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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

Security situation

On 21.03.24, an explosion took place outside a branch of Kabul Bank in the city of Kandahar. According to various reports, up to 27 people were killed and 43 others were injured. The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) has claimed responsibility for the attack.

According to its own sources, the National Resistance Front (NRF) killed a total of four Taliban insurgents in attacks carried out in Kabul and Takhar on 20.03.24, 23.03.24 and 24.03.24.¹

Persecution

On 20.03.24, the new academic year began with a ceremony held in Kabul. Female journalists were not allowed to attend. No changes have been made to the ban on secondary school attendance for girls. In an audio message broadcast over the radio, the Taliban's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, declared that women should be stoned to death if they commit a serious offence against Sharia law.

On 20.03.24 and 21.03.24, several people were arrested or beaten by the Taliban for celebrating the Persian New Year Nowruz. The Taliban labelled the festival un-Islamic and carried out strict controls.

In Takhar province, the Taliban are said to have carried out house searches following an attack by the NRF on 24.03.24 and arrested five people on charges of collaborating with the organisation. On 21.03.24, they also arrested four hospital employees in Herat under obscure circumstances as well as a journalist in Kunduz province. On 22.03.24, the Taliban arrested the chairperson of the Justice and Development Party, Sayed Jawad Hussaini, and the head of the office of this party, Jafar Joya, in Kabul. They are said to have spoken out against a Shia religious leader appointed by the Taliban.

On 22.03.24 and 23.03.24, the Taliban killed two former special force members in the provinces of Logar and Parwan.²

Humanitarian situation

At least three people, including one child, were killed in floods that swept the provinces of Badghis and Faryab on 21.03.24 and 22.03.24. Around 150 houses were destroyed.

To mark World Water Day on 22.03.24, the UN pointed out that 79 percent of the population do not have sufficient access to clean water.³

Cuba

Protests due to power cuts and hunger; arrests

The largest protest to take place since the demonstrations held in July 2021 took place in Santiago de Cuba on 17.03.24 in a mobilisation that was repeated in other provinces around the country. People were protesting the

ongoing lack of electricity, the poor supply situation and high food prices. According to subsequent media reports, calls for freedom (libertad) were also heard. As a rule, state security forces crack down immediately on protests, but this time the government confirmed that demonstrations were taking place. Nevertheless, arrests are said to have been made. However, it is unclear exactly how many people were arrested. So far, only the identities of five people arrested have been revealed. Two of these people were reportedly released after paying fines. These verified arrests took place in Bayamo, El Cobre and Matanzas. However, the civil society group Justicia 11J says that the number of people arrested is higher. In order to prevent the protests from spreading across the country, the internet was also shut down. Various police units and the special military unit Avispas Negras (Black Wasps) are said to have been deployed to the relevant regions to end the protests.⁴

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Journalist Stanis Bujakera convicted and released

On 19.03.24, the Congolese authorities released the journalist Stanis Bujakera Tshiamala, who has been held in custody at Makala prison for more than six months, after being convicted at trial the previous day. Bujakera had been arrested at Kinshasa Airport on 08.09.23 (cf. BN of 18.09.23) and since held in pre-trial custody.

The trial against Bujakera was based on an article he allegedly wrote about the murder of former minister and opposition politician Chérubin Okende. The article allegedly placed the intelligence service of the Congolese military under suspicion of having been involved in the murder of the politician. Okende, former spokesman for the opposition party Together for the Republic (Ensemble pour la République), had been found shot dead at the wheel of his car on 13.07.23.

On 18.03.24, the court found Bujakera guilty of "spreading rumours and fake news", among other things, and imposed a six-month prison sentence and a fine. Having already spent six months in prison at the time of the conviction, the journalist was able to leave prison after paying the fine. The public prosecutor, who had previously called for a prison sentence of 20 years at the trial, withdrew his appeal against the conviction. International media and human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, HRW and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) condemned Bujakera's arrest from the outset and called for his release.⁵

Moratorium on the death penalty lifted

According to media reports, the Ministry of Justice of the Democratic Republic of the Congo announced on 13.03.24 that the government will reinstate executions. This applies in particular to members of the military who are guilty of treason and to members of armed groups and criminal gangs. The death penalty was regularly imposed in these cases, but has been systematically commuted to life imprisonment since the moratorium was imposed in 2003. By ending this moratorium, the government wants to combat the increasing violence of militant groups and gang violence in the country. International organisations and governments have criticised the decision.⁶

The Gambia

Potential decriminalisation of female genital mutilation

According to media reports, on 18.03.24, the members of the Gambian parliament voted overwhelmingly, 42 to four, to refer the recently introduced bill that seeks to repeal the bill adopted in 2015 banning female genital mutilation (FGM) on the grounds of preserving religious purity and upholding traditional norms and values to parliament's business committee for further consideration (cf. BN of 11.03.24). The final third reading is due to take place in three months' time. The Gambia could become the first country to overturn the criminalisation of FGM. The widespread practice has been enshrined as a criminal offence in national law since 2015. There are fears in various circles that the introduction of the law could undo years of progress made in the area of women's and children's rights.

On the morning before the parliamentary debate, hundreds of people gathered in front of the parliament building in Banjul to protest for or against the decriminalisation of FGM. According to a news agency, most of them were in favour of FGM. According to an FGM activist, police forces prevented many FGM opponents from entering the

parliament building, while the police allowed pro-FGM religious leaders and their followers unhindered access to the building.⁷

Guinea

New Prime Minister comments on transition plan

In an interview broadcast on 12.03.24, the new Prime Minister appointed by the military junta, Mamadou Oury Bah (cf. BN of 04.03.24) explained that although a referendum on the new constitution is to be held before the end of 2024, the transition process is not expected to be completed until 2025. The plan is to fully return to a civilian, constitutional order by 31.12.24 (cf. BN of 24.10.22 and 27.03.23). Bah justified the delay with the explosion of a large oil depot tank which occurred in the port of Conakry on 18.12.23, killing and injuring many people and severely damaging the economy.⁸

Iran

Death penalty: number of executions remains high

Citing information provided by human rights organisations, it was reported in foreign media on 18.03.24 that a total of 95 executions took place in the period between January and mid-March 2024. However, they said the Iranian authorities only announce one third of the total number of executions actually carried out. In 2023, as in the previous year, the majority of death sentences were carried out for drug-related offences (N.B.: drug trafficking) and murder. The proportion of executions based on politically motivated charges, involving offences that leave correspondingly broad scope for interpretation under Iranian criminal law, was relatively low at 5 percent.

The human rights organisation Iran Human Rights (IHR) views the number of death sentences carried out as a means of deterrence used by the Iranian government, in particular to prevent further protests.⁹

Security forces prevent New Year celebrations near Saqqez (Kordestan province)

According to media reports issued on 22.03.24, security forces prevented the celebration of the Persian New Year (Nowruz) from going ahead in the village of Aichi, near the city of Saqqez (Kordestan province).

The village is home to the graves of Mahsa Amini and some of the victims of the nationwide protests that took place in 2022. According to a report released by a Kurdish news agency, security authorities in the city of Saqqez threatened and summoned the organisers of the local Nowruz ceremony. The information cannot be independently verified. According to the report, 30,000 residents were prevented from holding the celebrations in their hometown and had to move to other towns as a result. A similar situation was reported for the predominantly Kurdish city of Gilan e Gharb (Kermanshah province).¹⁰

UNHCR report on human rights violations during protests held in 2022

At the beginning of March 2024, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published a report as part of a fact-finding mission on the extent of measures implemented by the state during the nationwide protests held in 2022. According to the report, crimes against humanity were committed, inter alia, based on the large number of people killed during the protests and the verification of reports of torture and sexual violence in detention, among other things.¹¹

Iraq

Conflict between Türkiye and the PKK

According to the Turkish Ministry of Defence, Türkiye attacked a total of 39 PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) positions in northern Iraq on 19.03.24 and 20.03.24. The large-scale attack is seen as retaliation for a suspected PKK attack carried out on Turkish soldiers on 19.03.24, in which one Turkish soldier was killed and four others were injured.

On 22.03.24 and 23.03.24, two villages in the Amedi district (Dohuk province) were hit by suspected Turkish artillery strikes. It is unclear whether there were any casualties and whether there was any damage to property.¹²

Libya

Armed conflict leads to closure of border crossing with Tunisia

According to media reports, armed clashes erupted between an armed group that controls the Ras Jedir crossing point on the Libyan side and security forces deployed by Tripoli at the Tunisian-Libyan border crossing at Ras Jedir on 19.03.24. Shots were fired and vehicles were set on fire; there is no information available on the number of potential casualties. The authorities of both countries then closed the border crossing.

Disputes over control of the border crossing have reportedly been ongoing for several months. It is controlled by local militias from the nearby town of Zuwara, who in turn are opposed to the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) having any influence.¹³

Nigeria

Kaduna State: more people kidnapped

Armed actors abducted more than 100 people, including women and children, in two attacks carried out on villages in Kajuru Local Government Area (LGA) in Kaduna State on 16.03.24 and 17.03.24.

According to media reports, the violent actors are also responsible for stealing food and supplies. These are the latest in a spate of attacks and kidnappings to have occurred in Kajuru Local Government Area. On 07.03.24 and 11.03.24, armed actors abducted over 60 people from two villages in Kajuru Local Government Area in Kaduna State and raided a school in the town of Kuriga in Chikun Local Government Area, abducting over 200 schoolchildren (cf. BN of 11.03.24 and 18.03.24). Kidnappings for ransom have already occurred in the north of Nigeria in the past (cf. BN of 13.11.23, 29.01.24 and 12.02.24).¹⁴

Delta State: deadly clashes

Violent actors killed around 15 members of the Nigerian Army on 14.03.24 in Okuoma village in Bomadi Local Government Area in the southern state of Delta during an operation to end a violent conflict between residents of Okuama and Okoloba villages. The media reported that the violent actors were young men. The conflict was triggered by disputes over land rights. A few days later, on 17.03.24, armed actors attacked the village of Okuoma, looting several houses in the village of Okuoma and then setting them on fire. Deadly disputes over land or compensation for oil spills by energy companies have already occurred in Delta state in the past.¹⁵

Southwest: success in the fight against crime

In March 2024, success stories of the Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN), better known as Amotekun, caused a stir. The organisation is dedicated to the fight against crime.

According to media reports, members of an Amotekun Corps succeeded in arresting a human trafficker on 29.02.24 for reportedly trafficking five people, including four underage boys, from the southeastern state of Akwa Ibom to the southwestern state of Osun to work as labourers. The suspect and the suspected trafficking victims were transferred to the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) headquarters. The Amotekun Corps took action after reports were received by Amotekun command authorities in the region.

On 21.03.24, an Amotekun commander announced that they had succeeded in foiling a bank robbery planned by a seven-man gang in Ondo State. Amotekun was reportedly founded in 2020 and is active in Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo states. It is difficult to categorise Amotekun according to European standards. The organisation is not part of the Nigerian police or military. Human rights violations have reportedly been committed in connection with Amotekun's activities in the past.¹⁶

Kaduna State: kidnapped schoolchildren released

Members of the Nigerian army, in cooperation with local authorities and government representatives, reportedly freed more than 130 of the nearly 300 children who had been kidnapped by armed actors from a school in the northwestern town of Kuriga in Chikun Local Government Area, Kaduna State, on 24.03.24 (cf. BN of 11.03.24). According to the governor of the state of Kaduna, all of the almost 300 children were freed unharmed several days before the deadline for payment of the ransom. Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Adekunle Tinubu had promised to

free the children without paying a ransom. According to media reports, state actors rarely openly admit to paying ransoms to free abductees.¹⁷

Pakistan

Bomb blasts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan

On 10.03.24, two people were killed and another person was seriously injured when a motorcycle packed with explosives detonated in Peshawar.

According to the Pakistani military, seven soldiers were killed and 17 were injured in an attack that targeted an army post in North Waziristan near the Afghan border on 16.03.24. The army did not name the militant group behind the attack. However, a newly formed militant group, Jaish-e Fursan-e Muhammad, has claimed responsibility for the assault.

On 20.03.24, armed fighters attacked an administrative complex of the deep-water port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea. According to the authorities, all eight militants were killed by security forces. In a subsequent statement, the separatist Balochistan Liberation Army claimed responsibility for the attack.

On 21.03.24, two soldiers were killed and 15 others were injured in a bomb explosion near a security convoy in the Dera Ismail Khan district. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack. According to media reports, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan is suspected of being behind the attack.¹⁸

Airstrikes and clashes along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan

On 18.03.24, Afghanistan's Taliban government reported that two airstrikes carried out by the Pakistani army on Afghan territory had claimed the lives of five women and three children. In retaliation, Pakistani security forces along the border were shot at with heavy weapons. In a statement it released, the Pakistani Foreign Ministry said that Pakistan had carried out counter-terrorism operations in the border regions with Afghanistan because attacks had previously been launched on Pakistani territory from Afghan soil. This account is disputed by the Afghan side.¹⁹

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

Gaza Strip: current developments; humanitarian situation

On 24.03.24, the Hamas-led Ministry of Health announced that more than 32,226 Palestinians had been killed in the Gaza Strip since the start of the war. More than 74,518 other people are also said to have been wounded. The ministry does not differentiate between combatants and civilians. The Israeli military stated that at least a third of those killed were combatants.

In addition, the Israeli military says that a total of 250 Israeli military personnel have been killed and 1,489 others wounded since the beginning of the ground offensive as of 22.03.24. Israeli authorities estimate that 134 Israelis and other nationals or their remains are still being held hostage in the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli military operation in and around Shifa Hospital in Gaza City was still ongoing on 24.03.24. According to reports from the Gaza Strip, around 30,000 displaced people, patients and medical staff were unable to leave the building due to the fighting around the hospital. The military stated that it had arrested more than 500 suspects, including 358 who it claims to have identified as members of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) group. In addition, according to information provided by the Israeli military on 23.03.24, 170 people identified as Hamas members had been killed.

A member of the Israeli military was also killed. A correspondent for the Al Jazeera media platform was reportedly arrested by the Israeli army and released after 12 hours.

According to the Palestinian Red Crescent, Israeli troops began besieging two more hospitals in the southern city of Khan Younis on 24.03.24.

On 18.03.24, the international institution used to classify the severity of famine crises (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, IPC) warned of an imminent famine in the north of the Gaza Strip, while the rest of the Gaza Strip remains at the same level of risk. According to local authorities, 27 people, the majority of them children, have already died of malnutrition and dehydration in the north of the Gaza Strip. On 21.04.23, media outlets reported further aid deliveries from Israel to the north of the Gaza Strip. According to official reports, more than 7,000 lorries

were waiting to enter the Gaza Strip on the Egyptian side of the border with the Gaza Strip. International organisations and Israel are blaming each other for the delays in aid deliveries. According to UNRWA, more than 60 percent of housing units in the Gaza Strip have been destroyed, as well as 392 education facilities, 123 ambulances and 184 mosques.²⁰

West Bank: several killed in military operations

On 20.03.24, four Palestinians were killed in an Israeli airstrike carried out on a target near the city of Jenin in the north of the West Bank. According to the PIJ, at least three of those killed were members of the group.

In the following 24 hours, seven other Palestinians were also killed in various incidents. The incidents included a military raid to arrest a suspect, an armed confrontation and the killing of an individual who was allegedly acting suspiciously. Some media sources report that the individual was following Israeli army instructions and had his hands raised when he was shot. A further four people were killed in raids and airstrikes on the Nur Shams refugee camp in Tulkarem.

Clashes also erupted between Palestinian Authority security forces and armed militias in Jenin. This is said to have been triggered by the arrest of a militia member.

According to UN figures, 434 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in connection with armed clashes since the start of the war in the Gaza Strip. Of these, 421 were reportedly killed by the Israeli army, nine by Israeli settlers and three by one of the two groups of actors. More than 5,000 other Palestinians have been wounded. In addition, 15 Israelis, including four military personnel, have been killed in the occupied territories (excluding Gaza) and Israel. 109 other Israelis have been wounded.²¹

Russian Federation

Attack on concert hall near Moscow

According to the Russian authorities, at least 137 people died in a terrorist attack on a concert hall near Moscow on 22.03.24; 182 people are reported to have been injured. A branch of the Islamist terrorist organisation Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack. In the meantime, four men from Tajikistan have been charged with carrying out a deadly terrorist attack. According to news agencies, two of the four suspects, who have been remanded in custody, have admitted their guilt in the attack.²²

Senegal

Release from prison for opposition leaders Sonko and Faye; clear election victory for Faye looms

On 14.03.24 – ten days before the presidential election – opposition leader Ousmane Sonko and his deputy Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who had been registered for the presidential election, were also released on the basis of the general amnesty after spending several months in prison (cf. BN of 04.03.24 and 11.03.24). Crowds of people celebrated the release from prison of Sonko and Faye, who were then able to campaign undisturbed in the country. In the first round of the presidential election held on 24.03.2024, which seems to have gone peacefully, initial forecasts apparently indicated a clear victory for Faye with a high voter turnout. Other opposition candidates have already congratulated Faye on his victory. The official result is not expected for a few days.²³

Violent clashes during the election campaign with injuries and arrests

According to media reports, there have been several clashes between supporters of Sonko's banned party African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity (Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité (PASTEF)) and the presidential candidate of the government camp, Amadou Ba, since the election campaign was launched on 10.03.24. Such clashes, resulting in injuries to a number of people, some serious, were reported on 17.03.24 in Sibassor (Kaolack region) and also on 11.03.24 in the major city of Pikine (Dakar region) during an election campaign caravan of the Faye coalition. According to an opposition member of parliament, the clashes in Pikine were preceded by stone throwing, for which he blamed sympathisers and activists of the presidential party Alliance for the Republic (Alliance pour la République). Violent clashes between supporters of the two presidential candidates had reportedly already broken out in a district of Dakar on 10.03.24 after an election

campaign caravan of the Faye coalition had encountered Ba sympathisers. Numerous arrests were reportedly made, some people were seriously injured and vehicles were set on fire.

It was reported that on 19.03.24, confrontations and clashes occurred between police forces and young people in Nioro (Kaolack) who were waiting for the arrival of the Faye coalition's election campaign caravan. The police had used tear gas and had arrested a PASTEF departmental coordinator and taken him into police custody. Two people had also been injured and had suffered broken legs.²⁴

President of an opposition movement and others are released, along with a critical journalist

A media outlet has reported on the release of Olivier Boucal, president of the opposition movement Goudoump debout, who was taken into custody nine months ago because of an online video published abroad (cf. BN of 18.06.23). Boucal's political movement is close to PASTEF. Another media report mentioned the release of 69 people labelled as political prisoners. They reportedly included PASTEF members. Recently, journalist Maty Sarr Niang of the investigative news portal Kéwoulo, who was arrested in May 2023 and charged with several criminal offences, was also released from prison, according to media reports. The director of Kéwoulo assumed that Niang's detention was linked to her anti-government reporting and her posts on social media (cf. BN of 14.08.23).²⁵

Somalia

Drone attack

In the early hours of 19.03.24, government and foreign troops reportedly carried out a drone attack north of Mogadishu in Baqdaad (Lower Shabelle region). According to official sources, the attack was part of an operation against al-Shabaab, and 40 members of the terrorist group were killed. Affected villagers reported at least 20 other civilian casualties. It has not yet been possible to officially confirm this information.²⁶

Attack on military base

On 23.03.24, at least seven Somali soldiers were killed by al-Shabaab fighters in an attack on the Busley military base (Lower Shabelle region). Al-Shabaab is reported to have briefly captured the military base before government troops drove the attackers away. The Islamist group claimed responsibility for the attack and stated that the number of casualties among the Somali soldiers was significantly higher. The information has not yet been confirmed.²⁷

Syria

Northeast: deaths in ISIS attack

According to media reports, nine people were killed and six others injured in a targeted ISIS attack on civilians that occurred on 21.03.24. The victims were searching for truffles in the desert region of the Raqqah governorate. A further 11 truffle hunters are said to have been killed by ISIS fighters on 24.03.24. A total of 56 truffle hunters have reportedly already been killed by ISIS attacks and landmine explosions in March 2024.²⁸

Damascus: Israeli airstrikes

Several suspected Israeli airstrikes carried out on targets in and around Damascus on 19.03.24 caused significant material damage. There were initially no reports of casualties. According to media reports, Hezbollah sites near the city of Yabrud to the northeast of the capital were targeted. Another attack was carried out on targets near the village of Qutayfah, east of Damascus.²⁹

Türkiye

Around 70 people arrested in the context of Nowruz celebrations

According to media reports, around 70 people, including an AFP journalist, were detained by police in Istanbul on 17.03.24 on the sidelines of Kurdish celebrations in the run-up to Nowruz, the Persian calendar New Year celebrated on 20.03.24.

AFP video journalist Eylul Yasar said she was detained and taken to a police van after she resisted a body search. She was detained by police for six hours along with 14 other people and then released. According to Yasar, she and the other people detained were verbally abused and threatened by the police. In a statement, the international press agency AFP said that it regretted the arrest, welcomed the subsequent release and called on the Turkish authorities to respect the rights of journalists.

Two journalists from the news website Bianet, who had filmed the arrests, reported that they had been beaten and thrown to the ground by the police. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Türkiye ranked 164th out of 180 countries on the Press Freedom Index in 2023. This represented a drop of 16 places compared to 2022.³⁰

Journalist sentenced to 11 months and 20 days in prison for insulting the president

On 19.03.24, the 44th Criminal Court in Bakırköy sentenced the journalist Levent Gültekin to 11 months and 20 days in prison for insulting the President in a programme aired on the Halk TV channel in 2022. During the hearing, Gültekin requested his acquittal. In his defence, he argued that he had sharply criticised a speech made by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after a terrorist attack in the southern Turkish district of Mersin. The journalist added that criticism was his responsibility as a journalist, and his remarks did not constitute an insult.

The prosecutor argued that Gültekin's remark criticised Erdoğan's political stance, but really constituted a personal insult because it involved Erdoğan's name. Gültekin had said in the programme aired on 27.09.22 that Erdoğan was behaving like a schoolchild.

Gültekin is the 75th journalist to be sentenced by the courts under Article 299 of the Turkish Criminal Code (Türk Ceza Kanunu), which criminalises insulting the president. According to press reports, prosecutors initiated a total of 52,348 investigations against individuals for insulting President Erdoğan or his government between 2019 and 2022. Citizens were also investigated on the basis of Article 301 of the Turkish Criminal Code, which criminalises insulting the Turkish nation, the state of the Turkish Republic and the institutions and organs of the state. During the terms in office of the five presidents who preceded Erdoğan, 1,716 insult cases were filed. Anyone who insults the president can be punished with up to four years in prison. Any person who criticises the government can be punished with up to two years in prison.³¹

Tunisia

Journalist arrested for insulting a civil servant

According to media reports, the authorities arrested the journalist Mohamed Boughalleb, who is known for his criticism of President Kaïs Saïed, in Tunis on 22.03.24 on suspicion of insulting a civil servant and subjected him to questioning. Boughalleb is said to have repeatedly insulted a civil servant on social media and in a radio programme, causing damage to her honour and reputation and prompting her to lodge a complaint.

According to the head of the Tunisian journalists' union (Syndicat National des Journalistes Tunisiens, SNJT), Boughalleb's arrest is a further attempt by the authorities to intimidate and silence journalists.³²

Ukraine

Civilian war casualties

According to statements issued by the respective regional governors on 19.03.24, three people died in the Kherson region as a result of Russian shelling, while the Donetsk region recorded one death and five injuries. According to the regional military prosecutor's office, at least one person was killed on 19.03.24 in the border community of Velyka Pysarivka, focal point of the mass evacuations ordered due to intensive Russian attacks in Sumy Oblast. The Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs reported on 20.03.24 that one person had been killed in attacks on Sumy, which hit a school, a kindergarten and a hospital, among other things. According to the regional governor, two civilians were killed in an attack on Kherson on the same day. According to the mayor, five people died and eight were injured in a Russian attack on Kharkiv which occurred on 20.03.24. The authorities reported that 17 people were injured in large-scale Russian missile strikes in Kyiv on 21.03.24, which also hit a kindergarten. According to the local authorities, one person was killed and six wounded in Mykolaiv as a result of a missile strike that occurred on 21.03.24. According to media reports on 22.03.24, the Zaporizhzhia City Council reported several injuries

following missile strikes. The media reported that one person had been killed in the Khmelnytsky region. According to the Ukrainian army, 11 people were injured in a Russian drone attack in Mykolaiv on 25.03.24.³³

Development of the war

According to a media report released on 19.03.24, Ukrainian officials stated that the Russian side had stepped up attacks on the border regions, in particular missile strikes on the northeastern regions of Kharkiv and Sumy. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrsky emphasised the increasing importance of drones in combat operations, while President Volodymyr Zelensky earlier welcomed the new long-range capabilities of combat drones on the Ukrainian side following reports of attacks on Russian territory. Following his re-election, Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke out in favour of establishing a buffer zone, which he said was the only way to protect the Russian Federation from attacks from Ukraine. Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak saw this as a "direct and obvious statement that the war will now escalate". In an interview with a Russian newspaper, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov admitted for the first time that his country is "in a state of war" with Ukraine. He said that after "the entire West sided with Ukraine", the special operation turned into a war. A statement issued by Russian President Putin one day after the Islamist terrorist attack in Moscow on 22.03.24, according to which he assumed Ukrainian involvement, could also point to a further escalation. According to the Ukrainian military, there was an attack on the Russian-occupied Crimean peninsula on Sunday in which two military ships and military infrastructure were hit. The Russian-installed governor of Sevastopol also reported one death and four injuries.³⁴

Critical energy infrastructure in Ukraine put at risk

Russian missile strikes carried out on 22.03.24 severed one of the two power lines supplying the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (NPP), Europe's largest, and almost caused a blackout. According to the regional military administration, the line, which is connected to the Ukrainian power grid, supplies the NPP with external power to maintain the plant's safety systems, among other things. A week earlier, the line also had to be repaired following Russian shelling. According to IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi, the NPP's power supply is still unstable and prone to interruptions. In addition, on the same day, the dam of the DniproHES hydroelectric power plant in Zaporizhzhia was hit by Russian airstrikes, causing a fire at the power plant and killing at least five people. According to the utility company, however, the country's largest dam is in no immediate danger of bursting. Other regions also reported attacks on critical infrastructure objects, including large-scale attacks on Kharkiv's energy supply. On 24.03.24, other energy facilities were also heavily hit, particularly in Kyiv and Lviv, as well as in Odesa the following day. The Ukrainian state energy company Naftogaz also reported a missile strike on an underground gas storage facility. The massive wave of attacks on energy supplies and power plants led to complete power cuts in parts of the country. Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko sees this as "the largest attack on the Ukrainian energy industry in recent times". The Russian Ministry of Defence justified the massive attacks as "part of a series of acts of revenge" following previous "attacks" by the Ukrainian military on Russian territory.³⁵

Humanitarian situation in Russian-occupied territories

According to media reports, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine has identified numerous violations of international humanitarian law as part of Russia's efforts to consolidate its control there. People are, for example, being arbitrarily detained and tortured, Ukrainian culture and identity are being suppressed, and the Russian language and curriculum are being enforced to justify the Russian invasion. Ukrainian internet and mobile service providers have been replaced by Russian providers in order to control their content. Anyone who does not accept a Russian passport will receive neither healthcare nor social security benefits. However, Russian citizenship risks recruitment by the Russian armed forces, which is being vigorously pursued, although there is no concrete evidence of forced recruitment to date. In addition, the occupying power is calling on the population to denounce violations, which, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, undermines the social fabric, isolates people and will have long-lasting consequences for Ukrainian society as a whole. The current UN report is based on over 2,300 interviews.³⁶

Venezuela

Political developments in the electoral context: arrests, Yoris enrolment attempt, new Guyana law

The Vente Venezuela party has reported that on 19.03.24 the party coordinator in the Girardot municipality in the state of Aragua, Joe Villamizar, was arrested. On 20.03.24, two other members of the campaign team of the opposition party Vente Venezuela and confidants of María Corina Machado, Dignora Hernández and Henry Alviárez, were arrested, as confirmed in a statement issued by Attorney General Tarek William Saab. Seven further arrest warrants are still outstanding, including that of campaign manager Magalli Meda, who had been rumoured by some to be a possible alternative candidate for the banned Machado. All of those involved are accused of conspiracy.

The possibility for candidates to register for the presidential elections officially expires today. In the last few days, the Supreme Electoral Council, which is loyal to the government, has announced which parties are allowed to register candidates. The Plataforma Unitaria (Unitary Platform), which unites large parts of the opposition, requested an extension of the registration deadline on 24.03.24, as it had not yet been able to register the alternative candidate for the banned María Corina Machado, Corina Yoris.

In a speech delivered to the UN Human Rights Council on 19.03.24, the United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Nada Al-Nashif, also warned of an intensification of repression in the run-up to the elections and numerous restrictions in the area of social space. She also criticised recent arrests of human rights defenders, cases of enforced disappearances, detention conditions and the increasing restriction of social space and called for compliance with the Barbados Agreement.

On 21.03.24, the pro-government and Chavista-dominated parliament also passed the Organic Law for the Defence of Guayana Esequiba (Ley Orgánica para la Defensa de la Guayana Esequiba). Among other things, this law prohibits people who share or have shared Guyana's position against Venezuelan annexation of the territory from running for public office in an election or holding public office. In addition, the territory must in future be included in Venezuelan maps, and there is to be a governor along with other regional state bodies.³⁷

Vietnam

Resignation of the President

On 20.03.24, President Vo Van Thuong was forced to resign. He is said to have violated internal rules of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), according to its Central Committee. According to reports, Thuong is facing allegations of corruption. Vice President Vo Thi Anh Xuan was appointed interim president by the National Assembly. Thuong took over the presidency from Nguyen Xuan Phuc only a year ago, after the latter was dismissed following a two-year term in office due to corruption allegations. The office of president serves a largely ceremonial function in Vietnam but is one of the country's four highest political offices ("four pillars") alongside the General Secretary of the CPV, the Prime Minister and the Chairman of the National Assembly.³⁸

Yemen

Houthi security forces blow up house

On 19.03.24, Houthi security forces besieged a family's house and its surroundings in the Radea district in Bayda governorate before blowing it up. According to media reports, both parents and all of their seven children were killed in the blast. The security forces had suspected the father of being involved in an ambush in which two Houthi fighters were killed the previous day. In a statement, the Houthi Ministry of the Interior distanced itself from the actions of the security forces, saying they will face criminal prosecution.

Violent action against civilians accused of opposing the Houthis is a regular occurrence in the areas controlled by the Houthis. This often includes action being taken against (innocent) family members.³⁹

US airstrikes against the Houthis

According to unconfirmed reports, the US carried out airstrikes against three Houthi underground storage facilities on 22.03.24. Meanwhile, explosions could be heard in Sana'a city. Houthi media had also announced that airstrikes had been carried out in Sana'a city. There were no casualties reported.⁴⁰

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