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Group 62 – Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

20 May 2019

Afghanistan

New date for presidential elections

The presidential elections, which have been postponed several times and had lastly been set for 20 April 2019, are now envisaged to be held on 28 September 2019. Following the decision taken by the supreme court on 21 April 2019, incumbent President Ashraf Ghani is allowed to stay in office until the new president is sworn in. Meanwhile, several rival candidates have called for his resignation and for the installation of a transitional government until the September elections.

Afghan police officers accidentally killed in airstrike

An airstrike launched on 16 May 2019 in southern Helmand province accidentally killed 17 policemen and injured at least as many of them. The attack took place during an operation against the Taliban near the provincial capital Lashkar Gah.

IOM suspends temporary accommodation

So far, the International Organization for Migration has granted 15 days of temporary accommodation in Kabul for people removed to Afghanistan. Since April 2019, deportees only receive a cash payment of approx. 150 EUR as well as information e.g. on hotels available. According to the European External Action Service, that only few deportees made use of the accommodation facilities offered by IOM.

Algeria

Continuing protests

In the course of the continuing protests against the old regime which had started at the end of February, demonstrators in Algiers called on 17 May 2019 for the postponement of the elections scheduled to take place on 4 July 2019. The protesters want to ensure that no-one of the former power elite will participate in the new government, including army chief Ahmed Gaid Salah. Since the beginning of Ramadan, even more people have been taking to the streets; at the same time, security measures have been stepped up, with tanks being used and checkpoints installed at the roads running into the capital. AFP news agency reports of clashes between protesters and security forces and the use of tear gas at highly symbolic sites. Apparently, no-one has been injured in the protests. On 19 May, thousands of students rallied against the continuation of the government with the old power elite. On 14 May, a protest rally against unemployment was violently dispersed in the city of Tinerkouk, roughly 1,250 km southwest of the capital. Apparently, the protesters blocked access to government offices, setting fire to the buildings and looting them.

Burkina Faso

Attack on Catholic parade

On 13 May 2019, unidentified individuals attacked a Catholic Parade and killed 4 people in the northwestern town of Zimtenga (Kongoussi district, Centre-Nord province).

Cameroon

UN warns of further deterioration in anglophone regions

In a meeting of its Security Council held on 13 May 2019, the UN voiced concern about the situation in the two anglophone regions North-West and South-West, where both the security and the humanitarian situation have deteriorated. During the last year, Cameroon has seen one of the fastest-growing displacement crises in Africa, with more than half a million people being displaced and tens of thousands more having escaped to neighbouring countries, in particular to Nigeria, the UN said.

Egypt

Attack on tourist bus

On 19 May 2019, a roadside bomb was detonated near the pyramids of Giza when a tourist bus passed, injuring at least 14 people. Those suspected to be behind the attack are radical Islamists who in December 2018 had carried out a similar attack on a tourist bus close to the pyramids.

Iran

Escalating student protests against mandatory headscarf

On 13 May 2019, hundreds of students rallied at the premises of Tehran university to protest against increased patrols of the morality police during the month of Ramadan.

Since the beginning of Ramadan, these patrols have increased at universities. According to the students, the enforcement of the Islamic dress rules for women which are already strict, has increased even more. 40 years after the Islamic revolution, Iran's leadership is still rejecting any relaxation of the strict dress rules, claiming that the majority of Iranian women are voluntarily wearing the hijab (headscarf). The peaceful rally escalated when some of the protesters were attacked by members of the paramilitary Basij militia (a sub-organisation of the Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami). The Bassij forces, dressed in civilian clothes, are mainly deployed at rallies and are equipped with batons.

New detention of labour activists

On 16 May 2019, several workers of the sugar factory Haft-e Tapeh in southern Khuzestan province were arrested. The wave of detentions started on 9 May with a strike of the employees in protest against unpaid salaries, mismanagement, partial privatization and lack of support by the so-called workers' council. For years, Iranian workers' organizations have been demanding the freedom to form independent trade unions. The Iranian authorities do not recognize independent trade unions and regard their activists as dissidents controlled by foreign services. In view of this most recent wave of detentions, the international human rights organisation HRW urged the Iranian government on 15 May 2019 to comply with the international treaties signed by the state leadership which include the right to form trade unions.

Conservatives outraged: young people dancing to pop songs

A love song and schoolgirls dancing to a pop song have caused a scandal, disclosing the antagonistic views of rulers and citizens. The vice president of the parliament has demanded harsh consequences, the minister for education is trying to limit the 'damage'. Dancing and celebrating in the public have been prohibited in Iran for 40 years.

Iraq

Security situation

Security-relevant incidents are continuing to occur. On 13 May 2019, one Iraqi soldier was killed and 3 others injured when an improvised explosive device went off in the town of Umm al-Masayed near Telafar (Ninive province). On 15 and 16 May, a total of 7 Iraqi security officers were killed in two attacks launched by IS militants in Kirkuk. On 17 May, two bomb explosions in the disputed district of Khanaqin (Diyala province) left 2 civilians dead.

On 18 May 2019, the Iraqi armed forces killed 6 IS insurgents and destroyed their hideouts in Salahaddin province.

Rocket attacks hit Baghdad's green zone

On 19 May 2019, a Katyusha rocket hit the heavily fortified 'green zone' in Baghdad, apparently without causing any casualties. The area houses the US Embassy, numerous other embassies of western states as well as Iraqi ministries and parliamentary buildings. Apparently, the roads leading to the green zone were temporarily blocked. It was only in the end of December 2018 that the Iraqi government had partly reopened the green zone to public transport.

The blast came in the middle of heightened tensions between the U.S. and Iran. On 15 May 2019, the U.S. had ordered the evacuation of all but the indispensable staff at both its embassy in Baghdad and the consulate in Erbil.

Deadly anti-corruption protests

After several cases of corruption involving businessmen with links to the Sadr movement had become known, protests were held in several cities in the southern part of the country. Moqtada Sadr had called for demonstrations against corruption. Some of the rallies were peaceful, but there were also reports of protesters attacking offices and shops.

In Najaf, security guards of a shopping mall shot at the protesters, killing 4 individuals and injuring another 17. Iraqi media report that in connection with the incident, 5 security staff were arrested.

IS militants torch crop fields

Press reports of 14 May 2019 say that IS militants hiding in the Qarachogh mountains near Makhmour have torched several local crop fields because the farmers refused to pay taxes to them. Apparently, IS fighters also torched a farm in Diyala province.

Israel/Palestinian territory

Clashes at the Gaza border

On 15 May 2019, the day marking the 71st anniversary of the foundation of the state of Israel, around 7,000 Palestinians protested at the border fence in Gaza. Israeli troops fired tear gas and rubber bullets to keep them away from the fence. Emergency personnel said that 3 individuals were injured. Protest marches in Ramallah in the central West Bank were largely peaceful, media say.

Lebanon

Head of labour confederation Bechara Asmar arrested

On 18 May 2019, Bechara Asmar and five other people were detained. Bechara Asmar had made a joke about the late patriarch Cardinal Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, unaware that the microphones were already turned on. Apparently, the other 5 individuals had laughed about his comments. At present, Asmar is still in detention, while the other 5 people were released. As yet, no information has been forthcoming on the legal basis of Asmar's detention. Prime Minister Saad Hariri, foreign minister Jebran Bassil and other political and religious leaders have condemned Asmar's behaviour. The incident has led to a new debate on the freedom of speech and its limitations in the country.

Mali

Peacekeepers killed

Two attacks on the UN MINUSMA peacekeeping mission left one soldier dead and several others wounded. One attack took place in Timbuktu, where a Nigerian soldier was killed and another one injured. The second incident occurred in Tessalit (Kidal region) near the Algerian border, where three Chadian peacekeepers were injured when their vehicle had been hit by an explosive device.

On 15 May 2019, at least four Malian soldiers were apparently killed by suspected jihadists in Mopti region.

Niger

28 soldiers killed in attack on military patrol

Following an attack of radical Islamists on a military patrol on 14 May 2019, the death toll has meanwhile risen to at least 28. On 16 May, a spokesman of the defence ministry stated that 11 soldiers who had been listed as missing the previous day, were also killed in the attack. Before their bodies were found, there had been reports of 17 deaths. The Nigerien soldiers had been ambushed by heavily armed terrorists near the village of Tongo Tongo in Tillabéri, close to the Malian border. The patrol had been in pursuit of militants who had attacked a high-security prison 50 km outside the capital Niamey on 13 May; in the incident, one Nigerien soldier had been killed.

Pakistan

Bombing attack on police vehicles in Quetta

Two days after the attack on a luxury hotel in Balochistan province (see BN of 13 May 2019), a deadly bomb targeted police vehicles in the outskirts of the province's capital Quetta in the night to 14 May 2019, killing 4 policemen and wounding several others. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Bail granted to TLP leaders in trial for mass protest

On 14 May 2019, the high court of the Punjabi provincial capital Lahore granted bail to two leaders of the Islamist Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan TLP. The two clerics Khadim Rizvi and Afzal Qadri had led the mass protests following the acquittal of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman, who had been condemned to death for alleged blasphemy (see BN of 5 November 2018). In November 2018, they had been arrested (see BN of 3 December 2018).

Asia Bibi, who had spent eight years on death row after her conviction, has meanwhile left Pakistan and gone to Canada, where she was granted asylum.

Russian Federation

More than 20 protesters arrested

Media report that in Yekaterinburg, about 100 people were taken in police custody during protests lasting from 14 to 16 May 2019. Apparently, 20 individuals were sentenced to several days' imprisonment for participation in an unauthorised protest action. Since 14 May, the city has been the scene of repeated protests against the local authorities' decision to build a Russian Orthodox Church on a park square. The peaceful protests turned violent, with clashes occurring between supporters and opponents of the building project. On 16 May 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an opinion poll on the church construction project. Already 74,000 people had signed a petition against the project, which would take up one of the last remaining green areas in Russia's fourth largest city.

Saudi Arabia

Colleagues of murdered journalist Khashoggi under threat from Saudi Arabia

An Arab democracy activist living in Europe has told CBS News that he and two other colleagues of the murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi have received threats from Saudi Arabia because they are continuing Khashoggi's projects; one of them is living in the U.S: Online activist Iyad al-Baghdadi, who was granted asylum in Norway, recently said that the CIA informed the Norwegian authorities about the threats to his security.

Somalia

UN warns of a humanitarian crisis

A lack of rain in April and May has led to crop failure throughout the country. Reports say that two million people are threatened by starvation unless they receive humanitarian aid. Many people from rural areas have moved to cities in order to gain access to humanitarian supplies.

Students shot dead

In Beledweyne (Hiiran region), police apparently shot dead two students protesting against the government's decision not to carry out examinations which had been published online in advance.

Attacks

On 10 May 2019, the Somali branch of the Islamic State terrorist organisation detonated a bomb in front of the court building in Bosaso city (Puntland), targeting a local judge. At least 10 people were injured, the judge himself remained unhurt.

On 14 May, a bomb attack of al-Shabaab in Mogadishu targeting at a policeman apparently killed 4 people.

On 12 May, a Turkish engineer was killed by a car bomb near the K-4 intersection in Mogadishu. This attack is also ascribed to al-Shabaab.

Fighting

On 14 May 2019, al-Shabaab insurgents attacked the town of Barire in Lower Shabelle region. The Somali National Army SNA repelled the attack, killing 14 militants. Al-Shabaab has launched several attacks at Barire since the SNA forces conquered the town on 1 May.

Sri Lanka

Unrest

Since 12 May 2019, anti-Muslim rioting has taken place in response to the terror attacks of 21 April (see BN of 29 April 2019). In several cities, Muslim-owned shops and mosques have apparently been attacked mainly by Christian rioters. Anti-Muslim rioting took place in Kurunegala with a predominantly Buddhist population as well as in Chilaw with a significant Christian population. According to the authorities, the violence was caused by previously spread instigating news and false information in social media. On 13 May 2019, a Muslim died in Puttalam as a result of violent excesses. His death became known shortly after a nationwide night-time curfew had been imposed. The authorities have ordered a ban of access to Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram.

Sudan

Interim agreement between military and protesters at stake

On 13 May 2019, protesters and military agreed on framework conditions for a transitional body. The agreement comprises a transitional period of three years, during which a new governing council would take over state power. The council would consist of both civilian and military representatives. General Jasser Atta also announced that the first six months of the transition period would be used to sign peace treaties with the rebels in the conflict-ridden regions of Darfur, Blue Nile and South Kordofan. Despite the agreement, riots occurred in Khartoum on the same day, killing several people.

On 15 May 2019, the head of the military transitional council Abdel Fattah Burhan announced a 3-day suspension of the negotiations with the opposition on the formation of a transitional government. The military has requested the protesters to lift the street blockades imposed in the capital Khartoum. The opposition, in turn, has criticised the unilateral suspension of the negotiations. On 19 May 2019, the talks between military and opposition were resumed.

Former President Omar al-Bashir indicted

Sudan's public prosecutor has announced that ousted former President Omar al-Bashir has officially been charged with 'incitement and involvement in the killing of protesters'. It was not immediately clear what

punishment he might face. Omar al-Bashir is being held in prison since his ousting (see BN of 15 April 2019). Also, criminal investigations have been opened against him on suspicion of money laundering and corruption, after large sums of cash in various currencies had been found in his home.

Syria

Offensive in northwestern Syria

Fighting in the north of Hama and in Idlib has forced about 180,000 people to flee their homes since the government started a military offensive there. At least 16 aid organisations have been forced to discontinue their activities in the region. Schools and hospitals were deliberately targeted by the Syrian army and its Russian ally. Meanwhile, at least 12 villages have been recaptured by government forces. The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has documented approx. 223 civilian fatalities on both sides of the conflict since 30 April 2019. The rebels are still controlling a mountain range west of Idlib, from where they have been firing missiles to neighbouring Latakia. On 19 May 2019, Russia declared a unilateral cease-fire which was immediately rejected by the rebels. They demand the withdrawal of government troops from recently captured areas as a precondition for a ceasefire. Various humanitarian organisations have registered sporadic fire against rebel targets despite the unilateral ceasefire.

Explosions in the region around Damascus

Syrian state media report that the air defence was activated by missiles from Israel in the nights of 17 and 18 May 2019. No information was given if targets have been hit; local residents only reported loud explosions. The Israeli military has not offered any comment. In the past, Israel has repeatedly carried out strikes against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria. The London-based pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that the airstrikes targeted the Kiswah region, where arms depots are located and military personnel is stationed.

Strike against IS in Deir al Zor

On 15 May 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces announced a campaign against IS fighters who are still present in Deir al Zor province. Near the town of Shuhail, the mainly Kurdish militia has managed to arrest 20 individuals and to seize several weapons. A spokesperson of the Kurdish YPG militia warned that after the loss of their territory, IS supporters have already switched over to the use of guerrilla tactics such as planning isolated attacks.

Tajikistan

Scores dead after jail riot

The Tajik ministry of justice has stated that 3 prison guards and 29 prisoners died in a jail riot in Vakhdat on 19 May 2019. The riot in the high-security prison began after convicted IS fighters had armed themselves and killed 3 guards and 5 inmates with their knives. According to the ministry, the Tajik security authorities have killed 24 militants and restored order in the high security prison.

Turkey

Lift of visit ban for Öcalan's lawyers

On 16 May 2019, justice minister Abdullah Gül announced that the lawyers of the former leader of the banned Kurdish Workers' Party PKK Abdullah Öcalan are allowed again to visit their client in his prison on Imrali Island. All obstacles in this regard have been removed, he said. Since 1999, Öcalan has been serving a life sentence in his prison in the Marmara Sea. In July 2011, a visit ban was imposed for his lawyers; it was only in May 2019 that he received a special permit to see them. In November 2018, Kurdish lawmaker Leyla Güven of the opposition HDP party has started a hunger strike, which has been joined by many supporters.

Vietnam

More political prisoners

A report published by Amnesty International on 13 May 2019 says that the number of political prisoners has risen from 97 in 2018 to currently 128; the actual number is probably higher. The prisoners include bloggers as well as human rights defenders, environmental activists and pro-democracy campaigners. Almost one tenth of them was arrested in connection with publications in social media. At least 34 were sentenced under the provisions of a new penal code which took effect in 2018.

Yemen

Attacks in Sanaa and Taizz

On 16 May 2019, six civilians were killed and several others injured when the Saudi-led coalition conducted airstrikes on the capital Sanaa.

On 13 May, militants detonated two bombs in Taizz City, injuring at least 8 people.

Combat actions in al-Dhali

Yemeni government officials say that pro-government forces have recaptured Qataba district in al-Dhali governorate from the Houthi rebels.

Apparently, a Yemeni family was killed in Sanah area (al-Dhali), when their house was attacked by Houthi rebels on 14 May 2019.

Houthis withdraw from Hodeidah

The UN reports that on 14 May 2019, the Houthi rebels withdrew their soldiers from the ports of Hodeidah, Saleef and Ras Isa in Hodeidah governorate (see BN of 13 May 2019). Now, the UN benefits from better access to the ports and hopes in this respect that the import of food and other goods into the country will be easier. However, in order to implement the other parts of the 'Stockholm Agreement' negotiated by the UN, further efforts will be necessary. In other parts of the Hodeidah governorate, fighting is continuing between Houthi rebels and government forces.