media reports, security forces cleared and destroyed a total of 50 camps of violent actors in the southeastern states of Imo and Anambra between 11.02.24 and 07.03.24. According to estimates by the armed forces, these camps are run by members of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) group, which is in favour of the secession of southeastern Nigeria, and by members of its armed militant wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN). According to reports citing official military sources, numerous people categorised as IPOB and ESN were killed in the course of the operations led by the Joint Task Force South-East Operation UDO KA (OPUK). Some of the camps

destroyed on 07.03.24 reportedly housed headquarters. During the clearing of the 50 camps, numerous weapons, a considerable amount of ammunition and other equipment were seized. The security forces also discovered graves and indications of occult practices there. Reports on the destruction of individual separatist camps in the southeast have become more frequent in recent times, the most recent one at the beginning of March 2024 (cf. BN of 11.03.24).¹²

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

Gaza Strip: current developments; humanitarian situation

On 18.03.24, the Hamas-led Ministry of Health announced that more than 31,645 Palestinians had been killed in the Gaza Strip since the start of the war. In addition, as of 15.03.24, more than 73,400 other people are said to have been wounded. The Ministry does not officially distinguish between combatants and civilians.

Furthermore, as of 15.03.24, according to the Israeli military, a total of 247 military personnel have been killed and 1,476 others wounded since the launch of the ground offensive.

On 18.03.24, the Israeli army began a new military operation in and around Shifa Hospital in the north of the Gaza Strip. After the military had already raided the hospital in November, the spokesperson of the Israeli forces justified the renewed advance, claiming high-ranking Hamas members had been regrouping on the hospital premises. Hamas attacks are also said to have been launched from Shifa Hospital.

Although tunnel connections and weapons were found on the hospital premises in November 2023, the allegations made by the Israeli military in November could not be fully proven and critics have accused the military of recklessly endangering the lives of civilians. According to the Ministry of Health, more than 30,000 people are currently sheltering at the hospital.

According to media reports, at least 21 Palestinians were killed on 12.03.24 as they waited for food to be distributed. The Ministry of Health accused Israeli forces of opening fire on the people waiting there. The Israeli military, on the other hand, reported that Palestinian fighters opened fire on the crowd as people were waiting for food trucks. Aid deliveries are still being dropped over the north of the Gaza Strip. Around 300,000 Palestinians are still believed to be residing there. In addition, 200 tonnes of relief supplies were brought to the Gaza Strip by ship for the first time. Nevertheless, aid groups are protesting that airdrops and sea shipments are far less efficient ways of delivering the massive amounts of aid needed in Gaza than overland transport by truck.

According to the Israeli military, a high-ranking Hamas member was killed in an airstrike carried out by Israeli Defence Forces on a UN food distribution centre in the south of the Gaza Strip. Four other people were killed in the attack and 22 others were injured. At least one person employed by UNRWA was reportedly amongst the dead. On 15.03.24, the Israeli Prime Minister's Office announced that plans for a further military offensive on Rafah in the south of the Gaza Strip had been approved. These plans envisaged the evacuation of the civilian population in Rafah, without specifying the exact destination. A few days earlier, the military had said "humanitarian islands" would be created in central Gaza.¹³

West Bank: people killed and injured in armed clashes; entry to east Jerusalem during Ramadan

According to UN figures, 418 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in connection with armed conflicts since the start of the war in the Gaza Strip. The UN says 407 of them were killed by Israeli troops, nine by Israeli settlers and two by one of the two groups of actors. In addition, 15 Israelis, including four military personnel, have been killed in the occupied territories (excluding Gaza) and Israel. Ninety-nine other Israelis have been wounded.

On 14.03.24, armed Israeli settlers from the "Sde Efraim" settlement outpost raided the nearby village of Kafr Ni'ma in Ramallah. One Palestinian was wounded and numerous items of property were vandalised and destroyed. Since 07.10.23, the UN has recorded 646 attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians.

On 13.03.24, a Palestinian teenager was killed when he began stabbing Israeli military personnel near a checkpoint between the West Bank and Jerusalem. In addition, two Palestinians were killed during a military raid in Jenin. A 13-year-old Palestinian boy was killed when Israeli police reportedly responded to violent protests in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Palestinians from the West Bank were allowed to travel to the al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem as part of Friday prayers during the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan for the first time since the start of the war in the Gaza Strip.

However, access was restricted to Palestinian men over the age of 55 and Palestinian women over the age of 50, as well as children under the age of 10. In addition, all visitors are obliged to apply for an online permit using an app.¹⁴

Republic of Moldova

Alleged attack on military facility in Transnistria

On 17.03.24, Transnistrian authorities reported a drone attack on a military base in the breakaway region of Moldova, in which a fire had broken out and a helicopter had been destroyed. They said that the Tiraspol military base had earlier been attacked with a drone that had been launched in the Ukrainian region of Odesa. However, after analysing video footage and contacting Kyiv, Moldova's reintegration office announced that it was unable to confirm an attack on Transnistria. According to the Ukrainian government's Centre for Countering Disinformation, this was a provocation and deliberate misinformation. Both the Moldovan and Transnistrian sides confirmed that it was an old helicopter in an inoperable condition.

Only as recently as late February 2024, a request for protection from the Transnistrian authorities to the Russian Federation (RF) caused a stir (cf. BN of 04.03.24). The Moldovan presidential election and a referendum on the chosen path of EU integration are due to take place in autumn 2024 and the next parliamentary election in the summer of 2025. According to media reports, the director of the central government's Security and Intelligence Service (SIS) has stated that the RF is planning to undermine public order during these elections. He says that Russian influence in Transnistria and the autonomous region of Gagauzia is to be utilised for this purpose. The think tank Institute for the Study of War shares this assessment. Gagauzia's head of government Evghenia Guțul, who is said to be close to the exiled oligarch Ilan Șor (cf. BN of 24.07.23), met the President of the RF Vladimir Putin on 06.03.24 and accused the Moldovan central government of curtailing Gagauzia's freedoms.¹⁵

Russian Federation

Vladimir Putin re-elected president

Following a presidential election accompanied by allegations of manipulation, which took place over three days between 15.03.24 and 17.03.24, Russian state media have predicted a record result of at least 87 percent of the vote for incumbent Vladimir Putin. Russian state television declared the 71-year-old the winner as early as the evening of 17.03.24 on the basis of voter surveys conducted by several institutes close to the Kremlin. No genuine opposition candidates were allowed to stand in the vote on Putin's fifth term in office, which was accompanied by numerous protests. As a result, people had no real alternative in the election, which was neither free nor fair. As a rule, the forecasts have generally matched the result announced at the end. It would be a record for Putin, who received 76.7 percent of the vote in the last election held in 2018. Turnout was reported at just over 74 percent – the highest ever recorded in presidential elections in Russian history. Voting was also possible in the occupied Ukrainian territories, which do not belong to Russia under international law.

According to their own sources, the independent Russian election observers from the Golos organisation identified over 1,600 irregularities in the election. Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev called those who tried to express their protest by launching dye or fire attacks on ballot boxes traitors. According to human rights organisations, more than 60 criminal cases have now been launched.

Putin is likely to present the result as confirmation of his anti-Western and authoritarian course. Observers are convinced that this backing is partly due to repression and coercion and will have an impact on his domestic and foreign policy, and particularly also in his war of aggression against Ukraine, during his next years in office.

Many also fear a new mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of reservists, which Putin has so far avoided. The pressure on opposition activities could also increase further. In addition, tax increases have been announced to finance the high expenditure for the war and social policy programmes.¹⁶

Somalia

Attack on hotel

On 14.03.24, an attack was carried out on the Syl Hotel, which is located near the presidential residence in Mogadishu and is mainly frequented by government officials. The attack was accompanied by various explosions and exchanges of fire. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack. According to official sources, three Somali soldiers were killed and 27 people were injured. Government troops reportedly repelled the attack after several hours.¹⁷

Journalist shot and killed by security forces

On 13.03.24, the Somali journalist Abdikarin Ahmed Bulhan died of a gunshot wound that had earlier been inflicted by security forces. The journalist, who worked for the state-run Somali National TV and Somali National News Agency, was shot by a security guard while working in Abudwak (Galgaduud) for reasons that have not yet been clarified. National and international journalists' organisations have condemned the killing and are calling for a government investigation.¹⁸

Syria

13 years of the Syrian conflict

13 years after the start of the conflict in Syria, the level of violence since October 2023 is at its highest level since 2020, according to the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria.

Almost half a million people have been killed and half the population displaced since March 2011. According to the UN, more than half of the population, i.e. around 12.9 million people, are affected by food insecurity. A further 2.6 million people are at risk of food insecurity. The UN says that three quarters of the population are dependent on humanitarian aid, while the economic situation means that many Syrians have hardly any means of subsistence and there is a lack of funding for numerous aid programmes.¹⁹

Northeast: people killed and injured in ISIS attack; Turkish airstrike

According to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), at least 34 civilians were killed and dozens more wounded in an ISIS attack on truffle hunters that occurred on 06.03.24. Dozens more are also believed to have been abducted. The attack took place near the village of Kobajeb in the Deir ez-Zor governorate. Pro-government media reported a death toll of 44.

Due to the remote location, where large groups often search for truffles, these truffle gatherers have already been a frequent target of ISIS in the past. In addition to the numerous killings, people have also been kidnapped in the past in order to extort ransoms for them. According to media reports, at least 16 other people were killed in a landmine explosion in the Raqqa governorate on 16.03.24 while collecting truffles.

In addition, according to the Turkish Ministry of Defence, seven armed militants were killed in a Turkish airstrike on targets in northern Syria on 08.03.24.²⁰

Northwest: protests against HTS; Russian airstrike

In the Idlib governorate, the announcement of the death of a man was followed by days of protests demanding the release of prisoners and the resignation of HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. The man killed was a member of an armed militia and was allegedly tortured to death in a prison run by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the dominant group in the northwest.

Members of the militia opened fire on protesters during rallies held on 05.03.24. Initially, there were no reports of casualties. On 06.03.24, the local, HTS-dominated authorities released 420 prisoners as part of a general amnesty. In recent months, HTS has lost support due to internal conflicts that led to the arrest of numerous high-ranking and prominent members. The detainees are accused of passing on information to the US coalition that has led to the killing of numerous al-Qaeda commanders in recent years. On 07.03.24, a high-ranking member who was long regarded as al-Jolani's deputy, Maysar al-Jubouri, also known as Abu Maria al-Qahtani, was released. The protests are continuing, nonetheless.

According to its own sources, the Russian military attacked two bases of armed groups in the Idlib governorate from the air on 05.03.24. Around 20 militia members are said to have been killed in the attacks.²¹

Togo

Parliament extends security emergency for another twelve months

On 12.03.24, the Togolese parliament extended the state of security emergency in the northern region of Savanes for another year. There have been repeated deadly attacks by militant groups in the region since November 2021 and especially since May 2022. The security emergency measure enables the presence of the security authorities on the ground to be strengthened. This security emergency was first declared on 13.06.22 and was extended by 12 months on 06.04.23 (cf. BN of 17.04.23). President Faure Gnassingbé commented on the security situation in the north of the country for the first time in an interview conducted on 27.04.23 (cf. BN of 08.05.23). On 27.11.23, on state television, the government read out a summary of the terrorist attacks carried out in 2023 and lamented the total of 31 fatalities (cf. BN of 11.12.23).²²

Türkiye

Arrest of suspected Gülen members

According to media reports, the police and gendarmerie carried out house searches in seven provinces on 12.03.24 to arrest active and former soldiers and former military cadets who are suspected of having links to the Gülen movement.

The raids were carried out as part of investigations in İzmir, where prosecutors issued arrest warrants for a total of 23 people, including nine soldiers, six of whom were on active duty, and 14 cadets who had previously been removed from military schools. Following the arrest of 18 people in the raids, the security forces are now searching for the remaining five people, two of whom are reported to be abroad. According to the reports, the detainees were targeted by the security forces on the basis of witness statements accusing them of being suspected Gülen supporters and based on their alleged phone communications.

Previously, in early March, Turkish police arrested 91 people in 30 provinces for suspected links to the Gülen movement. The people were arrested for allegedly infiltrating the military and police and for using the messaging app ByLock. Among those arrested were people whose convictions for links to the Gülen movement had been confirmed by the Court of Cassation and who had been at large until their current arrest.²³

Türkiye ranks 164th among 179 countries in the Academic Freedom Index

The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) published by Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg for 2023, which assesses de facto levels of academic freedom around the world, ranks Türkiye in the bottom 10 percent, just ahead of countries such as North Korea, Myanmar and Iran.

The Index reports that in the last 15 years, the quantified value of academic freedom in Türkiye has fallen by more than 83 percent. The Index is based on five key indicators, including the freedom of research and teaching and the institutional autonomy of universities. The downward trend in academic freedom is primarily due to the events following the attempted coup in 2016. Since then, more than 30,000 teaching staff and 7,000 academics have been dismissed. Another factor the decision taken by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2016 to abolish internal university elections for the selection of rectors and to replace them with direct appointments by the president.²⁴

Uganda

Refusal to register an LGBTIQ rights group upheld in court

In 2018, the organisation Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), which advocates for the rights of LGBTIQ people, appealed against a decision by the Supreme Court, which had ruled that the competent authority's refusal to register the organisation was lawful. The Registration Services Bureau refused to register SMUG because the organisation aimed to "promote the rights of people whose conduct is against the law in Uganda". The Court of Appeal has now ruled that registration is unlawful as SMUG must be categorised as a criminal organisation under

the Criminal Code. SMUG expressed concern that the ruling would set a negative precedent for other organisations and drive forward the implementation of the Anti-Homosexuality Act.²⁵

Ukraine

Civilian war casualties

According to the regional governor, at least three people were killed and 38 people, including 10 children, were injured in a Russian missile attack on Kryviy Rih (Dnipropetrovsk Oblast) on 12.03.24. According to the regional administration, night-time drone and bomb attacks carried out on 12.03.24/13.03.24 killed at least one person and injured eight others in Sumy and injured five children in the Velyka Pysarivka administrative region. According to the regional governor, two people were killed and five injured in Ukrainian-controlled Myrnohrad (Donetsk Oblast). Ukrainian military sources say drone and missile attacks were carried out on a total of seven regions on the night of 14.03.24 to 15.03.24. According to the regional governor, two people were killed and three injured in a Russian drone attack on Vinnytsia. The regional governor said that a Russian missile attack on Odesa had left at least 20 people dead and 75 injured. Two deaths and five injuries were reported from the Sumy region. The authorities in the Zaporizhzhia region also reported one person killed. According to a media report issued on 17.03.24, one person was killed and another injured in the Donetsk region. On 17.03.24, Ukrainian authorities also reported Russian attacks on the Sumy Oblast, in which one person was killed, and on the port city of Mykolaiv, in which one person was killed and eight injured. According to Ukrainian authorities, numerous communities in the northern region of Sumy, which has been under daily shelling for a long time, have been evacuated.

The Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office announced that a total of 535 children have been killed and 1,255 injured in Ukraine since 24.02.22. Authorities installed by the Russian side report three children killed in the Russian-controlled city of Donetsk after Ukrainian shelling.²⁶

Development of the war

In a TV interview, President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that the strategic situation in Ukraine had improved for the first time in three months as a result of the recently halted advance of Russian troops, despite a lack of equipment and the great intensity of Russian attacks. He thus confirmed statements issued by the Ukrainian military, which managed to stabilise the front line following the forced withdrawal from Avdiivka and the surrounding area (Donetsk Oblast). According to Zelensky, the superiority of Russian long-range weapons was "20 kilometres ahead" of the Ukrainian range. In addition, Ukrainian forces had begun to build three lines of fortifications in the Kyiv area, which are expected to reach a length of over 1,000 km once completed. According to Ukrainian military analysts, the expansion of urgently needed lines of fortifications has come very late and should have been carried out in 2023.

Ukrainian commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky nevertheless continues to assess the situation as "difficult" and refers to Russian offensive actions in the Donetsk region. The Institute for the Study of War comes to a similar conclusion. It says that although the Russian advance west of Avdiivka has slowed down, Russian forces still hold the initiative. According to Syrsky, they have begun to replace deployed units with new troops at unspecified sections of the front.

A Ukrainian military spokesperson stated on 11.03.24 that more shells containing chemical substances had been used in Russian attacks on Ukrainian positions in the direction of Zaporizhzhia. He said that in the period from 04.03.24 to 10.03.24 alone, more than 60 grenades containing the suspected warfare agent chloropicrin or a similar substance had been used by the Russian side in warfare, which constitutes a violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention.²⁷

Disinformation accusation against UOC

The Security Service of Ukraine says that one of the largest networks spreading pro-Russian "informational sabotage" in Ukraine has been uncovered. It says the network was coordinated by a cleric of the Moscow-linked Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). This church officially broke away from the Moscow Patriarchate in May 2022 (cf. BN of 12.12.22 u. 23.10.23).²⁸

Russian presidential elections in occupied Ukrainian territories

The authorities installed by the Kremlin report Ukrainian attacks in the Russian-controlled areas of the Kherson region, in which two polling stations in Kakhovka and Brylivka were hit and several people were injured. The Ukrainian army's "Centre of National Resistance" announced that 100,000 Russian citizens had been brought into the occupied territories and filmed in order to simulate a high voter turnout in the pseudo-elections, which it claimed were held under duress and lasted for weeks. There are also reports of labourers from Central Asia without Russian passports casting their votes. After Ukraine had already declared the Russian presidential elections in the occupied territories invalid, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also condemned the elections and once again emphasised the invalidity of the alleged Russian annexation of Ukrainian territories under international law.²⁹

Venezuela

General developments: arrests for posts; official nomination of Maduro as PSUV candidate

According to information released by Attorney General Tarek William Saab on 13.03.24, Whillfer Piña Azuaje and Renzo Flores, members of the political organisation Causa R, which supports the candidacy of María Corina Machado, were arrested in Maturín in the state of Monagas on 11.03.24 for threats on social media and WhatsApp against President Nicolás Maduro and conspiracy. Also on 11.03.24, the Coalition for Human Rights and Democracy (Coalición por los Derechos Humanos y la Democracia) said that the trade union leader Victor Venegas, who was also arrested in January in connection with an alleged conspiracy (cf. BN of 22.01.24), had been released from prison under precautionary measures. On 12.03.24, Attorney General Saab also confirmed the issuing of an arrest warrant for the President of the Centre for Agrifood Studies (CEA), Edison Arciniega, for incitement to hatred. Arciniega had, among other things, previously denounced transport difficulties for food producers due to a lack of petrol and its unequal distribution on his social networks. According to the NGO Espacio Público, more than 35 people were arrested between 2020 and 2023 for comments made on social media or WhatsApp.

The ruling PSUV party also recently announced that President Maduro will once again be standing as its candidate in the upcoming presidential elections to be held on 28.07.24.³⁰

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BN-Redaktion@bamf.bund.de

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