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Briefing Notes

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Afghanistan

UNICEF figures on the nutrition of children

The UN child welfare organisation UNICEF is alarmed that around 600,000 children under the age of five are suffering from acute malnutrition, a spokesperson said on 24 May 2019 in Geneva. Given these figures, Afghanistan is one of the three most drastically affected nations along with civil war-torn Yemen and South Sudan.

Daily combat actions, draught and floods force many families to leave their homes. Besides, the ongoing battles against radical-Islamist Taliban und IS insurgents are leading to casualties on a daily basis. A political solution to the conflict is not in sight despite ongoing negotiations between U.S. representatives and high-rank Taliban members, which should eventually lead to talks with the Afghan government,.

Renowned cleric killed in attack

On 24 May 2019, just before the Friday prayer, an attack on a mosque in the eastern part of the capital Kabul killed three people and injured at least another 32. Among the victims is Maulawi Raihan, Imam and prayer leader of the mosque. As yet, no-one has claimed responsibility for the attack. In the past, radical-Islamist Taliban insurgents have repeatedly targeted clerics who have taken the government's side.

Algeria

New protests

The demonstrations against the current political structures have entered the 14th consecutive week. Among other things, the protesters demand the resignation of army chief Ahmed Gaid Salah and an end to the military's influence on the political agenda.

DR Congo

Opposition leader returns from exile

On 20 May 2019, Moise Katumbi, one of the most prominent opposition leaders, returned to the DRC after three years of exile in Belgium. During his absence, he had been convicted to a prison term of 3 years for suspected property fraud. In 2018, he had been barred from running in the presidential elections and was not allowed to enter the country. It was only after President Felix Tshisekedi was sworn into office that the verdict was overturned by an appeals court, allowing Moise Katumbi to re-enter the country. He was welcomed by thousands of his followers on his arrival in his hometown of Lubumbashi,.

Sylvestre Ilunga Ilukamba appointed Prime Minister

On 20 May 2019, President Felix Tshisekedi appointed Sylvestre Ilunga Ilukamba as the country's new Prime Minister. Before, he had been the head of the DRC's national railway company SNCC; he belonged to the alliance of parties Common Front for Congo FCC of former President Joseph Kabila.

Egypt

Attack and ensuing fighting

Following the bomb attack of 19 May 2019 on a tourist bus, in which several people were wounded, the Egyptian authorities are targeting the individuals behind the assault. On 20 May, Egyptian security forces conducted raids in Cairo, in which 12 suspected militants were killed.

India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi re-elected

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's governing Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata party BJP won the elections with an absolute majority of votes. According to the votes counted so far, the BJP won in over 300 of the 500 constituencies; with this result, he is the first leader since 1971 to secure a single party majority twice in a row. The elections were considered as a referendum on the Prime Minister, since his populist approach to politics divides the country. He is a proponent of a militant ideology called Hindutva, whose supporters want a majority rule of the Hindus in the country which is secular by constitution. During his time of office, violence of Hindus against Muslims and other minorities has increased. In addition, Modi's economy is criticized because the party had grossly failed to keep the election promise of creating ten million new jobs every year. At the same time, the Prime Minister is seen as a protector of India and its culture by many citizens.

Indonesia

Unrest after election result

Protests escalated on 22 and 23 May 2019, leaving six people dead and around 200 others wounded, after incumbent President Joko Widodo had won the election with 55,5 percent. Last week his defeated opponent Prabowo Subianto had called on his supporters to protest against the election result. A police spokesman said that clashes had been planned in advance, even though seemingly the marches started peacefully. Prabowo's speaker, in turn, underlined that there had only been calls for peaceful protests. In the evening of 22 May, after the breaking of the Ramadan fast, several thousands of protesters gathered in front of the electoral commission's headquarters. The electoral commission had unexpectedly shifted forward by one day the announcement of the results originally scheduled to take place on 23 May. The presidential and parliamentary elections had been held on 17 April 2019.

Iran

Demands for lifting of harsh verdicts against writers

894 writers have condemned the harsh verdicts against three of their colleagues, members of the Iranian Writers Association IWA. On 19 May 2019, a corresponding petition was published on the portal of the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA). On 15 May 2019, the Tehran revolutionary court had sentenced the three board members of the IWA Baktash Abtin, Keyvan Bajan and Reza Khandan Mahabadi to six years in prison each. They were charged with propaganda against the state and assembly and collusion against national security. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the association was classified as subversive and was banned from organising events.

Majlis steps up acid attack punishment

On 20 May 2019, the Iranian parliament (majlis) voted in favour of legislation that steps up punishment for acid attacks and provides more support to survivors of such acts. According to the new law, perpetrators face up to 25 years in prison. If the victim's face is hurt beyond recognition by the acid attack, the punishment may exceed 25 years. If an acid attack leads to physical disability, the victims can demand retaliation in kind and the payment of blood money (diya). If the perpetrator has run off or in case he is unable to pay the blood money, the government will cover the costs. In Iran, acid attacks are frequent, often as response to perceived violation of honour within the family. Five years ago, a series of acid attacks in the city of Isfahan had

attracted considerable medial interest when 14 young women were attacked on the open road by unidentified men on motorbikes. Some of the victims were severely injured.

Investigations against female singer

On 21 May 2019, the prosecutor of the city of Natanz informed that investigations were opened against a woman for performing solo in the streets. On 17 May, the young women had uploaded a video in her Instagram account showing her singing in front of a group of tourists in the historic village of Abyaneh (Isfahan province). Iranian media report that the prosecutor found other videos on her Instagram site which implied that she had often performed before mixed groups in public. Since the revolution of 1979, Iranian women are not allowed to sing solo in front of a mixed audience; they may only sing in choirs or in mixed ensembles.

Student protests against sanctions and oppression

On 26 May 2019, hundreds of students of Tehran's Allameh Tabatabai University protested against international sanctions and political oppression. In a statement they articulated being caught between foreign and domestic oppressors. Human rights activists criticize that in Iran, dissenters are frequently arrested under the general suspicion of being instigated by foreign powers. Most of them are not given a fair trial and are sentenced to harsh prison terms for endangering national security, human rights activists say.

Iraq

Security-related incidents

On 22 May 2019, the blast of an explosive device killed one civilian and injured 3 others in Ninewa province. Security sources say that the attack targeted farmers who wanted to tend to their fields.

Also on 22 May, an attack launched by IS militants in Salah ad-Din province left one policeman dead and 5 others wounded.

On 26 May, a car bomb explosion at a market in Rabia (Ninewa province) killed 5 people and injured another 8.

Also on 26 May, a member of Hashd al-Ashairi died when an explosive device detonated at a roadside near Ramadi (Anbar province).

IS claims responsibility for crop fires

In several provinces, farmland has been set on fire. Media report that IS militants burn fields of farmers who refuse to co-operate or to pay the demanded taxes. On 23 May 2019, IS apparently claimed responsibility for crop fires in Kirkuk, Diyala, Ninewa and Salah ad-Din provinces as well as in some provinces of Syria. Kurdish media also report of farmland fires in Daquq, Khanaqin und Makhmour. On 20 May 2019, the Iraqi ministry for agriculture set up a crisis team.

Tensions in Kirkuk

Local Kurdish media report of increased tensions between ethnic Kurdish and Arab Iraqis in Kirkuk province. Apparently, ethnic Kurds have been forced to leave their homes. Rakan Saeed, governor of Kirkuk, was accused of having approved administrative procedures ordering the evacuations. On 20 May 2019, Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi met with representatives of the Kurdish regional government to settle the relations between the two governments including the situation in Kirkuk. Another item on the agenda was the safe return of ethnic Kurds who had been displaced in October 2017.

Party leader in hunger strike

Following his arrest, the leader of the New Generation opposition party Shaswar Abdulwahid has been on hunger strike for a week now. There are media reports on his unstable health. He was arrested for suspected blackmail and defamation in his own party on 16 May 2019. Arrest warrants were issued against 10 other party members. In a statement, the party said that there was no legal basis for the arrests which were an attempt at weakening the opposition and at discrediting the party.

Kosovo

German government extends KFOR mission

On 22 May 2019, the German cabinet agreed to extend the deployment of German troops to NATO's KFOR mission for another 12 months. The final decision has to be passed by parliament. Overall, the situation is mainly calm and stable, but it cannot be excluded that an unexpected incident may lead to new tensions, especially in the northern parts of the country.

The German forces have been deployed in Kosovo for 20 years now. In accordance with NATO's planning, the upper limit of German troops has been successively reduced to 400 from initially 800. At present, 68 Germans are deployed in Kosovo.

Lebanon/Syria

Deportations

On 24 May 2019, Human Rights Watch reported that at least 16 Syrians have been deported from Beirut airport to Syria. At least 5 of the deportees are officially registered with UNHCR as refugees. They were forced to sign voluntary return forms, HRW says. Local NGOs estimate that so far in 2019, approx. 30 Syrians have been deported to Syria from Beirut's international airport. The Lebanese authorities have rejected these accusations.

Libya

Attack on water supply for western Libya

From 19 to 20 May 2019, unidentified militants gained control over the country's most important waterworks. For around 24 hours, water supply was interrupted in the greater Tripoli area.

Fighting in Tripoli

The most violent clashes are occurring in the former airport and in Ain Zara. In the last week, neither side appears to have gained a decisive advantage. The UNHCR reports that around 78,000 people have been displaced since the offensive started.

On 24 May 2019, a drone attack was launched on the Rixos hotel, causing only property damage. The hotel is the seat of the breakaway parliament members who are opposing Khalifa Haftar's attack on Tripoli.

Distribution of medical supplies

In a large-scale operation co-financed among others by Italy and Germany, the WHO started to distribute urgently needed medical supplies to health facilities across the country on 16 May 2019. These supplies will cover the needs of half a million people for the next 3 months.

Mali

Attack claims several lives

In the evening of 19 May, 2 policemen, a border guard and 2 civilians were apparently killed in an attack on a border post in the town of Koury (Sikasso region). Koury is situated close to the border with Burkina Faso. The identity of the perpetrators is not yet known.

Moldova

Time limit to form a government

On 22 May 2019, President Igor Dodon set the political parties a time limit of 2 weeks to find a government majority. Otherwise, parliament will have to be dissolved and early elections will take place.

In the parliamentary elections held on 24 February 2019, no party had won an absolute majority. Consensus on the formation of a government majority has not yet been reached between the 3 main parties, i.e. the most

recently governing pro-European Democrats Party PDM of oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, the pro-Russian Socialist Party of President Igor Dodon PSRM), and the pro-EU ACUM bloc which so far has no seats in parliament.

Moldova, with a population of 3.5 million, is among the poorest countries in Europe; it has been undergoing several political crises leading to instability. Oligarchic power structures, corruption and legal uncertainty are widespread. Many Moldavians have moved to the EU or to Russia to find jobs there.

Morocco

New medical centre

On 20 May 2019, a new medical centre designed for the provision of medical care for up to 500,000 people was opened in Casablanca. Its main aim is to improve medical treatment of disadvantaged groups.

Detention for video about the situation in the Rif region

On 20 May 2019, a 44-year-old man who had denounced the situation in the Rif region in a livestream video shared on his Facebook page, was sentenced on charges of sedition to 12 months imprisonment and a fine of 3,000 Dirham. Two of his sons received prison sentences for their participation in the Hirak protests in 2017.

Nigeria

Many people killed in Boko Haram attack

On 25 May 2019, between 20 and 25 people were killed in an attack of Boko Haram militants. Most victims were soldiers. Apparently, fighters of the terror group ambushed a convoy with civilian and military vehicles near the town of Damboa (Borno state).

Pakistan

Attack at mosque

On 24 May 2019, a new attack was launched in the province of Balochistan. Just before Friday prayers, an explosive device detonated in a Mosque in the provincial capital Quetta, killing at least 3 people and injuring at least 20 more. So far, nobody has claimed responsibility for the attack. Both Islamists and separatist insurgent groups are active in Balochistan. In the past, the Pakistani Taliban Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan TTP and IS have claimed responsibility for attacks on places of worship in the province.

Serbia

Parliament introduces life imprisonment without parole for particularly serious crimes

Offenders condemned to life in prison for rape and murder of a minor or a pregnant woman or a disabled person can no longer hope for an early release. Their only chance is to be pardoned by the President. So far, the maximum prison sentence in Serbia has been 40 years. The new law stipulates that a prison sentence can be suspended after 27 years. However, this will not apply to the groups of offenders mentioned above.

On 21 May 2019, the Serbian parliament approved the disputed amendments to the criminal law. Several opposition lawmakers boycotted the voting. The bill was also criticised by the Council of Europe who considers it a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, where the possibility of an early release and of a review of the verdict are mandatory.

Somalia

Fighting

Air raids launched by US Africa Command US AFRICOM have killed several al-Shabaab militants. Media report about operations conducted on 18 May 2019 in the cities of Buale and Jilib (Middle Jubba region), on

22 May near the village Beled Amin (Lower Shabelle region) and on 24 May in the Golis Mountains in Puntland. There, an airstrike had been launched already two days before, killing 2 fighters of the terrorist group Islamic State in Somalia ISS.

On 21 May, clashes between security forces from Somalia and Puntland took place in Damalla-Hagare, a town in the disputed Sanaag region in northern Somalia; at least 3 individuals lost their lives in the incident.

Attacks

On 22 May 2019, al-Shabaab fighters bombed a checkpoint manned with government soldiers near the Presidential palace in Mogadishu. The reported death toll varies between 5 and 15. Former foreign minister Hussein Elabe Faahiye was among the victims.

On 19 May 2019, al-Shabaab insurgents detonated a car bomb in Mogadishu's Hamar Weyne district. Apparently, nobody was killed in the attack. On the same day, 5 soldiers were said to have been killed in an attack targeting a base of the Somali National Army SNA in the town of Wajid (Bakool region).

Also on 19 May, suspected al-Shabaab fighters detonated a bomb in Berdale district (Bay region), targeting the security forces of the South West State. 2 soldiers were killed and several others injured in the incident.

Sudan

Call for strike

After military and opposition have again failed to agree on 20 May 2019, the trade union alliance Sudan Professionals Association SPA has called for a general strike, scheduled to begin on Tuesday and to last until Thursday. Negotiations between military and opposition are still stuck. The main point of disagreement remains the composition of the new governing council and who will be the head of the new body.

Syria

Offensive in the north-west

The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has recorded 766 fatalities including 226 civilians in the north of Hama and in Idlib since the start of the military offensive on 30 May 2019. Recently, particularly heavy battles have taken place around the village of Kfar Nabuda which first was recaptured by the rebels on 22 May 2019, before government forces regained control on 26 May. On this day alone, the fighting around Kfar Nabuda apparently killed 28 rebels and 16 government soldiers or fighters of pro-regime militias. Besides air strikes and shelling, also barrel bombs have been used in the fighting.

New report on systematic human rights violations

On 21 May 2019, the Washington-based NGO Syria Justice and Accountability Centre SJAC published a report on the results of a random analysis of 5003 documents of the Syrian government out of a total of 483,000 documents collected during the civil war. The instructions and reports produced by the complex Syrian bureaucracy document numerous human rights violations and may be used as evidence in a possible future war crimes trial, SJAC says.

Tunisia

UN expert Moncef Kartas back in Berlin

On 21 May 2019, the responsible public prosecutor's office announced the release on bail of the German-Tunisian diplomat Moncef Kartas. A Tunisian court had decided to grant him provisional release. However, the case is not yet closed and investigations are still ongoing, the prosecutor's office said. Moncef Kartas is accused of possessing equipment for the control of civil and military air traffic that needs a special authorization.

Moncef Kartas is a member of the UN expert panel assigned to monitor the arms embargo imposed on Libya. Despite his diplomatic immunity, he was arrested by the police when he entered Tunisia two months ago.

Ukraine

Volodymyr Zelenskiy sworn in

On 20 May 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskiy was sworn in as Ukraine's new President. In his inaugural speech, he announced the dissolution of the parliament and new elections within 2 months. Originally, parliamentary elections had been scheduled for October 2019. The new President also encouraged the government to resign. Currently, he has no parliamentary majority of his own. In view of this situation, prime minister Volodymyr Groisman announced that he would resign on 22 May after the dissolution of parliament. Volodymyr Groisman had been sworn in as prime minister in April 2016. Already before President Zelenskiy's inaugural speech, high-ranking politicians had resigned, among them foreign minister Pavlo Klimkin. After the speech, minister of defence Stepan Poltorak also resigned.

In his inaugural speech, President Zelenskyi announced to waive the immunity of MPs and to launch an initiative against enrichment in office. He intends to dismiss the intelligence chief and the chief prosecutor. He wants to restore Ukraine's territorial integrity and to end the conflict in the Donbass region. He called on Russia to return the Crimea. However, Russia has rejected this request maintaining that Crimea is a Russian region.

Venezuela

Humanitarian aid from China

On 13 May 2019, an aircraft carrying 71 tons of medical supplies landed in Caracas. Already in March, China had sent to Venezuela an aircraft with 65 tons of humanitarian goods. Maduro's government accepted the Chinese offer of assistance, in contrast to the help offered by the U.S. and other Latin American or European countries.

Prison revolt in Acarigua

Since 13 May 2019, prisoners have been protesting in a jail in Acarigua (Portuguesa state). Violence escalated when the prisoners took hostages and one prisoner (a so-called Pran, a leader) was killed on 23. May 2019. The exact circumstances are unclear, the official version is that it was a massive prison break. On 24 May, at least 29 inmates lost their lives in clashes during the revolt. Prison revolts claiming fatalities only rarely occur in Venezuela.

Yemen

UN threats to suspend humanitarian aid

On 20 May 2019, the UN announced to consider suspending aid delivery in the areas under the control of the Houthi rebels, because aid convoys have been blocked by local authorities who want to interfere with food distribution.

Saudi Arabia attacked by Houthi rebels

On 26 May 2019, Houthi rebels apparently launched a drone attack on Jizan airport in the south of Saudi Arabia. So far, Saudi Arabia has not confirmed the attack. Between 21 and 23 May, Houthi rebels launched three drone strikes against Najran Regional Airport, which is also located in the south of Saudi Arabia. The rebels have claimed responsibility for the drone strikes targeting oil processing plants on 14 May 2019.

Civilians killed in airstrikes

According to information provided by the UN, 12 civilians were killed in a Saudi-led coalition airstrike targeting the city of Taiz in the night to 25 May 2019.