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# Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

11 January 2021

## Afghanistan

### Attacks, fighting and civilian casualties

As the following, not exhaustive, examples show, there have been several targeted attacks on civil society representatives in the past three weeks as well as on the security forces and other people associated with the government. Media professionals in particular have been attacked noticeably frequently in recent weeks. In 2020, the Afghanistan Journalists Center counted 112 violent attacks on media professionals, seven died and 19 were injured. In a press release dated 6 January 2021, the Taliban denied any participation (ascribed to them by the government) in the below mentioned killings of journalists and civil society activists.

On 21 December 2020, a well-known Afghan journalist in the Ghazni province was shot by unknown persons.

On 22 December 2020, a bomb attack in Kabul resulted in five deaths and two persons injured. The victims, among them four doctors, are said to have worked at the Pul-e-Charkhi Prison.

On 23 December 2020, the known civil society activist and chairman of the Free and Fair Election Forum of Afghanistan, Yousuf Rashid, and his driver were shot and killed in Kabul by unknown persons.

On 24 December 2020, unknown assailants shot and killed a woman's rights activist and her brother in the Kapisa province, bordering Kabul to the north. The woman had posted a message on her Facebook page days before that she had been receiving threats.

On 30 December 2020, unknown perpetrators shot and killed a helicopter pilot in the Afghan military while he was off duty.

On 28 December 2020, the Taliban kidnapped 15 travellers on the road between the Jaghori and Qarabagh districts in the province of Ghazni. The details are not known, however, many Hazaras live in the area.

On 31 December 2020, a civil society activist from the northern province of Baghlan was shot and killed in Kabul. In the southern province of Helmand, a tribal elder was killed and a bomb attack was carried out in Kabul on a vehicle with employees from the presidential palace. One person was injured and one died.

On 1 January 2021, unknown perpetrators shot and killed another journalist. The attack took place in the central Afghan province of Ghor.

On 3 January 2021, a religious leader was injured in a bomb attack carried out by an unknown perpetrator. In total, at least five people were killed and nine injured.

On 8 January 2021, a further attack was carried out on a civil society representative in the province of Baghlan in which two people were killed and six injured.

On 10 January 2021, an Afghan spokesperson and his driver and a bodyguard were killed in a bomb attack in Kabul. The spokesperson who was killed is said to have received threats beforehand.

On 11 January 2021, unknown perpetrators in Lashkargah/Helmand carried out a bomb attack on a vehicle with employees of the Afghan intelligence service. An intelligence service employee was killed and 15 injured.

Due to the rising number of attacks and the level of criminality in Kabul, according to information received from the Afghan Ministry of the Interior, a camera monitoring system supported by the NATO Resolute Support Mission is to be installed in the city centre of Kabul and the number of policemen in relation to the population doubled. In addition to the attacks mentioned, fighting also broke out in several provinces, resulting in civilian casualties, such as an air raid in the Helmand province on 7 January 2021 and in Nimroz on 9 January 2021. According to information from the New York Times on the conflict in Afghanistan, there have been confirmed reports of the death of 3,378 security force members and 1,468 civilians in the year 2020. The Afghan government stated that at least 18,000 families in or from the provinces of Baghlan, Kunduz, Farah, Herat, Ghor and Uruzgan had been displaced in the past month due to the conflict.

## **Algeria**

### **Further incarceration of the brother of a former state president despite acquittal**

On 2 January 2021, the brother of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Said Bouteflika, was acquitted of the charge of conspiring against the state and the army by an appeal court. His 15-year sentence was annulled. He was transferred to another prison where he has to wait for the court proceedings relating to corruption. The proceedings relate to the government's action against members of the former elite.

## **Armenia / Azerbaijan**

### **Ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh holds – meeting in Moscow agreed**

After 44 days of war in Nagorno-Karabakh with more than 5,000 fatalities, the ceasefire agreed between Armenia and Azerbaijan on 9 November 2020 is holding. However, isolated incidents continue to occur. Much of the agreement mediated by Russia remains unclarified. Issues include the border that now runs between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In addition, thousands of people in Armenia are waiting for news of their captured and missing relatives. The Russian leadership sees a requirement for action due to the reasons mentioned and President Putin invited Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and Azerbaijan President Aliyev to individual talks and a joint meeting on 11 January 2021. Prior to the planned meeting, the security chiefs of both countries held talks with the head of the Russian internal security agency, the FSB. The Russian border troops report to the FSB. They have been deployed to the border of Armenia with Turkey and Iran as part of a security pact. Since the war, they have also been stationed at the southern border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In recent weeks, this area has become a hot spot outside of Nagorno-Karabakh with respect to the future border.

### **Domestic political situation in Armenia remains tense**

The current situation in Armenia is characterised by the difficult economic and political crisis. The opposition has protested against Prime Minister Pashinyan for weeks. They have labelled him as a traitor due to his signing of the ceasefire agreement. Opposition leader Manukyan even called for the formation of a citizen's militia as security forces were unable to defend the country. At the same time, the opposition representatives and demonstrators demanding Pashinyan's resignation ignored the fact that, without Russia's help, Armenia had no prospects militarily in the conflict with Azerbaijan. Pashinyan has now declared that he is ready for early general elections this year. Thanks to the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh guaranteed by the Russian peacekeeping forces, around 48,000 Armenians have now reportedly returned to Nagorno-Karabakh after some 100,000 Armenians had fled the area to Armenia previously.

## **Belarus**

### **Protests against President Lukashenko continue**

On 10 January 2021 protest rallies against President Alexander Lukashenko took place again in several cities of the country. The rallies were organised as flash mobs, with small groups gathering in parks and residential areas after the location of the gathering had been announced on social media shortly before. This was done to make it more difficult for the security forces to intervene against the participants. Several people were arrested. President

Lukashenko again announced the drafting of a new constitution by the end of the year, on which he would hold a referendum. Opposition leader Svetlana Tikhonovskaya announced that her office would soon present a draft constitution independently of Lukashenko for discussion.

## **Central African Republic**

### **Violence surrounds presidential and general elections**

According to preliminary results announced on 4 January 2021, incumbent Faustin-Archange Touadéra won the presidential election held on 27 December 2020. He received 54% of the votes cast, while his strongest challenger, former head of government Anicet-Georges Dologuélé, received 21%. A total of 17 candidates contested the election. The full results of the general elections held on the same day are not yet available.

In the run-up to and after the elections, there was fighting between a newly formed rebel alliance called Coalition des patriotes pour le changement (CPC) on the one hand and the national military and the UN peacekeeping force Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République centrafricaine (MINUSCA) on the other. At the request of the government, Russia sent 300 military advisers to the Central African Republic before the election. Rwanda also reported sending soldiers. Security forces prevented a rebel advance on Bangui, which was probably intended to prevent the election. Because of the conflict, voting could not take place in 29 of 71 sub-prefectures. Opposition representatives demanded the annulment of the election because of the violence in the country and allegations of electoral fraud.

On 2 January 2021, rebels attacked the city of Bangassou, located in the southeast on the border with DR Congo, and took control of it by the following day. Also on 2 January 2021, the national armed forces repelled a rebel attack on the town of Damara, north of the capital city of Bangui. According to UNHCR, more than 30,000 people fled to neighbouring countries and about 62,000 people were internally displaced. A nationwide night curfew was imposed on 7 January 2021. On 9 January 2021, rebels attacked the towns of Bouar in the northwest and Grimari in the northeast of the country.

The six groups belonging to the rebel alliance CPC are accused of war crimes. Former President François Bozizé is said to support the alliance. He came to power in a coup in 2003 and was president of the country until his overthrow by a predominantly Muslim rebel alliance in 2013. Bozizé returned from exile in December 2019 to contest the current presidential election. The United Nations (UN) imposed sanctions on him for crimes committed by militias close to him in the armed conflict that continued after his overthrow; an international arrest warrant has also been issued for him. The Constitutional Court therefore excluded Bozizé from the election in December 2020. He then supported the candidacy of Anicet-Georges Dologuélé. On 4 January 2021, the Attorney General opened investigations against Bozizé for supporting a terrorist group.

Despite a 2019 peace agreement, there have been repeated outbreaks of violence. More than 12,500 members of MINUSCA are currently stationed in the country. Ranked 188 out of 189 in the Human Development Index, the resource-rich country is one of the least developed. More than half of the approximately 4.9 million inhabitants are dependent on humanitarian aid. Observers expect the security situation to deteriorate further. Aid organisations fear a humanitarian crisis in view of the recent violence.

## **China**

### **Hong Kong: Arrests**

On 6 January 2021, police arrested 53 members of the democracy movement for the subversion of state power. They were accused of violating the security law by organising and participating in an unofficial primary election in July 2020 prior to the general election which was later cancelled. Those arrested included prominent activists, lawyers and former members of parliament. Of those arrested, 52 were released on 7 January 2021, mostly on bail. According to the organisers, more than 600,000 Hong Kong citizens participated in the primary election. The general election originally planned for September 2020 was officially postponed by one year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Hong Kong: imprisonment for illegal border crossing**

On 30 December 2020, a court in Shenzhen (Guangdong province) convicted ten activists from the democracy movement to sentences of between seven months and three years for illegal border crossings. In August 2020, a total of twelve activists had attempted to flee to Taiwan in a speedboat (see BN of 21 December 2020). Two people who allegedly organised the escape were sentenced to two or three years in jail; and the other eight to seven months respectively. In addition, they all had to pay fines of up CNY 20,000 (approx. EUR 2,527). Two youths who were also arrested were not sentenced but handed over to the Hong Kong police on 30 December 2020. It is unclear whether they are subject to further investigation for other accusations there.

### **Hong Kong: Jimmy Lai temporarily under house arrest**

On 23 December 2020, the High Court released media entrepreneur Jimmy Lai from pre-trial detention on bail and held him under house arrest. The Hong Kong public prosecutor's office appealed the decision. The Court of Final Appeal reversed the High Court's decision on 31 December 2020. Lai was then remanded in pre-trial detention again. The trial against him is to be continued on 16 April 2021. He is accused of fraud and violating the security act (see BN of 14 December 2020).

### **COVID-19 pandemic: cities with millions of inhabitants sealed off**

The province neighbouring the capital city of Beijing, Hebei, saw the largest outbreak of the coronavirus in months at the beginning of January 2021. The provincial capital Shijiazhuang (eleven million inhabitants) and the city of Xingtai (seven million inhabitants) were sealed off. Authorities reported some 350 infections in the province.

### **COVID-19 pandemic: citizen journalist sentenced**

On 28 December 2020, a court in Shanghai sentenced citizen journalist Zhang Zhan to four years in prison. With her reports on social media about the situation in Wuhan at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in China in spring 2020 she had "instigated disputes and provoked anger".

### **Tibet/international: election of the Parliament in Exile and the President of the Government in Exile**

The first round of elections for the President of the Government in Exile (Central Tibetan Administration – CTA) and the Parliament in Exile of the some 150,000 Tibetans living outside of China took place on 3 January 2021. Approximately 80,000 Tibetans registered for the elections. The second round of elections is set for 11 April 2021. The Prime Minister of the Government in Exile in office, Lobsang Sangay, will no longer be available for election after two terms in office. His term ends in May 2021. The Government in Exile and the Parliament in Exile are not recognised internationally. The religious leader of the Tibetans is the Dalai Lama who, like the Government in Exile and the Parliament in Exile, resides in Dharamsala (federal state of Himachal Pradesh).

## **DR Congo**

### **Many dead after rebel attacks; MONUSCO mandate extended**

On 31 December 2020, 25 people were reportedly killed in an attack by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) militia in the village of Tingwe, near Eringeti in the Beni region (North Kivu province). A civil society representative spoke of a higher number; many had been beheaded. In addition, an unknown number of people were abducted.

On 4 January 2021, ADF militias again reportedly killed 20 to 22 civilians from the village of Mwenda in the Beni area with machetes. Furthermore, people were again abducted.

In a statement made on 6 January 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres condemned the violence against civilians and called for the perpetrators to be brought to justice. He called on all armed groups to lay down their arms. Guterres underlined the readiness of the UN peacekeeping mission MONUSCO to do everything possible within its mandate to protect the civilian population. On 18 December 2020, the UN Security Council extended MONUSCO's mandate until 20 December 2021 with 14 votes and one abstention by Russia. The resolution text provides for a nationwide reduction of the mission and a focus on the provinces of Ituri and North and South Kivu. On 10 January 2021, six rangers were killed in Virunga National Park. This attack is attributed to the Mai-Mai militia. At least 200 rangers are reported to have been killed in Virunga National Park, which stretches for 300 km along the borders with Rwanda and especially Uganda, in attacks that have been ongoing for more than a decade.

## **Egypt**

### **Satirist arrested and sentenced again after release**

After satirist Shady Abu Zeid was released on parole in October 2020 after having been in pre-trial detention for two years, a Cairo court sentenced him to 6 months' imprisonment in other proceedings. On 21 December 2020, he was transferred to Tora Prison in Cairo. Abu Zeid is accused of insulting an official in a video published on social media (see BN of 19 October 2020).

## **Ethiopia**

### **Continued fighting in Tigray**

After the capture of the regional capital city of Mekelle on 28 November 2020, the Ethiopian government declared the conflict in Tigray as ended (see BN of 30 November 2020), although fighting between the Ethiopian army and units of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) continued in some regions of the country. Participation by Eritrean soldiers in the fight against the TPLF has now been confirmed by the authorities. There are reports of serious human rights violations against the civilian population such as executions, rapes, displacements, plundering, forced recruitments, destruction of buildings and burning of arable land. Ethiopian security forces have apparently not yet succeeded in incarcerating the entire leadership of the TPLF. It is not yet possible to obtain reliable information on the situation in Tigray as the Internet and mobile telephony remains largely blocked.

The Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) puts the number of civilian casualties in Tigray at a minimum of 2,000 fatalities and more than one million displaced persons. The interim government in Tigray estimates a figure of 2.2 million internally displaced persons. The humanitarian situation is regarded as extraordinarily difficult: 4.5 million people are in need of humanitarian aid. Numerous buildings, including schools, hospitals and other administrative institutions, were plundered, destroyed or damaged. In urban municipalities, health care is only being partially provided and, in many cases, not at all in rural regions.

### **More than 200 killed in the massacre in the regional state of Benishangul-Gumuz**

On 23 December 2020, at least 220 people were killed in an attack on a militia in the Benishangul-Gumuz region on the border of Sudan. Houses and fields were burnt down and inhabitants murdered in their sleep. The incident occurred in the Kebele Bekuji area (Woreda Bulen district) in the Metekel Zone. According to information received from the authorities, soldiers from the Ethiopian army killed 42 armed men who were allegedly participating in the deadly attack. They have not released any information about the identity of the offenders. The reasons for the killings are unclear. As the victims belonged to the two largest ethnic groups of the country, the Oromo and the Amhara, as well as the Sinasha, it is assumed that ethnic tensions were the motive. In particular, the Gumuz ethnic group had recently complained of the increased influx and influence of the Amhara ethnic group. Sources therefore accuse the Gumuz militia of the act. The region, situated in the west of the country, has seen sporadic violence between the population groups for months. As recently as in the middle of November 2020, 34 people were killed in an attack on a bus (see BN of 23 November 2020). There is no link to the military action in Tigray (see BN of 7 November 2020).

### **Electoral commission sets new date for general elections**

The general elections originally scheduled for August 2020 but postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic are now expected to take place on 5 June 2021. Regional elections are now also set to take place in nine of the ten regions of the country but not in the conflict region of Tigray, according to the electoral commission in Addis Ababa. These will be the first elections in which Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed will stand for election by the population. He came to power as a result of the withdrawal of his predecessor in April 2018 and has initiated numerous reforms since then. However, during his time in office, ethnic tensions and conflicts in the multi-ethnic country of around 110 million people have increased. Criticism against Abiy Ahmed in the country is growing.

## Ghana

### No clear winner in general election

The New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) each won 137 of the 275 seats in the new parliament elected on 7 December 2020. A further mandate went to an independent candidate.

### Disorder during the election of the Speaker of Parliament

Due to disagreements over the election of the Speaker of Parliament, tumultuous scenes erupted on 7 January 2021 during the constituent session of the newly elected Parliament. Security forces moved in to calm the situation. After the disorderly conduct ended, NDC nominee, Alban Sumana Bagbin, was elected.

### NDC candidate challenges presidential election

The defeated candidate of the opposition NDC in the presidential election of 7 December 2020, John Dramani Mahama, filed an application for annulment of the presidential election in the Supreme Court on 30 December 2020. He accused the electoral commission of irregularities in the announcement of the election result. Mahama is seeking a rerun of the election with himself and the election winner of 7 December 2020, Nana Akufo-Addo (NPP), as the sole candidates.

## India

### Religiously motivated clashes in Madhya Pradesh

There were reports of religiously motivated clashes in the central state of Madhya Pradesh in late December 2020. They were triggered by a variety of rallies by Hindu nationalist organisations against the planned construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

On 29 December 2020, clashes occurred outside a mosque in Indore district and an attempted attack on a mosque in Mandsaur district.

On 25 December 2020, skirmishes occurred between members of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) youth wing of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Ujjain.

### Kashmir: Result of the first elections since the revocation of special status

The elections to the Regional Assembly (District Development Council) in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir held between 28 November 2020 and 19 December 2020 were won by the Peoples Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) with 112 seats out of a total of 280. The PAGD alliance consists predominantly of the Jammu & Kashmir National Conference (JKNC), the ruling party in the region until 2019, and the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). While pro-India, this alliance favours Kashmir's self-governance with greater autonomy as granted by the special status revoked in 2019. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling BJP party won 74 seats. 49 seats went to independent candidates. The Congress Party (INC) won 26 seats. The BJP won the majority of seats in the four Hindu-majority districts in the Jammu region. In the Kashmir Valley with a Muslim majority, the BJP won only three seats. About half of the six million eligible voters cast their ballots in the 20 districts of the region.

After the election results became known, the Indian government arrested at least 75 leading separatists as well as members of the Jamaat-e-Islami Kashmir party, which has been suspended for five years since 2019, in order to avert political unrest, according to its own statements. According to critics, the election victory of the PAGD alliance shows that the population would not accept the lifting of special status.

## Iran

### COVID-19 pandemic: Revolution Leader bans import of and vaccination with vaccines from Western countries

Iranian foreign media discussed the ban on the import and use of COVID-19 vaccines by Revolution Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on 28 December 2020 and the impact on the country. The Revolutionary Leader justified the ban on vaccines from companies such as Moderna, BioNTech/Pfizer as well as AstraZeneca by saying

that they would be testing their products on the population. Iran has had its own vaccine produced, but it has not been internationally certified. In addition, there is close cooperation with Cuba in the field of vaccine development.

### **Criminal proceedings and prison sentences against demonstrators**

On 8 January 2021, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the shooting down of a Ukrainian passenger plane by units of the Revolutionary Guards near Tehran (on 8 January 2020), Iranian media abroad reported court cases against persons who had taken part in public protests in connection with this incident. In total, courts are reported to have handed down prison sentences and suspended sentences against 27 demonstrators. The prison sentences range from two months to five years. Human Rights Watch (HRW) confirmed 20 sentences. Bahareh Hedayat and Mehdi Mahmudian were sentenced to four years and eight months in prison and five years in prison. A student, Mostafa Hashemizadeh, was sentenced to five years' imprisonment and 73 lashes for subversion of national security.

### **Three men of Arabic origin sentenced**

On 8 January 2021, a revolutionary court in Dezful in the southwestern province of Khuzestan sentenced three men of Arabic origin to long prison terms in connection with the November 2019 riots. Raad Hamdani (23 years), Qasa Khasarji (19 years) and Sajad Dabat (20 years) were found guilty of moharebeh (sedition and war against God) for allegedly burning pictures of the Revolutionary Leader and setting fire to a petrol station. Prison sentences of twenty years and twice ten years were handed down.

## **Iraq**

### **Protests in Nasiriya**

A wave of arrests in Nasiriya has led to new escalations between protesters and security forces since 7 January 2021. Two deaths have been confirmed so far. According to various reports, about 600 people active in anti-government demonstrations were arrested in the wave of arrests.

### **Protests in KR-I**

The Kurdish Regional Government was unable to pay its employees in April, July, September and November 2020. This caused repeated violent protests. In this context, the Kurdish Regional Government says that Baghdad has failed to make payments. Iraq has considerable revenue problems due to the losses in oil prices and has only very limited access to financing via the capital market; the public sector is by far the largest employer in the KR-I, as it is in Iraq as a whole.

## **Ivory Coast**

### **Prominent opposition politician released after two months in pre-trial detention**

Pascal Affi N'Guessan, one of Ivory Coast's most important opposition politicians, was provisionally released on 30 December 2020 after almost two months in pre-trial detention, according to media reports. The release was preceded by talks between the government and the opposition in view of the general elections scheduled for March 2021. However, the criminal charge of subversion of the authority of the state against the 68-year-old opposition politician was upheld, according to media reports. Affi N'Guessan was Prime Minister of Ivory Coast from 27 October 2000 to 10 February 2003. He has been president of the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI) party since 2015. In the days following the presidential election of 31 October 2020, won by incumbent Alassane Ouattara, a number of Ouattara's political opponents were detained, including Affi N'Guessan (see BN of 9 November 2020). He was one of only three candidates allowed to run against Ouattara in the presidential election, but had explicitly called on his supporters to boycott the disputed ballot. After the election, he acted as spokesperson for a part of the opposition that refused to recognise Ouattara's re-election.

## **Kazakhstan**

### **Death penalty officially abolished**

According to official information of 2 January 2021, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev signed the ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by parliament, thus abolishing the death penalty in Kazakhstan. The death penalty had been suspended in 2003, except for offences in terrorist contexts.

### **Prison sentences against journalist and opposition activists**

Blogger and journalist Aigul Otepova, who was initially placed under house arrest after publishing a Facebook post criticising the Kazakh authorities' course of action regarding the coronavirus on 17 September 2020, is back under house arrest after being released from a psychiatric hospital. According to her lawyer, the house arrest would last until 17 January 2021. A court had ordered her forced admission to a psychiatric hospital so that her mental health could be examined. After being detained in a clinic in Nur-Sultan since 23 November 2020, where she was certified as mentally healthy, she was transferred to house arrest on 11 December 2020, according to her lawyer. Amnesty International describes Otepova as a political prisoner. Authorities accused her of supporting the banned Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party.

Because of links to this party, a court sentenced activist Alibek Moldin on 21 December 2020 to a one-year so-called deprivation of liberty. After being under house arrest since 10 November 2020, he is not allowed to leave the city of Aqtöbe until 21 December 2021 and has to report regularly to the police. Activist Marat Duisembiew was sentenced to three and a half years' deprivation of liberty on 22 December 2020. A court found him guilty of involvement in party activities. In the months leading up to the general elections on 10 January 2021, several political activists were given prison sentences because of this.

## **Kosovo**

### **New elections after constitutional court decision to form government**

On 14 February 2021, a new parliament will be elected in Kosovo ahead of schedule. This date was set by the current President of the Republic, Vjosa Osmani (see BN of 9 November 2020). At the same time, she dissolved the current parliament after the Constitutional Court published the written reasons for its ruling of 21 December 2020 on 6 January 2021. The Constitutional Court had ruled that the election of Avdullah Hoti as Prime Minister on 3 June 2020 (see BN of 8 June 2020) with 61 out of 120 votes had been based on the vote of a non-voting MP and was therefore not lawful. At the time of the parliamentary vote, politician Etem Arifi had been sentenced to more than one year in prison with legal effect which, according to the constitution, should have ended his mandate. The complaint was filed by the opposition party Vetëvendosje (self-determination). Until a new government is confirmed, the current government of Prime Minister Hoti remains in office.

According to media reports, the Constitutional Court's decision simultaneously raises questions about the eligibility of various politicians, including Albin Kurti, leader of Vetëvendosje. Along with other Vetëvendosje MPs, he had been convicted in January 2018 for throwing tear gas in parliament. Vetëvendosje is considered to have a chance of becoming the strongest party again. Overall, Kosovo's political instability continues after the last early general election on 6 October 2019 (see BN of 7 October 2019). The formation of a coalition government with Vetëvendosje and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) subsequently dragged on for a long time. (see BN of 10 February 2020). The government then failed after only six weeks in power due to a vote of no confidence co-sponsored by the LDK of the future Prime Minister Hoti (see BN of 30 March 2020).

## **Lebanon**

### **Political and economic crisis**

There is still no agreement on a cabinet. The Lebanese pound now seems to have somewhat stabilised on the black market in the region of 8,600 to 9,000 to the dollar; the official exchange rate, which however only applies to a very limited number of goods, is 1:1500. The current president of the National Bank brought up the abandonment of

the peg to the dollar as part of the solution to the economic problems; however, in view of the dwindling currency reserves, it is not expected that this peg can be maintained for much longer. An abandonment would drastically increase the price of basic goods such as medicines, wheat flour and petrol, among other things.

### **COVID-19 pandemic**

On 9 January 2021, Lebanon recorded its highest level ever with 5,440 confirmed new infections and 17 deaths. The intensive care units of most hospitals in the country are full. A 25-day lockdown has been in effect for the entire country since 8 January 2021. However, it is not expected to be implemented effectively. A curfew is in effect from 6pm to 5am. Until the explosion in the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020, numbers remained in the low triple digits. The loss of significant numbers of hospital beds and housing due to the explosion hit the country of only about 6.8 million inhabitants hard, and furthered the spread of the virus due to the greatly exacerbated housing shortage and reduction in available medical facilities.

## **Liberia**

### **Trial of alleged Liberian war criminal Alieu Kosiah begins in Switzerland**

Kosiah is the first person to be tried for war crimes in a non-military Swiss court and the first Liberian to be indicted for alleged crimes during Liberia's first civil war from 1989 to 1996. After an investigation lasting almost five years, the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland filed charges against Kosiah in March 2019. It accuses him of various crimes, including ordering the murder and ill-treatment of civilians, rape and looting.

Liberia has not prosecuted anyone for the serious crimes committed during the armed conflict.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) called the trial an important step towards justice for victims and survivors.

## **Libya**

### **Prisoner exchange between GNA and LNA**

On 26 December 2020, 29 December 2020 and 5 January 2021, an exchange of prisoners took place between the Government of National Unity (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) troops in the southwestern town of Shwayrif. According to statements by the LNA, the process will continue. The ceasefire agreement negotiated in Geneva in October 2020 by military representatives of General Chalifa Haftar and Prime Minister Fajis al-Saraj included the exchange of prisoners (see BN of 26 October 2020).

### **Fighting between GNA and LNA in Sabha**

According to media reports, there were sporadic violent clashes between GNA-allied militias and LNA units in the southern Libyan town of Sabha on 3/4 January 2021. Shortly afterwards, the LNA regained full control of Sabha. There is no information about casualties. The LNA controls most of the southwest, but some tribal militias in the region are loyal to the GNA. This repeatedly leads to tensions in the region.

### **Request for GNA to identify individuals found in the mass graves of Tarhuna**

After GNA units took control of the town of Tarhuna, 90 km south-east of Tripoli, in June 2020, 27 mass graves were discovered in and around the town. From 2015 to June 2020, the al-Kani militia exercised control over Tarhuna, during which time there were reportedly regular abductions, torture and disappearances of dissenters. Since then, 338 residents have been reported missing. The actual number of missing persons is said to be much higher. Relatives, local missing persons organisations and international human rights organisations are now calling for the GNA to quickly identify the individuals found in the mass graves and for a full legal investigation.

## **Mali**

### **Soldiers killed in several attacks**

Since mid-December 2020, several attacks occurred in which Malian and French soldiers were killed and injured. On 15 December 2020, a Malian soldier was killed and five others injured when an explosive device hit their vehicle.

On 28 December 2020, an explosive device detonated on the road near Hombori, close to the border with Burkina Faso, killing three French soldiers. On 2 January 2021, two French soldiers were killed and one injured when their vehicle was hit by an explosive device in the Ménaka region of north-eastern Mali.

## **Montenegro**

### **President refuses to sign amendment to religion law**

On 2 January 2021, President Milo Đukanović (Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro, DPS) refused to sign the reform of the Law on "Freedom of Religion and Legal Status of Churches and Religious Communities" along with six other laws. The new government had passed the amendments to the controversial law in mid-December 2020 (see BN of 21 December 2020). On 29 December 2020, the parliament then also voted in favour of the amendment to the law with the votes of the governing coalition, while the opposition, which now includes Đukanović's DPS, boycotted the vote. The president's office explained the refusal to sign the legislation by saying that not enough MPs had been present at the parliamentary vote. If parliament were to pass the amendments to the legislation a second time, the president would be forced to sign it.

According to media reports, in the run-up to the vote, there had been protests in front of the parliament building with several thousand participants against the reform of the religion law. Among other things, participants shouted "treason" and "This is not Serbia!" This was the first major demonstration against the new coalition under Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić (see BN of 7 December 2020).

## **Nepal**

### **Parliament dissolved in Nepal**

In Nepal, President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolved parliament on 20 December 2020, paving the way for new elections. The elections are to be held in two rounds at the end of April and in May 2021, more than a year before the regular date. The President thus complied with a recommendation by Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, whose ruling Communist Party (CP) is riven by internal power struggles. Recently, there had been recurrent rumours of a split in the CP, which emerged in 2018 from a merger of the Oli-led Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Centre (CPN-MC) led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister's work during the COVID pandemic was repeatedly listed as the reason. The number of new infections in Nepal, with a population of about 30 million, has recently risen to over 265,000, and the number of deaths to 1,917. Its closer ties with China have also been criticised, which has led to tensions with Nepal's traditional partner, India.

The CP in Nepal has been fragmented for years. From 1996 to 2006, the Maoists waged a guerilla war against the then royal army. In alliance with the other left and liberal forces, the monarchy was abolished in 2008

## **Nicaragua**

### **Law restricts participation in elections**

On 21 December 2020, parliament passed a "Law for the Defence of the Rights of the People to Independence, Sovereignty and Self-Determination for Peace" (Ley No. 1055). It prohibits persons who, among other things, subvert independence, sovereignty and self-determination, or who incite foreign interference in internal affairs, from participating in elections. Critics see the law as an attempt by the government to further isolate the opposition in the country. Several hundred people were killed and hundreds arrested in escalating violent protests against the government in 2018.

### **Amnesty**

Vice President Rosario Murillo announced on 18 December 2020 that 1,004 prisoners, including at least three political prisoners, were released on the occasion of the upcoming Christmas holiday.

## **Niger**

### **Elections in Niger**

Presidential and general elections were held in Niger on 27 December 2020 in what was intended to be the first democratic transfer of power in the history of the state. Around 7.4 million voters were registered, 30 candidates were admitted. The Constitutional Court rejected the candidacies of eleven people, citing electoral regulations. According to these regulations, candidates who have been sentenced to one year or more in prison are not allowed to run, which is why the former head of government and opposition politician Hama Amadou was not admitted. Outgoing President Mahamadou Issoufou did not stand for re-election after two terms and a total of ten years in office, in line with the constitution. Voter turnout was 69.67%. Mohamed Bazoum, a close confidant of Issoufou, received 39.33% and Mahamane Ousmane 17% of the vote. As none of the 30 presidential candidates achieved an absolute majority, there will be a run-off election on 21 February 2021.

### **More than 100 people killed in attacks**

In the Tillabéri region, about 120 km north of the capital city of Niamey, about one hundred people were killed in attacks on two villages on 2 January 2021. Up to 70 people were killed in Tchomo Bangou village and 30 bodies were discovered in Zaroumadareye, with around 30 other people injured, the mayor of both villages told the AFP news agency on 3 January 2021. Several dozen attackers on motorbikes allegedly invaded the villages and shot at men and boys. No one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack. The attack is said to have been an act of revenge. The villagers had fought off protection racketeers in recent months and killed two of them.

### **Boko Haram attack claims 28 lives**

On 12 December 2020, members of the terrorist militia Boko Haram invaded the village of Toumour, not far from the border with Nigeria. The attackers opened fire, killing ten people. Four people were drowned. The attackers then started a fire that claimed the lives of fourteen villagers. More than 100 people were injured in the three-hour attack. Between 800 and 1,000 houses, the central market and numerous vehicles were destroyed by the fire, officials from Niger told al-Jazeera. Almost 60% of the village has been destroyed. It is one of the worst terrorist attacks Niger has ever suffered, prompting the government to declare a 72-hour national period of mourning on 14 December 2020.

## **Nigeria**

### **Attempted abduction of schoolchildren fails**

According to media reports, security forces were able to prevent the abduction of school children on 20 December 2020. The night before, gunmen took about 80 pupils from a Koranic school in Mahuta (Katsina State) hostage. After a shootout with the kidnappers, all the children were freed, a police spokesperson said. It is unclear who the kidnappers were. Just on 17 December 2020, Nigerian state television had reported the release of over 300 abducted schoolchildren who had been kidnapped from a boys' boarding school in another town in Katsina State on 11 December 2020 (see BN of 21 December 2020). Boko Haram, but also other groups, have been terrorising the population of northern Nigeria for years. Observers fear that the latest incidents in Katsina State could be the harbinger of an expansion of terror from the north-east to the north-west of Nigeria. Already on 11 December 2020, the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court in The Hague announced investigations by her agency into crimes against humanity committed in Nigeria. Both acts of violence by Boko Haram and abuses by Nigerian armed forces are to be investigated.

## **North Macedonia**

### **Arrests on suspicion of terrorism**

A total of eight men aged 21 to 31 were arrested on 27 December 2020 in the cities of Skopje and Kumanovo on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks, police announced the next day. They are accused of having links with IS. They had planned to commit murders and destroy public buildings. However, no specific targets were named. The arrests were preceded by months of investigations. One of the arrested had already been convicted of belonging to

the IS. The police further stated that those arrested belonged to the same group as the three suspects who were also arrested in Kumanovo on 1 September 2020 on suspicion of terrorism (see BN of 14 September 2020).

## **Pakistan**

### **Protests against Christians in Lahore**

According to International Christian Concern (ICC), an angry crowd threatened a Christian community in the Charar district of Lahore (Punjab) on 26 December 2020. The incident was prompted by a social media post by a Christian pastor on 22 December 2020, which was found to be religiously offensive. A 25-year-old Christian was charged with blasphemy after sharing the post. No blasphemy charges were brought against the pastor himself. He was taken to a safe place by security forces for his protection.

### **Attack on Hindu temple**

On 30 December 2020, an angry crowd of 2,000 people ransacked a Hindu temple in Karak in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province and set fire to the compound. More than two dozen people, among them Muslim clerics who had called for the attack, were arrested.

### **Attacks in Balochistan province**

On 27 December 2020, at least seven Frontier Corps soldiers were killed by unknown assailants in Harnai district, Balochistan province.

On 26 December 2020, a bomb explosion near a football field killed two spectators and injured six others in the Panjgur district in the southwest of the province. No one claimed responsibility for the attack.

### **Eleven Hazaras targeted and killed in Balochistan**

On 3 January 2021, eleven miners belonging to the Shi'ite Hazara minority were abducted by gunmen from a coal mine southeast of Quetta in Balochistan province in a targeted attack and subsequently shot and killed. Seven of those killed were Afghan migrant workers from the Daikondi province. According to the Reuters news agency, IS subsequently claimed responsibility for the acts.

According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), more than 2,600 Shi'ite Muslims have been killed in Pakistan since 2001 in violent attacks on religious grounds.

### **Violence increased in former FATA areas**

In a report released in early January 2021 by the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) Research Centre, terrorist violence in the former tribal areas, which are part of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province and border Afghanistan, increased again in 2020 after a steady decline in previous years. In terrorist attacks, targeted killings or clashes with security forces 226 people were killed (2019: 110) and 164 people were injured (2019: 171), of these 80 civilian victims were killed and 63 injured, and 65 members of the security forces were killed and 81 injured. The increase in violence was partly due to the reunification of splinter groups of the Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, TTP) in this area since June 2020.

### **Mastermind of Mumbai attacks convicted**

On 8 January 2021, one of the masterminds of the Mumbai series of attacks in November 2008 was sentenced to several years' imprisonment as well as a fine by an anti-terror court in Lahore (Punjab) for terror financing. Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, arrested on 2 January 2021, is believed to be one of the leaders of the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which is credited with the 2008 Mumbai attacks in India that killed 175 people, including 26 foreigners and nine of the terrorists.

### **Four new blasphemy verdicts**

On 8 January 2021, an anti-terror court in the capital city of Islamabad handed down death sentences to three men for blasphemy. The men are accused of insulting the Prophet Mohammed with posts on social media. The court also sentenced a professor to ten years in prison for allegedly spreading blasphemous course content.

## **Sudan / Ethiopia**

### **Armed conflicts in border region**

In December 2020, four soldiers were killed and several injured in border clashes in the al-Fashaga region of al-Qadarif (Gedaref) state in eastern Sudan, according to the Sudanese military. Sudan accused Ethiopia of armed forces and militia crossing the border illegally and deployed military to the region. On 6 January 2021, renewed clashes between Sudanese and Ethiopian forces were reported. A Sudanese representative stated that they had repelled two attacks by Ethiopian forces and now controlled all the areas along the border. In addition, all Ethiopian farmers settling in the region were asked to return to their homeland.

The border between the two countries has always been disputed. According to the colonial treaties of 1902 and 1907, the international border runs to the east, and the region therefore belongs to Sudan. Ethiopia and Sudan finally agreed on a compromise in 2008. Ethiopia recognised the border, but Sudan allowed the Ethiopian – mostly Amharic – farmers who had been settling there for decades to remain. Since Abiy Ahmed took office, however, the Amhars have criticised the compromise because the talks were led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Amhars were not involved. Recently, both countries have signalled a willingness to talk again.

## **Sudan**

### **Normalisation of relations between Sudan and Israel and removal from the US terror list**

On 6 January 2021, the so-called Abraham Accords were signed in Khartoum by the Sudanese Minister of Justice, Nasredeen Abdulbari. The Abraham Accords are a series of agreements in which Sudan was called upon to normalise relations with Israel. Already in October 2020, it was announced that Sudan and Israel had agreed to normalise their relations. As part of this agreement, US President Donald Trump had declared that Sudan would be removed from the US list of countries supporting terrorism (see BN of 26 October 2020). This process was completed in mid-December 2020. Sudan now has access to international funds, which it urgently needs to improve the economic situation in the country.

## **Syria**

### **Government decides to ration fuel**

To address the further deteriorating economic situation, the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources announced on 10 January 2021 that it will cut the amount of diesel and fuel it distributes to areas under government control by 17% and 24% respectively. A time limit for this measure was not announced. Syria currently sources its fuel almost exclusively from Iran, which is (also) struggling with international sanctions.

The cost of a litre of non-subsidised petrol on the black market is reported to be around USD 2.05, while that of subsidised petrol is USD 0.88. Most Syrians earn less than USD 100 a month.

### **Israeli attacks on military positions in southern Syria**

On 6 January 2020, Syrian state media reported of a third series of attacks by Israeli flying objects in less than two weeks. According to other reports, their targets included Iranian Revolutionary Guards bases in Kisswa, south of the capital city of Damascus, and positions used by Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria. According to Israeli media, a senior military official confirmed attacks last year on more than 500 targets in Syria.

The reconnaissance or attack flights are mostly carried out over Lebanon. According to UN reports, Israeli drones enter Lebanese airspace on a daily basis.

### **Deir ez-Zor and Hama: Dozens dead in attacks on military personnel**

According to state media reports, a total of 28 people lost their lives in an attack on a military passenger bus on 30 December 2020. State media rarely publish the death toll of its own troops. The incident occurred near the ancient city of Palmyra in the otherwise sparsely populated area.

On 4 January 2021, a similar incident occurred east of the provincial capital of Hama, where at least nine occupants of a military bus were reported to have been killed.

In recent months, observers have also reported an increase in individual attacks by remaining IS supporters and members of Arab tribes who oppose the influence of Iranian military and militia presence in the region.

#### **North-west: rebels attack Russian convoy**

According to the Russian military, a convoy was attacked near Tronba in the Idlib province on 29 December 2020, injuring three members of the Russian military police. Rebels had fired an anti-tank guided missile at the patrolling vehicle from their territory.

The Russian presence in the region has been instrumental in implementing a ceasefire between the Syrian government, rebels and the Turkish military.

#### **North-east: fighting between Turkish military and Kurdish militia**

The Turkish Defence Ministry declared on 27 December 2020 that it had killed a total of 15 members of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) after they had prepared an attack on the areas of the Turkish military operation "Source of Peace".

Russia reacted to the latest escalation near Ain Issa, where there had already been heavy fighting in the weeks before (see BN of 30 November 2020), by announcing on 28 December 2020 that the Ministry of Defence would send additional Russian military police personnel to the region. After consultation with the Turkish partners, joint Turkish-Russian observation posts are to be established in order to stabilise the area.

## **Togo**

#### **List of suspected political prisoners**

An initiative by the opposition, called the Committee for the Release of All Political Prisoners in the Country, on 22 December 2020 presented a list of persons it considers to be political prisoners currently being detained. Among the 67 named were 16 who had been arrested between 19 and 21 December 2018 in connection with the general election held on 20 December 2018. A further 48 people were arrested in connection with the so-called Tiger Revolution, which refers to two attacks in November 2019 against security forces in Sokodé and Lomé in which a soldier was killed.

## **Tunisia**

#### **State of emergency extended for another six months**

The national state of emergency in Tunisia, which has been in effect since 2015, was extended by President Kais Saied on 26 December 2020 for another six months until the end of June 2021. Under the state of emergency, the security authorities have extended powers, which can lead to restrictions on freedom of movement, press freedom and freedom of assembly. In 2015, a national state of emergency was declared after the IS attacked a presidential guard bus in Tunis, killing 12 people. The act was preceded by other IS attacks in Tunis' Bardo Museum and a hotel complex in Sousse in the same year.

#### **COVID-19 pandemic: night curfew until mid-January 2021**

In order to further limit the spread of the coronavirus in the country, the authorities decided to extend the night curfew (from 8pm to 5am) until 15 January 2021. Other measures such as travel restrictions between regions, a ban on public gatherings and the closure of all cafés from 7pm also remain in force. In Tunisia, according to authorities, 157,514 people have been infected with the coronavirus since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, 5,153 of whom have died.

## **Turkey**

#### **New indictments in Kobanê trial**

According to the Anadolu news agency on 7 January 2021, a new indictment in the Kobanê trial was accepted in Ankara. A total of 108 people are accused, including ex-members of the pro-Kurdish HDP party, among them the

former HDP chairpersons Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, who are in custody along with 25 other accused. Among other things, they are accused of "destroying the unity of the state and the integrity of the country" in connection with the so-called Kobanê protests of October 2014, which were directed against the siege of the Syrian city of Kobanê by the IS terrorist militia and turned violent. The European Court of Human Rights has twice called for Demirtaş's release, most recently on 22 December 2020, but he remains in detention.

#### **Prison sentence for Can Dündar**

On 23 December 2020, journalist Can Dündar, who has been living in exile in Germany since 2016, was sentenced in Turkey in absentia to 18 years and nine months imprisonment for espionage and a further eight years and nine months for supporting terrorism. The background to the proceedings is a newspaper report from 2015 in which the newspaper Cumhuriyet critical of the government published secret information that was supposed to prove arms deliveries to rebels in Syria by the Turkish government. At the time, Dündar was editor-in-chief of Cumhuriyet. He had already been sentenced to over five years in prison for the publications in 2016 for betraying secrets, but was acquitted of the espionage charge. However, the Supreme Court had overturned the verdict in 2018 and declared that a new trial against Dündar would have to be extended to include the offence of espionage.

#### **Prison sentence for Leyla Güven**

According to reports by the AFP news agency, on 21 December 2020 a court in Diyarbakir sentenced the Kurdish politician and former HDP MP Leyla Güven to 22 years and three months imprisonment on terrorism charges for membership of a terrorist organisation and spreading terrorist propaganda. She was not present at the sentencing, and the court ordered her arrest.

She had already been deprived of her electoral mandate in June 2020 and was temporarily detained. Güven had already attracted attention in 2018 when she went on a 200-day hunger strike to demand the release of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan.

#### **Arrests**

Turkish authorities arrested over 260 suspects in raids between 20 and 31 December 2020 in 33 cities and provinces for suspected links to terrorist organisations, according to reports by the state-run Anadolu news agency. Of those taken into custody, 161 were foreign nationals Police believe that the suspects were planning attacks on New Year's Eve. During the raids, police also seized weapons, explosives and digital documents with links to terrorist groups.

#### **Protests against rector appointment**

Hundreds of students again protested against the appointment of a new university rector by President Erdoğan during a demonstration march through Istanbul on 6 January 2021. The participants walked along the Bosphorus strait with signs and banners and then crossed to the Asian part of Istanbul by ferry, where a larger rally then took place. Security forces observed the protests but did not intervene.

The rally was directed against former AKP politician Melih Bulu, who was appointed head of the prestigious Boğaziçi University by Erdoğan on Friday. There had already been protests against this appointment on 4 January 2021. The police had responded to this demonstration with raids and the arrest of over 40 people. The university was fenced off to prevent the rally originally planned there for Wednesday. Students at the university refer to Bulu as a "forced administration", in reference to the HDP mayors who were deposed by decree. As president, Erdoğan has had the right to appoint rectors since the changes in legislation following the 2016 coup attempt. Previously, rectors had always been elected internally by the university. The students also criticise the director's closeness to the AKP and regard the appointment as undemocratic.

### **Venezuela**

#### **Deadly police operation in Caracas**

On 8 January 2021, there was a major operation by the Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales (FAES), a group of security forces that has long been accused of large-scale extrajudicial killings, in the La Vega neighbourhood of eastern Caracas. According to various reports, the operation was primarily directed at a criminal gang that largely controls the neighbourhood; 23 deaths have been reported so far as a result of this operation, including several bystanders.

## **Vietnam**

### **Journalists sentenced**

On 5 January 2021, a court in Ho Chi Minh City sentenced three reporters from the Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam (IJAVN) to prison terms of eleven and fifteen years each for disseminating anti-state propaganda. The IJAVN is classified as an illegal organisation.

## **Yemen**

### **Attack on members of the newly formed government**

Shortly after a plane carrying ministers of the newly formed Yemeni government (see BN of 22 December 2020) landed in Aden, South Yemen, a large explosion occurred on 30 December 2020. While none of the passengers on the plane were injured, an estimated 25 other persons were killed and 110 injured. A few hours later, a second explosion occurred near the presidential palace where the ministers had been taken to safety. Although no group claimed responsibility for the attack, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition retaliated with air strikes on the capital city of Sanaa. No fatalities were reported following the attack.

### **The USA classifies Houthi movement as a terrorist organisation**

On 10 January 2021, the United States announced that it is formally classifying the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organisation. The designation will come into effect on 19 January 2021 and is likely to deter actors from transacting with the Houthis, who control large parts of the country. Critics of the decision fear that this will hinder future peace talks with the Houthis as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid to Houthi-controlled areas.

## **Zimbabwe**

### **Journalist critical of government re-arrested**

According to an agency report of 9 January 2021, prominent journalist Hopewell Chin'ono has been re-arrested and charged. He is accused of spreading falsehoods. According to the indictment, he had commented on a social media video in which citizens accused some police officers of fatally injuring a baby. A lawyer for Chin'ono said the charges were based on a law that has since been repealed.

The journalist is a well-known critic of President Emmerson Mnangagwa. He had exposed corruption in the procurement of medical supplies to fight the coronavirus. Together with opposition politician Jacob Nagrivhume, Chin'ono was arrested in Harare on 20 July 2020 on charges of inciting the population to violence during demonstrations. On 2 September 2020, both were released from pre-trial detention on bail (see BN of 27 July 2020 and 7 September 2020).

Human rights groups have repeatedly criticised the government for cracking down on the media during the coronavirus crisis and for intimidating and arresting journalists who report on the COVID-19 pandemic. Zimbabwe has been in a severe economic crisis for years and has a very weak health system, which was already overstretched before the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the agency report.