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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

23 January 2023

Afghanistan

Security situation: difficulties in China's cooperation with the Taliban

According to media reports issued on 22.01.23, China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang urged the Taliban Foreign Minister to ensure the safety of Chinese nationals in Afghanistan in a telephone conversation they had to mark the occasion of Chinese New Year. In recent weeks, repeated attacks have been carried out by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) on Chinese nationals in Afghanistan (cf. BN of 16.01.23). Previously, on 05.01.23, the Taliban had signed its first international contract for the extraction of oil in the northern Amu-Darya Basin with a subsidiary of the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). On 22.01.23, it was reported that Taliban authorities in Afghanistan had arrested five men, including two Chinese nationals, who were allegedly trying to smuggle an estimated 1,000 tonnes of lithium-bearing rock from the country to China via Pakistan.

Persecution events: public punishments, detentions

According to media reports, public punishments were held at a football stadium in Kandahar province on 17.01.23. For the first time in their tenure, the Taliban chopped off the hands of four men accused of robbery. Five others were flogged. On the same day, a girl and a boy were flogged in Badakhshan province on charges of being in a premarital relationship. On 16.01.23, according to journalists of the Afghan press medium Hasht-e Subh living in exile, a student was arrested by the Taliban in the city of Ghazni after he criticised the closing of universities to women. On 17.01.23, a list circulated on social media with the names of 13 employees of the former security forces whom the Taliban want to arrest. The Taliban have not confirmed the authenticity of the list. On 18.01.23, according to journalists of the Afghan press medium Hasht-e Subh living in exile, a member of a former special forces unit died in a prison in Paktia province, presumably from the consequences of torture meted out by the Taliban. On 17.01.23, fifteen civilians were reportedly arrested in Panjshir province. The very same day, a man arrested by the Taliban in Panjshir province on charges of collaborating with the National Resistance Front (NRF) died in hospital as a result of torture he suffered. On 17.01.23, the owner of a public bath in Herat was arrested by the Taliban after he opened the bath to women and children who were unable to wash at home due to disruption in the water supply. The Taliban had banned public baths for women in November 2022.

Humanitarian situation: cold snap causing many deaths

Afghanistan is currently experiencing an uncharacteristic cold snap. Temperatures have dropped to -30 degrees Celsius in some places (for instance, in Ghor province). According to a report issued by Al-Jazeera on 18.01.23, around 70 persons have died, and 70,000 livestock have perished in the freezing temperatures so far. In the provinces of Badakhshan, Samangan, Jowzjan, Paktia, Ghazni, Faryab and Sar-e Pol, at least 57 people have reportedly frozen to death because they were unable to heat their homes during the extreme cold spell. Some families report that they have to decide whether to spend what little money they have on heating or food. The casualties consist mainly of women, children and drug addicts. Due to these circumstances, the Taliban in some

locations have allowed NGOs in the healthcare sector to hire female helpers again for a short time (cf. BN of 02.01.23).

Algeria

Human rights league dissolved by authorities

Media reported on 22.01.23 that the Ligue Algérienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme (LADDH) (Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights) was dissolved without its knowledge by the authorities during a trial. The League had not been informed about this trial either.

The dissolution came after the Ministry of the Interior lodged a complaint with the Administrative Court of Algiers on 04.05.22; the court ruled in favour of the complaint on 29.06.22.

Bangladesh / Myanmar

HRW on conditions at Rohingya refugee camps; UNHCR data on Rohingya boat people

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports on extortion, harassment and arbitrary arrests of Rohingya refugees by the Armed Police Battalion (APBn). This special police unit is responsible for the refugee camps where nearly one million Rohingyas are living. According to a report published by HRW on 17.01.23, safety at the camps has deteriorated steadily since 2020. Attacks on Rohingyas by the APBn in Cox's Bazar occur repeatedly. At least 16 cases of severe abuse by security forces are mentioned in the report. Incidents of extortion are also reported. APBn security forces allegedly demanded 10,000-40,000 taka (US\$100-400) to avoid arrest, and 50,000-100,000 taka (\$500-1,000) for the release of a detained family member. A police spokesperson denied the statements in the report.

Rohingya refugees are fleeing in increasing numbers not just the conditions at refugee camps in Bangladesh, they also continue to flee their homeland Myanmar. According to UNHCR data, more than 3,500 Rohingyas attempted to reach the southern countries of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia by boat in 2022. In the aftermath, 348 Rohingyas lost their lives at sea.

Benin

Pro-government parties win parliamentary election

Two parties supporting the policies of President Patrice Talon won 81 out of 109 parliamentary seats in the parliamentary elections held on 08.01.23, according to media reports. The parties in question are the Union Progressiste le Renouveau (UPR) (Progressive Union for Renewal) and the Bloc Republicain (BR) (Republican Bloc), which, according to the electoral commission, won 37.56 % and 29.17 % of the votes respectively. The opposition party Les Démocrates (The Democrats), which is linked to President Talon's predecessor and rival Thomas Boni Yayi, came in at 24.02 % and will enter parliament with 28 MPs. All other contesting parties failed to clear the 10 % hurdle. Turnout is said to have been around 38 %. The peaceful parliamentary election was also seen by many as a test of democracy, as several opposition parties that had been excluded from or had boycotted previous elections took part again. The 2019 parliamentary elections sparked deadly violence, a massive military operation on the streets and dozens of arrests. The election held on 08.01.23 also saw the application of a new electoral law that makes it mandatory to reserve one parliamentary seat for a woman in each constituency, thus guaranteeing the election of at least 24 women MPs.

Burkina Faso

Abducted women and children released

The women and children abducted in the province of Soum, in the north of Burkina Faso, on 12.01.23 and 13.01.23 have been released, according to various media reports. Sixty-six women and young children were abducted by

suspected jihadists when they left their villages near the town of Arbinda to look for food. Arbinda is located in the Sahel and has been under blockade by jihadist groups for months, causing food shortages in the region.

Colombia

FARC dissidents: several soldiers abducted and released

On 15.01.23, three soldiers were kidnapped in the Cauca region by members of the Carlos Patiño guerrilla group, who are FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) dissidents. On 18.01.23, the soldiers were handed over to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The handover of the uninjured soldiers took place in a rural area in southern Cauca. Earlier, two soldiers had been kidnapped in Arauca province by the 10th Front of FARC dissidents and released through the mediation of the Ombudsman's Office, the Catholic Church, ICRC and UN.

DR Congo

Protestors clash with police officers in Goma

The authorities in Goma clashed with protestors demanding the withdrawal of East African Community (EAC) troops on 18.01.2013. The military units were deployed in the east of the country to fight armed groups. According to media reports, the regional force is made up of hundreds of Kenyan and Burundian soldiers. Another 750 male and female soldiers from South Sudan will join shortly. According to press reports, popular resentment has been growing since Kenyan soldiers held ceremonies in two villages north of Goma in late December 2022 and early January 2023 to mark the withdrawal of the M23 rebels and the regaining of control by the EAC. Since the end of October 2022, the M23 has remained at loggerheads with the Congolese army and other armed groups despite ceasefire declarations and the withdrawal of its troops.

Ethiopia / Eritrea

Eritrean troops withdraw from Tigray

Eritrean forces began withdrawing from Ethiopia's conflict-ridden Tigray region on 20.01.23, according to media reports. Eyewitnesses reported having seen convoys of Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) with trucks, buses, artillery shells and tanks in Shire and Adwa in the north of the regional state. However, it remains unclear whether this is the beginning of a complete withdrawal or whether some Eritrean troops will remain in the region. There has been no official confirmation from either the Ethiopian or Eritrean side.

The presence of the EDF in the region is seen as the greatest obstacle to the implementation of the "Agreement on the Permanent Cessation of Hostilities" signed between the Ethiopian federal government and the regional government of Tigray in early November 2022 (cf. BN of 07.11.22). Eritrean soldiers have been accused of serious human rights violations in Tigray, including arbitrary killings and mass rape.

Iran

Prison sentences for photographer/women's activist and actress

Persian-language foreign media report that an actress and photographer has been sentenced to several years in prison. According to the report, the theatre and film actress took part in protests at the beginning of November 2022 but was temporarily released after paying bail. She was sentenced to five years in prison. No further information on the charges has been provided. The photographer and women's activist was sentenced to six years in prison on charges of committing acts against national security and spreading propaganda against the regime. She reportedly engaged in activities as a women's rights activist in the past and signed a statement against the sexual harassment of actresses. She had already been temporarily arrested for a fortnight in May 2022.

Protestors arrested at rallies in the province of Sistan-Baluchistan

According to media reports, several persons were arrested during a protest in the city of Zahedan on 20.01.23, including guards from a mosque. In the province's predominantly Sunni communities, protestors gather weekly after Friday prayers to commemorate the victims of the violent dispersal of protests by security forces in Zahedan in late September 2022 (cf. BN of 10.10.22). A well-known local Sunni cleric has since regularly criticised the Iranian leadership's treatment of protestors in his Friday sermons. According to human rights organisations, security forces blocked entrances and exits to and from the city of Zahedan on 19.01.23 to prevent further Friday rallies.

Report on the gradual decline of nationwide protests

According to an analysis carried out by the US-based Critical Threats Institute, the nationwide wave of protests that began with the death of a 22-year-old Kurdish woman held in regime custody has been in gradual decline since December 2022. Attempts made by protestors to organise rallies on 20.01.23 failed to attract significant numbers, despite widespread calls for nationwide protests on social media. Nevertheless, the population's willingness to protest remains very high and critical stance towards the regime can by no means be declared over. Protests continue to take place every Friday in the Sunni communities in the provinces of Sistan-Baluchistan and Golestan, for instance. Protests continue to draw large crowds in Zahedan in particular, (see above). Larger protests may well occur in the coming weeks and months. Factors such as the weather, cold and exhaustion among protestors, as well as everyday commitments are probably responsible for the decline in protest participation.

Iraq

Fight against ISIS

On 20.01.23, an attack was carried out on a police station in Diyala province. Two policemen were injured. It is not clear who was behind the attack, but there have been repeated ISIS attacks in the region.

On 21.01.23, a major airstrike was carried out against ISIS positions in Salah ad-Din province. At least five ISIS fighters were killed, according to an initial investigation.

Kazakhstan

Parliament dissolved and snap elections called

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev dissolved the lower house of parliament (called the Majilis) and the local representative bodies (called the Maslikhatat) all levels by decree on 19.01.23. He has called early parliamentary elections for 19.03.23. The date of the elections with regard to the local representative bodies is yet to be announced by the Central Election Commission. In January last year, mass unrest broke out in Kazakhstan, resulting in riots and clashes with law enforcement officers, resulting in the death of 238 people. After the unrest in the country was contained, Tokayev initiated a constitutional reform to transition from a super-presidential form of government to a presidential republic with an influential parliament. According to Tokayev, the constitutional reform has made it necessary to hold snap elections.

Kosovo / Serbia

EU Special Representatives in Kosovo and Serbia for crisis talks

According to recent media reports, the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, Miroslav Lajcak, together with other EU representatives and US diplomats, met separately with the Kosovar and Serbian leaders in Pristina and Belgrade on 20.01.23. They say the talks focused on the content of a European proposal for normalising future relations between Serbia and Kosovo; President Aleksandar Vucic has apparently shown a willingness to take difficult decisions in the interest of peace and European perspective of Serbia. According to Lajcak, the implementation of a community of Serbian majority municipalities included in the proposed plan is a crucial element for stability and for overcoming the turbulence in the border region with Serbia where tensions had temporarily escalated hugely again in December 2022 (cf. BN of 12.12.22 and 09.01.23).

Lebanon

Economic situation

On 20.01.23 it was announced that Lebanon will lose its voting rights in the UN General Assembly for not paying its minimum contributions to the organisation's operating budget. This makes it one of six countries, along with South Sudan, Venezuela, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Dominican Republic, on which the UN has imposed this sanction.

According to a report issued by the FAO, the WFP and the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture, around two million Lebanese – about 1.3 million Lebanese and 700,000 Syrians – are now dependent on food aid. This number is expected to rise to 2.2 million this year.

Since 19.01.23, the Lebanese pound has sunk to a record low of 1:50,000 against the U.S. dollar, the currency therefore remains in freefall.

Libya

Violent clashes at Tripoli International Airport

On 19.01.23, clashes reportedly erupted between two armed groups at Tripoli International Airport, around 30 km south of the capital's city centre. Both the Special Deterrence Force (SDF, also called Rada militia) and the 111th Brigade support the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU). Fighting reportedly broke out between the two militias after the 111th Brigade refused to hand over airport security to the SDF. Forces from the 444th Brigade, which is attached to the Chief of General Staff, intervened to resolve the conflict. There is no information available on the number of casualties. In the past, the 111th Brigade had been entrusted with airport security by the GNU, but it is not known whether the SDF was acting with an official mandate from the GNU.

The airport had been closed since the outbreak of the civil war in 2014, after it was severely damaged in fighting. The reconstruction work, which was entrusted to Turkish and Italian companies, had to be suspended between April 2019 and June 2020 due to renewed fighting.

Morocco / Western Sahara

Polisario holds five-day congress

A five-day congress of the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia El Hamra and Río de Oro) began on 13.01.23. The congress took place in the Sahrawi refugee camp "Dakhla" in Algeria (Dakhla is a port city in Western Sahara), 175 km south of Tindouf. More than 2,200 members of the movement and about 370 foreign guests attended. On 20.01.23, Brahim Ghali was re-elected as General Secretary with 69 % of the vote. His rival for the post, Béchir Mustapha, received 31 % of the vote.

According to observers, the movement is internally divided into two groups and has reached a turning point. The group around Brahim Ghali (who is supported by Algeria) considers the continuation of the struggle to be the only solution for achieving independence for Western Sahara. They say the group around Béchir Mustapha is in favour of engaging in a dialogue with Morocco and is accusing the group around Ghali of corruption and abuse of power. In November 2020, the Polisario had lifted the ceasefire that had existed under UN auspices since 1991, after Moroccan forces broke a blockade set up by the Polisario near Guerguerat. Since then, there have been repeated incidents at the sand wall built by Morocco. In October 2022, the UN Security Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) until 31.10.23 and called for the resumption of talks in a move towards a lasting and mutually acceptable solution.

Nicaragua

Femicide 2022

According to a report issued by the Voces Observatory of the NGO Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (Catholics for the Right to Decide), at least 67 women were the victims of femicide in Nicaragua in 2022, and there were 110 attempted femicides. Violence against women, including sexual violence against minors, has increased since 2018.

NGOs and women's rights defenders also blame the Ortega government's policies for this. They say the government promotes patriarchal culture and male violence by making it more difficult to file charges and deal with the corresponding offences under criminal law, and by favouring mediation procedures between the perpetrator and the victim. Organisations have been criticising numerous cases involving the very early release of men during the pandemic who had previously been sentenced to long prison terms for femicide or gender-based violence. In recent years, several (attempted) femicides have also been committed by former offenders released by the Ortega government.

Nigeria

Police kill three suspected IPOB members

On 18.01.23, police forces in Imo State killed three members of the IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra) independence movement, which has been banned since 2017 when they attacked a police facility. This emerged from media reports issued on 20.01.2023, citing a police spokesperson as the source. The incident reportedly took place in Agwa, a community in Oguta Local Government Area (LGA). The IPOB independence movement is known for its advocacy of secession from Nigeria's southeast.

Third promising candidate for the presidential election 2023

Peter Obi, the presidential candidate of the Nigerian Labour Party (LP), delivered a much-acclaimed speech in London on 16.01.23 regarding his election promises. While observers of the presidential election campaign originally expected a duel between the candidates of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), Bola Ahmed Adekunle Tinubu (cf. BN of 20.06.22) and the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP), Atiku Abubakar (cf. BN of 30.05.22), recent poll results suggest that 61-year-old Obi is now also considered to be a serious contender. The country's next President, inter alia, will be elected at the general election scheduled for 25.02.23.

Steady decline in the prevalence of FGM

A scientific analysis of surveys on FGM prevalence rates carried out in Nigeria since 2008 published on 13.01.23 comes to the clear conclusion that the proportion of Nigerian girls affected by female genital mutilation (FGM), with the exception of Bauchi, Kaduna and Taraba states, is steadily declining. A decrease is particularly noticeable in urban areas and in the south of the country. The individual risk of being subjected to FGM, on the other hand, is reportedly higher for girls whose mothers are poor, do not have access to education and media, and are excluded from household decision-making.

Reliable data on the prevalence rate of FGM among Nigerian girls and women can be obtained from the official scientific Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), which is published every five years, as well as from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) on Nigeria, which was last published in 2018 and 2022. The MICS global survey programme was developed by UNICEF in the 1990s and continues to receive technical support from UNICEF when conducting surveys.

A comparison of the survey results published in the NDHS 2008, 2013 and 2018 reveals that the percentage of Nigerian women affected by FGM in the age group of 15 to 49-year-olds decreased steadily across the country, from 30 % (NDHS 2008) initially to 25 % (NDHS 2013) and then to 20 % (NDHS 2018). These findings are corroborated by the MICS reports, as the MICS survey published in 2018 shows that the proportion of girls and women aged between 15 and 49 affected by FGM in Nigeria was around 18.4 % in the 2016/2017 survey period. According to data provided in the MICS report published in 2022, the rate of Nigerian women between the age of 15 and 49 affected by FGM in the 2021 survey period was 15.1 % and the rate in the age group of new-borns to 14-year-olds was 8.2 % in the same period.

Information provided by individual persons (cf. BN of 16.01.23) that the prevalence of FGM is currently much higher among Nigerian girls and women does not concur with the results of the NDHS and MICS scientific surveys presented here. The actual further decline in prevalence rates may be associated with the implementation of successful anti-FGM campaigns and measures at regional level which are not uncommon in Nigeria (cf. BN of 30.11.20, 22.02.21, 09.05.22 and 21.11.22).

Pakistan

Two provincial parliaments dissolved

The provincial parliament in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was dissolved on 18.01.23 after the provincial parliament of the most populous province Punjab had been dissolved on 14.01.23. Both provinces were ruled by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Led by former Prime Minister Imran Khan, the PTI is pushing for early federal elections not in October 2023, but as early as April 2023. Khan and the PTI expect that the dissolution of two of the four regional assemblies will force Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League to immediately call snap national elections at federal level.

UN urges government to take action against forced marriages and conversions

The UN has condemned abductions, forced marriages and forced conversions of girls belonging to religious minorities and has urged the government to take effective action against them. Forced marriages and conversions of Christian and Hindu girls (in the Muslim-majority country) are reported regularly. Every year, for instance, dozens of girls from Hindu communities, especially in the southern province of Sindh, become victims of these practices, which are allegedly promoted and supported by fundamentalist religious groups.

Quota for transgender persons in Sindh

Sindh has become the first Pakistani province to introduce a quota for transgender people (hijras) in local governments and municipalities. In future, one per cent of seats will be reserved for them. This is another step towards more rights and political representation. Since 2018, a third gender has been recognised in Pakistani personal documents. Hijras face considerable discrimination in their everyday lives. Besides harassment, there are also repeated cases of killing and abduction. Hijras are often abandoned by their families and are forced to engage in prostitution in order to survive.

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

West Bank: several persons killed by members of the armed forces

At least five Palestinians were killed by Israeli armed forces between 16.01.23 and 21.01.23. The incidents occurred mainly during arrests or raids carried out at refugee camps, with one incident involving the stabbing of a settler. Three of those killed were reportedly members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades or Islamic Jihad. In addition, a soldier of the Israeli military was lightly wounded. It is not known whether the soldier was male or female.

One of those killed was a 14-year-old boy who was shot dead at a refugee camp near Bethlehem. The Israeli soldiers were pelted with stones and incendiary devices when they entered the camp and responded with live ammunition.

Israel: cabinet member dismissed after Supreme Court ruling

The Israeli Supreme Court on 18.01.23 ordered the dismissal of Aryeh Deri, who had been appointed Interior and Health Minister when the government was formed in late December 2022. The court ruled that he could no longer remain in office following his conviction for tax offences last year.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his government announced shortly beforehand that one of their greatest priorities was to reform the Israeli judiciary, claiming judges and government legal advisors have too much influence on legislation and the executive. Critical voices fear that this could undermine Israeli democracy in the long run. Thousands of Israelis have therefore taken to the streets in recent weeks to protest against the announced changes.

In December 2022, the government amended a law prohibiting a person convicted in criminal proceedings from assuming duties as a cabinet member, allowing Deri to take up his post. The Supreme Court challenged this decision and has now delivered its verdict.

Deri had already been sentenced to three years' imprisonment in 2000 for bribery, fraud and embezzlement during his time as Interior Minister in the 1990s.

Peru

Demonstrations in the capital, further deaths in the interior, arrests at the UNMSM

On 19.01.23, a large rally under the heading "La Toma de Lima" (The capture of Lima) took place in the capital with many people travelling from the southern regions of the country to participate. Violent clashes broke out between protestors and state security forces. On 19.01.23, more persons were killed at protests in the southern regions of the country, including Macusani (Puno) where some protestors set fire to a police station and a court building. In a public address, President Dina Boluarte announced that the "instigators" and perpetrators of violence during the protests would be prosecuted. According to the National Ombudsman's Office, 54 civilians and one police officer have died in the protests, more than 1,200 people from civil society and the state security apparatus have been injured and several public buildings have been destroyed. According to the Public Prosecutor's Office, almost 200 people were briefly arrested on 21.01.23 during an operation carried out by the National Police (PNP) at a university in Lima (Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (UNMSM) (National University of San Marcos). The university had been taken over by the student union and the campus had given access to protesters from the southern regions who had come to the capital on 19.01.23 to demonstrate, offering food and overnight accommodation. Various political actors have criticised the police officers' approach to the arrests as well as the absence of prosecutors and, among other things, the refusal to give journalists and medical professionals access at the beginning of the operation.

Senegal

Leader of the opposition Ousmane Sonko to face trial

Ousmane Sonko, current mayor of Ziguinchor, leader of the Pastef-Les Patriotes (Patriots of Senegal for Ethics, Work and Fraternity) party and a promising candidate in Senegal's 2024 presidential elections, is to stand trial before a criminal court on charges of rape and one other offence, according to unanimous media reports. No date for the main hearing has reportedly been set yet. Sonko, who has been under judicial supervision since March 2021, has again denied the charges levelled against him. He speaks of a "plot by his political opponents", "political conspiracy" and "instrumentalisation of the judiciary by President Macky Sall" aimed at disqualifying him from the 2024 presidential elections. President Sall has not yet officially announced whether he will run for a third term. In the 2018 presidential elections, in which Sonko came third, prosecutions prevented political rivals such as Khalifa Sall and Karim Wade from running for president. According to the Senegalese newspaper L'AS Quotidien, Sonko once again called on his supporters to resist. In 2021, the arrest of Sonko on rape charges, who is especially popular among young people and is considered to be a rival of President Sall, sparked the most serious domestic unrest in years, with several people being killed (cf. BN of 08.03.21 and 15.03.21).

Casamance: one person killed and several wounded in military operation against MFDC rebels

One Senegalese soldier was killed and seven others were injured during a Senegalese military operation conducted against the rebels of the Mouvement des forces démocratiques de la Casamance (MFDC) (Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance) on 16.01.23 in the department of Bignona (southern region of Ziguinchor) near the Gambian border, according to a statement issued by the Directeur de l'information et des relations publiques des Armées sénégalaises, (DIRP) (Armed Forces Information and Public Relations Directorate). Other sources reported that one soldier was killed, and four others were injured. According to a media report, military operations against the MFDC rebels have been taking place in the region for several weeks in order to prevent them from establishing a new base in the border areas with The Gambia and from destroying the hemp fields they cultivate.

Somalia

SNA recapture strategic towns

On 16.01.23, the government announced that the Somali National Army (SNA) had retaken the port town of Harardheere (Mudug region) with the support of local militias. Harardheere is considered to be the most

strategically important town in Galmudug and had been controlled by al-Shabaab since 2010. This was a "historic victory", the government said.

According to official reports, the town of Galcad (Galguduud region) was also recaptured. After several days of control over Galcad, heavy fighting reportedly broke out between the SNA and al-Shabaab after a car bomb detonated at a military base in Galcad on 20.01.2013. Several SNA members, including the deputy commander of the Danab forces, Hassan Tuurre, were reportedly killed in the attack. The SNA was then supported by US Africa Command with an airstrike, in which, according to US reports, around 30 al-Shabaab fighters were killed. Afterwards, the area was reportedly brought back under military control. According to official figures, at least 100 al-Shabaab fighters were killed in the fighting. Al-Shabaab, by contrast, claims to have killed dozens of soldiers. It is not possible to independently verify the number of casualties.

Attack on military base in Hawadley

On 17.01.23, al-Shabaab fighters carried out an attack on the military base in Hawadley, about 60 km north of Mogadishu. At least seven soldiers were reportedly killed when a vehicle loaded with explosives was blown up before the camp was attacked by gunmen. The military base had been recaptured by government forces and al-Shabaab clan militias in October 2022.

At least eight killed in attack on government office in Mogadishu

On 22.01.23, at least six civilians and two members of the security forces were killed and more than 16 were injured when al-Shabaab fighters stormed the headquarters of the Benadir Regional Administration where the office of the Mayor of Mogadishu is also located. At least six insurgents were reportedly killed. The attack began with a suicide bombing after which gunmen penetrated the gates and engaged in gunfire exchange with security forces.

Sri Lanka

Human rights organisations demand release of activists; criticise anti-terror law

Several human rights organisations, including Amnesty International (ai) and Human Rights Watch (HRW), are calling for the release of a student arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) five months ago during protests triggered by the country's worst economic crisis. The protestors demanded far-reaching reforms to combat the economic crisis, which is accompanied by shortages of essential goods, fuel and medicines. The protests resulted in the resignation of the then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Since the new President Ranil Wickremesinghe took office in July 2022, the military has cracked down on the protests with intimidation, surveillance and arbitrary arrests. Many of those arrested at the time have since been released on bail. People critical of the government are calling for the PTA to be repealed. They say that the reform of the law in March 2022 was merely cosmetic as it is still possible to arrest suspects without a warrant and to use torture to force confessions.

Sudan

Renewed demonstrations

According to the Socialist Doctors' Association, at least 112 people were injured and 60 arrested during protests in the capital Khartoum on 17.01.23. Some of the injuries were reportedly caused by tear gas, stones and broken glass. According to the Sudanese Emergency Lawyers' Association, one of its members was also picked up and arrested by the police in front of its offices in Khartoum on 17.01.23. The association announced that it would be taking legal action against the arrest.

Syria

Aleppo: at least 16 dead after building collapse

According to various media reports, a five-storey building in Aleppo city collapsed on 22.01.23 after a previous water leak had reportedly weakened its foundations. At least 16 people are said to have been killed.

The disaster occurred in the Sheikh Maksoud district, which is under the control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Mazloum Abdi, commander-in-chief of the SDF, issued a statement condemning Syrian government forces who control the surrounding neighbourhoods and have been preventing the delivery of construction materials to Sheikh Maksoud for years. The neighbourhood is one of a few that have remained under SDF control since the Syrian government recaptured Aleppo.

Türkiye in a dialogue with Damascus and Tehran

During a visit to Ankara on 17.01.23, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian welcomed the recent diplomatic rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria. Türkiye sought direct talks with the Syrian government for the first time a few weeks ago (cf. BN of 09.01.23), after relations had been severed following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011. For his part, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said he could meet with his Syrian counterpart as early as next month. Çavuşoğlu acknowledged Iran's contribution to the rapprochement with Syria and announced close cooperation with Iran in a move to solve existing problems.

As recently as 13.01.23, a demonstration against the reconciliation policy with Damascus took place in the Turkish-occupied city of Azaz in northern Syria, during which the president of the Istanbul-based National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (ETILAF) was attacked by protestors.

On 12.01.23, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that talks with Syria and Russia would help speed up the return of refugees from Türkiye to Syria. Only the day before, he had announced that around 550,000 people had already returned to the areas of northern Syria occupied by Türkiye.

Mandate for UN aid extended

On 10.01.23, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to extend the opening of the Turkish-Syrian border crossing at Bab al-Hawa for international aid to Syria. Russia had previously threatened several times to veto the aid deliveries to the rebel-controlled areas of northern Syria. Russia supports the Syrian government's position that all aid deliveries should go through Damascus. The latest agreement is initially valid for six months.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres described the aid as an "indispensable lifeline for 4.1 million people in north-west Syria".

Türkiye

Deportations

On 19.01.23, the Turkish Presidency of Migration Management announced that between 01.01.23 and 19.01.23, a total of 5,466 refugees and migrants had been deported from Türkiye, 2,215 of them on flights to their countries of origin. According to the authorities, more than 124,000 refugees and migrants are reported to have been deported from Türkiye in 2022.

Village guard killed

On 22.01.23, the Turkish Ministry of Interior announced that a village guard had been killed during the anti-terrorist "Eren Abluka Autumn Winter-23" operation carried out in the eastern province of Sirnak. According to a Twitter post by Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, the perpetrators are members of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party).

Uganda

Opposition supporters arrested

On 22.01.23, thirteen supporters of former opposition presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi (aka Bobi Wine, National Unity Platform) were reportedly arrested, and others injured in Jinja. The suspects had allegedly held an illegal gathering disguised as a wedding ceremony.

Ukraine

Development of the war

According to media reports, on 22.01.23, President Volodymyr Zelensky instructed the military leadership to create additional personnel reserves for the Ukrainian armed forces. Details of the mobilisation process were not disclosed. Based on information provided by regional authorities and the Ukrainian General Staff on the morning of 23.01.23, Russian attacks had been reported in the Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk, Sumy, Kharkiv, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts in the previous 24 hours.

Ukraine's domestic intelligence service SBU announced on 20.01.23 that it had detained seven people in the city of Dnipro suspected of providing Russian forces with position coordinates for critical infrastructure facilities in the Dnipropetrovsk region. A connection with the missile strike on a multi-storey residential building in Dnipro on 14.01.23 is being investigated. According to information provided by the authorities on 19.01.23, at least 46 people were killed, and the search for other missing persons was suspended on 17.01.23 (cf. BN of 16.01.23).

When a Ukrainian state emergency service helicopter crashed into a nursery near the capital Kyiv on 18.01.23, fourteen people were killed, according to Ukrainian sources, including the Ukrainian Interior Minister Denys Monastyrskyj, who was on board at the time of the crash, and other high-ranking representatives of the Interior Ministry. Twenty-five people were reportedly injured.

Ukraine / Russian Federation

Crimean Tatars given lengthy prison sentences

A military court in Rostov-on-Don sentenced five Crimean Tatars on 11.01.23 to 13 years' imprisonment in a strict-regime prison having convicted them of being members of the banned Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir and participating in a terrorist organisation. With this, the court brought to an end the so-called 25 Case, in which a total of 25 Crimean Tatars who were arrested in 2019 had been sentenced to long prison terms. All the men were found guilty of participating in activities of this organisation which is legal in Ukraine. A day later, the same court sentenced Crimean Tatar activist and cleric Raif Fevziyev to 17 years in prison for conspiracy to seize power and organising activities of a terrorist organisation. After the Crimean Peninsula was annexed from Ukraine by the Russian Federation in March 2014, dozens of Crimean Tatars became targets of state persecution on charges of membership in that organisation.

Venezuela

Social protests

The peaceful protests in Venezuela (cf. BN v. 16.01.23) continue and in week 3 extended across several states of the country. According to the Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social (OVCS) (Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict), there have already been more than 400 demonstrations in the first 18 days of 2023, the majority of which demand higher wages in the public sector. According to the OVCS, at least eight protests have been stopped by state security forces. Videos of so-called colectivos appeared on social media asking the demonstrators to refrain from further protests. Their authenticity could not be independently verified. According to the Venezuelan trade union network, the state secret service SEBIN also besieged the house of the general secretary of the Corpoelec workers' union in the state of Falcón on 22.01.23. The network sees this as a measure of intimidation to prevent further protests.

At least 18 people have been arrested for obstructing public transport or inciting hatred following protests by workers of various state-owned companies organised in the conglomerate Corporacion Venezolana de Guayana (CVG) in Bolívar state. After negotiations were held with the regional government, it was agreed that no employees participating in protests would be dismissed, those arrested would be released and in return road blockades of the local highway would be lifted. The negotiation of salaries and better working conditions was postponed until planned dialogue meetings are held.

Backdrop

The income of persons employed in the public sector and the pensions of persons formerly employed in this sector are based on the minimum wage of 130 bolívars, which was last increased in March 2022. In addition to this basic salary, higher increments are paid for seniority, years of service or higher educational qualifications or bonuses. The latter, however, are paid irregularly or not necessarily on time. In March 2022, the minimum wage in bolívars was equivalent to about USD 30; due to devaluation, the current equivalent is about USD 7. Inflation at the end of 2022 was consistently over 300 %, according to various independent sources. Food prices have risen significantly, the economy has been quasi de-facto dollarised for several years, which is why wages in the private sector are often paid in dollars.

The government had paid a bonus of 580 bolívars (a little less than USD 30) on 15.08.23 for Teacher's Day. The protestors chanted in various videos on social media that they wanted a regular salary linked to the dollar or the basic food basket, not a one-off bonus. The equivalent value of the basic food basket for a family of five was USD 371 in December 2022, according to data provided by the Observatorio Venezolano de Finanzas (OVF) (Venezuelan Observatory of Finance) and estimates from the Centro de Documentación y Análisis Social de la Federación de Maestros (Cendas-FVM) (Centre for Documentation and Social Analysis of the Teachers' Federation) were even higher, at USD 485.

Release of former Interior Minister Torres, departure for Spain

On 21.01.23, Major General and former Venezuelan Interior Minister Miguel Rodríguez Torres was released from prison after almost five years of imprisonment for conspiracy. While he was director of the SEBIN (Bolivarian intelligence service) under the Chávez government, he headed the Interior Ministry in 2014 under President Nicolás Maduro, when police security forces were accused of numerous human rights violations in the violent end to protests at the time, as well as acts of torture. After distancing himself from chavismo, he was arrested in 2018 for his "alleged involvement in actions to disturb peace and public tranquillity and in a plot to attack the unity of the National Bolivarian Armed Forces (FANB)" and charged with incitement to rebellion, among other things. He has always maintained his innocence. According to media reports, he left for Spain immediately upon his release, which was also due to mediation by former Spanish President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. Some voices and media reports suggest that his departure was more likely an expulsion by the authorities.

Yemen

Lack of medicines

According to the National Cancer Centre in Sanaa, only about half of the approximately 130 essential medicines for cancer patients are currently available, and there is only one radiotherapy device in the whole country. Yemen imports 100 % of its medicines, but importing is complicated, lengthy and expensive due to years of fighting the Saudi sea and air blockade, and internal restrictions on movement. The Houthis are also regularly accused of obstructing aid deliveries, meaning that some cancer patients often have to procure medicines themselves, and in many cases the only option is to buy them on the black market. Last year, several children died after taking contaminated medicines bought on the black market (cf. BN of 31.10.22).