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Group 62 – Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

13 May 2019

Afghanistan

Taliban attack on NGO in Kabul

On 8 May 2019, several Taliban militants attacked the office of the non-profit US organisation Counterpart International in the 10th police district of Kabul, killing at least 9 people and wounding 29 in the 6-hour fighting. Among the casualties were three civilians, alongside security officers and guards; among the injured were 20 civilians. This has been the fifth attack in Kabul so far this year.

Only recently, President Ghani had offered the Taliban militants a ceasefire during the month of Ramadan (see BN of 6 May 2019); however, the Taliban rejected the offer.

Two more bombs went off on 11 May in the 5th police district (Qambar Square) and on 12 May near Dar-ul-Aman road. While the first attack did not cause any damage, one individual was injured and a police vehicle destroyed in the second blast.

Rising numbers of internally displaced people

According to information provided by the World Health Organization WHO, a total of 29,251 people have left their homes due to conflicts in the month of March 2019, bringing the total number of IDPs so far this year to 70,557. Most affected were eastern Kunar and Nangarhar provinces.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre said that by the end of the year 2018, a total of 2.6 million people were living in displacement as a result of the conflict in Afghanistan.

Attacks on government-related individuals

On 11 May 2019, a female advisor to the parliament's cultural affairs commission was assassinated by unknown gunmen in Kabul.

On 12 May 2019, the deputy intelligence director for northeastern Baghlan province was killed by Taliban militants. Also on 12 May, the deputy intelligence director for eastern Nangarhar's Kama district was killed by unidentified individuals.

Albania

Heavy violence

On 11 May 2019, violent clashes erupted at an anti-government protest rally in Tirana. When the protesters threw Molotov cocktails at the police cordon, the officers resorted to the use of water guns and tear gas. Several people were injured in the incident; a number of protesters were arrested by the police.

Since February, opposition supporters have been organising rallies against Prime Minister Edi Rama and his ruling socialist party PS, demanding his resignation. They are accusing him of voter fraud, corruption and links to organised crime and call for the formation of a transitional government tasked to prepare new elections. Prime Minister Rama has ruled out the possibility of new elections.

The post-communist PS party and its rivalling party PD have been enemies since the collapse of communism in the 1990ies. Since 2014, Albania is a NATO member and also candidate country for EU membership. The country hopes that accession negotiations can be opened by the end of this year. However, in view of the current situation, this seems to be more than uncertain.

Algeria

Protests against transitional government

Also on 10 May 2019, tens of thousands of protesters marched in the streets. In the capital Algiers, protests were mainly directed against transitional President Bensalah. On 9 May 2019, Louisa Hanoune, secretary general of the opposition Workers' Party was detained by the military court in Blida. Together with other members of her party, she supported the protests. As yet, no specific charges have been brought against her.

Benin/Burkina Faso

Hostages rescued

In the night of 10 May 2019, the French army rescued two French tourists in northern Burkina Faso who had been kidnapped in Benin in the beginning of May (see BN of 6 May 2019, where it was wrongly reported that a married couple was abducted). Two French soldiers died in the operation. An US-American woman and a female South Korean hostage were also liberated in the operation. As yet, no details were given on the latter two tourists; it was apparently only during the rescue operation that their presence was found out. According to reports from the French authorities, the kidnappers had planned to hand over the hostages to a group of militant Islamists in Mali.

Burkina Faso

Attack on Catholic church kills several people

On 12 May 2019, unidentified gunmen attacked a Catholic church in the northern town of Dablo and shot dead at least six people, among them a priest. Subsequently, they set fire to the church and other buildings. Apparently, parts of the country as well as parts of neighbouring Mali and Niger are retreat areas for militant Islamists.

Egypt

Death sentences over church attack

On 12 May 2019, a court in Cairo sentenced ten men over an attack on a church and a Christian-owned shop in Cairo in November 2017. IS had claimed responsibility for the attack. Six of the defendants were handed down jail sentences between three and four years, two were convicted to life in prison; the main suspect and another individual, who is on the run, were sentenced to death.

Iran

Long prison sentences for Baha'is

On 6 May 2019, a court in Bushehr sentenced 7 members of the Baha'i faith to a total of 21 years in prison on charges of 'propaganda against the Islamic state'. All defendants had been arrested from their homes in Bushehr in February 2017. In the past, the Baha'i community in Germany has repeatedly criticized that Baha'i members are routinely sentenced without proper trial. A report of the international Baha'i community says that both economic and cultural discrimination of the religious community has intensified during Hassan Rouhani's presidency. The Iranian government has forced over 400 Baha'i to close down their shops or businesses. There are over 300,000 Baha'i living in Iran, forming the largest religious minority in the country.

President's brother in prison

Judiciary spokesman Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei has stated that President Hassan Rouhani's brother was detained by the Iranian authorities for charges of corruption. Hossein Fereydouni was facing unspecified 'financial charges', the spokesman said. If a bail was arranged, he would be released until the beginning of

his trial. During the investigations, other suspects have also been detained. For years, Hossein Fereydouni has been accused of corruption. It is unclear why he was detained at this specific time.

Medical care situation

On 7 May 2019, state news agency IRNA reported the production of four new medicines for cancer and diabetes developed by Iranian researchers, marking an important step in the treatment of the respective diseases. Apparently, the quality of these drugs is higher than of those available in Iran and elsewhere. Some of the drugs are exported to other countries, among them India and Russia.

Iraq

Security situation

Security-related incidents are continuing, but the level has been lower so far this month. Reports say that Diyala is most affected province with five incidents (four of them in Baquba and Muqtadiya in the east and in the middle of the province, respectively). From Salahaddin province, four incidents were reported. Also affected were Kirkuk with three shotgun attacks and Mossul with one car bomb attack and the kidnapping of four people. In Baghdad, at least 7 people were killed and numerous others wounded in a suicide attack on a market.

HRW warns of mass detention of families with alleged IS ties

Human Rights Watch reports that the national reconciliation committee of the Iraqi government has presented a plan to confine approx. 250,000 people in closed residential compounds outside of cities. People living there would only be allowed to leave the compound in limited circumstances, including to get to the hospital. This plan would affect the nuclear families of suspected IS terrorists (including siblings), i.e. mainly women and children. Under the proposal, health clinics and schools would be provided on the compounds; also, compulsory deradicalization programmes and vocational training would be foreseen, but no employment opportunities would be found inside the compound. Interned families would be allowed to return only after an agreement is secured with the local communities and after the families have completed the deradicalization programme. A time frame was not specified. The families would only receive identity documentation once they are allowed to leave the compound. According to HRW, these plans for internment would not meet international standards (such as access to a fair trial) and would constitute a form of collective punishment of families.

Lebanon

Teachers protest as UNRWA ends contracts

On 10 May 2019, around 100 teachers protested against the early termination of their contracts under an UNRWA programme for elementary school children. According to local media reports, the programme supports around 3,000 pupils in approx. 50 schools. The programme was scheduled to expire in 2020. UNRWA has been under financial pressure after the US ended funding for the agency in 2018.

Mieh Mieh refugee camp to become free of weapons

After an agreement between Palestinian and Lebanese authorities on the Palestinian refugee camp Mieh-Mieh, the responsible security forces of Fatah, Hamas and Ansar Allah have taken first steps to remove the weapons in the camp. Local media report that in the night to 11 May 2019, Fatah began with the removal of their checkpoints at the southwestern entrance to the camp. The leadership of the Palestinian factions have ordered their security personnel not to appear in arms and in uniforms. Failures to comply with the agreement would result in arrest by the Lebanese army, it was reported.

Since October 2018, armed clashes between the three Palestinian factions have left at least five people dead and more than 30 others wounded.

Transfer of more than 100 prisoners following accusations of torture

Reports say that over 100 prisoners have been transferred from the Roumieh prison's high-security wing to the main unit (Block B). Apparently, the decision was taken after an investigation ordered by interior minister Raya El-Hassan confirmed that human rights violations had taken place in the wing.

Libya

Battle for Tripoli

Reports are continuing on fighting in several parts of the city. So far, neither side has been able to achieve a decisive advantage, with fighting mainly taking place along two axes (south-west and north-west) as well as in Ain Zara district. The LNA operates with drone strikes, apparently aiming not only at military, but also at civilian targets. Apparently, shrapnel ammunition is used in the airstrikes.

On 8 May 2019, the WHO said that 443 people have died and more than 2,000 others wounded since the offensive began in Tripoli; the number of displaced people has risen to more than 60,000.

Mali

Formation of a new government

On 5 May 2019, president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta appointed the new cabinet led by Prime Minister Boubou Cissé. The reshuffle of the cabinet comprising 37 members became necessary after the whole cabinet had resigned on 18 April 2019 (see BN of 29 April 2019).

Montenegro

Jail sentences over coup plot

On 9 May 2019, nine Serbs, three Montenegrin nationals and two Russians were sentenced to prison terms between one and 15 years for charges of terrorism and formation of a criminal organisation. Among the convicted were two leading figures of the opposition pro-Russian DF party. The two Russian nationals, allegedly agents of the Russian intelligence service GRU, were convicted in absentia to prison terms of 15 and 12 years, respectively (Russia does not intend to extradite them).

The court found the group guilty of having organised and financed a coup against Milo Djukanovic during the parliamentary elections in October 2016 with the aim to set up a pro-Russian government which then would prevent Montenegro's accession to NATO (see BN of 30 July 2018: Did Russia mastermind the 2016 coup attempt?).

The court mainly based its judgement on the testimony of one principal witness. The precise circumstances of the mysterious coup attempt were not clarified in the course of the trial. Opposition members and independent observers say that the whole trial was legally flawed.

Morocco

Migrants force entry into Spain's Melilla exclave

In the early morning of 12 May 2019, a total of 52 African migrants managed to overcome the border fence around Melilla and to enter Spain's north African exclave. Apparently, 50 other migrants were stopped by Moroccan and Spanish border guards.

Migrant boats stopped on their way to Spain

In the night to 11 May 2019, the Moroccan marine stopped three dinghies carrying 117 sub-Saharan migrants trying to escape to Spain. The migrants were brought back to Moroccan ports.

Myanmar

Journalist released from prison

On 7 May 2019, the two Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo who had been convicted to seven-year prison terms, were released under a presidential amnesty. They had stayed more than 500 days in Yangon's Insein prison (see BN of 3 September 2018 and 29 April 2019). A government spokesperson said that the families of the two reporters had approached Win Myint and Aung San Suu Kyi and that the pardon also serves 'Myanmar's long-term interests'. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini expressed willingness to continue cooperation with the Myanmar authorities to foster democracy.

Nigeria

More than 900 children released

The United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF has stated that on 10 March 2019, the Civilian Joint Task Force CJTF militia released around 900 children from its own ranks in northeast Nigeria. In 2017, CJTF had committed itself to stop recruiting children. Since then, 1,727 children have been released, UN sources say.

11 soldiers killed

On 10 May 2019, an attack on a military base in the town of Gajiganna in Borno State killed 11 soldiers. IS has claimed responsibility for the attack via its news agency AMAQ.

Pakistan

Attack on luxury hotel in Gwadar

On 11 May 2019, several men armed with guns and grenades stormed a hotel in the port city of Gwadar (Balochistan), killing a security guard. After a firefight which lasted 8 hours, security forces killed the attackers. One soldier and 3 hotel employees also lost their lives in the operation. Apparently, no hotel guests were injured.

The Balochistan Liberation Army, demanding greater independence for the province, has claimed responsibility for the attack, which was targeting Chinese and other foreign investors. The hotel is part of a Chinese infrastructure project.

Attack on Sufi shrine in Lahore

On 8 May 2019, the perpetrator and at least 8 other individuals died in a suicide attack on the Sufi shrine Data Darbar in Lahore; dozens more were injured. The Taliban group Hizbul Ahrar has claimed responsibility for the attack. This was not the first time that shrines of Islamic Saints were targeted by attacks. While the majority of Pakistan's Sunnites are following the Barelvi school of thought, which accepts the veneration of saints and prayers at sacred shrines, the Taliban follow the Deoband school, which strictly rejects the veneration of saints.

Human trafficking

In recent weeks, several Chinese nationals and their helpers have been arrested in various large cities in Pakistan. They are accused of having lured Pakistani girls into fake marriages and forcing them into prostitution in China. Human rights organisations, among them HRW and the non-governmental Human Rights Commission of Pakistan have reported cases where poor families married their daughters off to Chinese nationals in exchange for money and visa.

Senegal

Béthio Thioune reported dead after being sentenced for accessory of murder

On 6 May 2019, the influential Senegalese Muslim leader Béthio Thioune was sentenced to 10 years of hard labour for abetting the murder of two followers. A day later he died in France, to where the 81-year-old man had gone in January 2019 for medical treatment. Béthio Thioune was a civil servant and member of the

influential Muslim Mouride Brotherhood. The murder of one of his followers had occurred in April 2012, and Béthio Thioune was taken in custody. Subsequently, his supporters rioted in the centre of Dakar, damaging cars, shattering windows and injuring several people. They also tried to storm the Senegalese embassy in Paris. In February 2013, the Sheikh was provisionally released. A longstanding legal wrangling followed mainly about the question whether he had commissioned the murder himself or whether he had at least known about it. President Macky Sall was accused by Béthio Thioune's supporters that the trial had been politically motivated. Béthio Thioune, a determined supporter of President Sall's predecessor and opponent Abdoulaye Wade, had been arrested shortly after President Sall took over office. The disputed Sheikh is provoking controversies also beyond his death. His followers are convinced that it was Allah himself who saved him from punishment and took him home.

Serbia

Continuing protests

On 11 May 2019, again thousands of protesters took to the streets in rallies against President Aleksandar Vučić and his government, making accusations of corruption and restriction on the freedom of media. The trigger for the weekly protests, which began in December 2018, had been an attack on an opposition leader (see, for example, BN of 1 December 2018). The government appears unimpressed since Vučić and his party continue to have a large following. In recent surveys, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has reached about 55 percent. The protests are hardly covered by the Serbian media. There are very few truly independent media and journalists left.

Somalia

IS militants killed by US airstrikes

On 8 and 9 May 2019, the United States Africa Command US AFRICOM conducted two air raids against the Islamic State in the Golis Mountains, apparently killing 17 militants.

Sri Lanka

Attackers either dead or in jail

On 7 May 2019, the authorities communicated that all attackers behind the Easter Sunday bombings were killed or imprisoned. The curfews were lifted and the schools reopened. On 12 May, regular Sunday services were held for the first time since the attacks.

South Sudan

Transition period for government formation extended

On 3 May 2019, the former conflict parties agreed to extend for a further six months the transition period necessary to form a government. The initial plan had been to form a government of national unity by 12 May 2019. The extension was justified by the necessity to conduct further negotiations between the former conflict parties.

Sudan

Continuing negotiations for government formation

Also one month after the ousting of Omar al-Bashir, negotiations between military and opposition on the formation of a transitional government have not yet been concluded. As discussions have reached an impasse, new talks were scheduled for 13 May 2019. The opposition accuses the military to delay the formation of a transitional government. Meanwhile, protests are continuing on the square in front of the military headquarter in Khartoum.

At least 90 dead since the beginning of the protests

On 6 May 2019, the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors CCSD stated that at least 90 people have been killed by security forces since the protests started in December 2018.

Syria

Military offensive in Idlib

The military offensive of Syrian and Russian forces has advanced into the southern and western part of Idlib, the last rebel-held region with 3 million residents. Since September 2018, the region nominally falls within the sphere of protection of a Russian-Turkish agreement (Astana Agreement), in which a cease-fire between the conflict parties was agreed. However, rebels apparently have launched missiles at the Russian air base near Latakia. Since the start of the military offensive on 30 April 2019, at least 10 schools have reportedly been destroyed and 12 health clinics shelled. About 150,000 people have been displaced during the recent combat operations.

Protests in Deir ez-Zor

Arab inhabitants of Syria's oil-rich east have started a third week of protests against Kurdish rule. Only about 18 months ago, Deir ez-Zor was liberated from IS rule by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. The protesters are opposing the forced recruitment into the Kurdish-dominated army and the fact that thousands of Arabs are still held captive by the Kurdish forces. In addition to this, the region has recently sold considerable quantities of oil to the Syrian government in order to compensate an acute lack of fuel in Damascus.

Togo

Parliament reinstates two-term limit for presidents

On 8 May 2019, Togo's parliament approved a constitutional amendment reinstating the two-term limit for presidents. As past and ongoing mandates are not taken into consideration, President Faure Gnassingbé will be eligible to run in the next elections in 2020 and 2025. He had come to power in 2005 with the military's support after the death of his father and longstanding predecessor Gnassingbé Eyadema.

Since August 2017, a domestic political conflict has been going on, with the opposition unsuccessfully attempting to achieve, among other things, a limitation of the presidential terms to be applicable retroactively, which would lead to the resignation of Faure Gnassingbé. This is one of the reasons why most opposition parties had boycotted the parliamentary elections held in December 2018.

Turkey

Election re-run in Istanbul

On 6 May 2019, Turkey's supreme election board followed the proposal of the governing AKP party to annul Istanbul's mayoral election which the opposition CHP party's candidate Ekrem Imamoglu had won by a small margin. The re-run of the election was ordered to take place on 23 June 2019. The AKP had primarily based its proposal on irregularities in voters' lists and polling stations. Many western politicians and international organisations have regretted and criticized the decision to annul the election result. President Erdogan, however, expressly rejected any criticism of the decision from abroad.

Venezuela

Arrest of several opposition figures

On 8 May 2019, the vice president of the national assembly Edgar Zambrano was arrested by agents of Venezuela's intelligence service Sebin. Alongside other members of parliament, he is accused of having

participated in the attempted coup staged on 30 April 2019. Edgar Zambrano had appeared in video messages calling for a coup amongst members of the armed forces.

In total, arrest warrants were issued against 10 lawmakers, and their immunity was waived by the national assembly. Luis Florido, one of the wanted individuals, has meanwhile gone to Colombia. Marianella Magallanes and Americo De Grazia have taken refuge in the Italian embassy, Richard Blanco in the Argentinian one.

Border crossing points reopened

On 10 May 2019, it was announced that the border crossings with Brazil were to be reopened and that the traffic of persons and goods with the Island of Aruba would be resumed. Since the end of February, virtually all borders of Venezuela have been closed; however, a busy smuggling trade has developed, alongside a large number of undocumented border crossings.

Yemen

Houthi rebels withdraw from Yemen's Red Sea ports

With months of delay, the Houthi rebels have started to hand over control of the ports of Hodeidah, Saleef and Ras Isa (Hodeidah governorate), thus complying with a crucial provision of the peace deal with the Yemeni government that had been agreed in Sweden in December. Some members of the Yemeni government, however, have accused the rebels of faking the pull-out.

Yemeni government criticizes UAE

The Yemeni government has accused the United Arab Emirates of landing around 100 fighters of the Security Belt Forces (also known as al-Hizam Security Forces) on the remote island of Sokotra on 8 May 2019, trying to take over control of the island located in the Gulf of Aden. The UAE is part of a coalition fighting formally on behalf of Yemen's government against the Houthi rebels. However, tensions have recently increased between the two countries.

Combat operations

On 9 May 2019, the Saudi-led coalition carried out airstrikes against the Houthi rebels near the city of Qatabah in al-Dhali governorate. Houthi rebels and Yemeni government troops are both trying to take over control of the region. Already on 8 May, Houthi positions were attacked in Kataf and Baqim districts in Saadah governorate.

On 7 May 2019, a suspected US drone strike targeted militants of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula AQAP in Wadi Abidah, Marib governorate. Reports say that at least four insurgents were killed in the operation.