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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

09 December 2024

Afghanistan

Governance and persecution

On 04.12.24 the Taliban held a cabinet meeting in the city of Kandahar to discuss control of the media and the activities of a number of foreign organisations in Afghanistan. Those attending the meeting were reportedly forbidden to take smartphones or any other technical recording devices into the room. The military presence in the city of Kandahar was stepped up substantially during the cabinet meeting.

On 04.12.24 the Taliban shut down the Arezo TV station in the city of Kabul on the grounds that it had violated Islamic values.

It was reported in the media on 02.12.24 that Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada had issued a new directive banning women from visiting medical institutes (including universities, medical further education establishments). This impacts training to become a midwife, for example, and deprives women of one of the final options for taking up further education in the country. The directive is likely to further exacerbate the already critical shortage of female health workers. Under the Taliban's rules, male health workers are not permitted to treat women.

On 02.12.24 the head of the vice and virtue ministry, Khalid Hanafi, resumed his journey around the provinces to drive forward implementation of the morality law, travelling through Helmand and Uruzgan provinces.

On the same day, the Taliban arrested 100 farmers in Badakhshan province for growing opium. It was reported in the media on 06.12.24 that the Taliban had publicly flogged a total of seven people in Khost and Faryab provinces. According to reports in the media, the Taliban built a total of seven new madrasas for religious education in seven provinces (Sar-e Pul, Kapisa, Farah, Badakhshan, Baghlan, Khost and Ghazni) between October and November 2024, at a total cost of AFM 24 million (approx. EUR 330,000 as per 09.12.24).¹

Humanitarian situation

According to reports in the media, the ban imposed by the Taliban on girls attending school in Afghanistan has led to a 25 % increase in child marriages and a 45 % rise in the birth rate. UNICEF has reported that 22.9 million people in Afghanistan, including 12.4 million children, will be dependent on humanitarian aid in 2025. At the end of November 2024, at least three children aged between nine and twelve froze to death in heavy snowfall on their way from their homes in the village of Nawabad to the nearby village of Calar, in the Raghistan district of Badakhshan province in the north-east of the country.²

Angola

Demonstration against hunger and the government

On 23.11.24 thousands of people demonstrated against the government of president João Lourenço in the capital, Luanda, in response to a joint call by several opposition parties. According to reports in the media, the large numbers of people staged a peaceful process in which they accused the government of failing to do anything to combat the

acute hunger and poverty among the population. Although the country is the second-largest oil producer on the continent, some two million Angolans are reportedly affected by food insecurity, which is now also spreading into the middle class. The continuing drought in the south of the country is cited as one reason for this situation, as it deprives a large proportion of the regional population not only of their harvests, but also of an important source of income. The non-partisan demonstration was reportedly the largest of its type since the controversial elections in 2022.³

Azerbaijan

Media representatives remanded in custody

According to the news portal Meydan TV and other coverage in the media, on 08.12.24 a court in Baku ordered that six Meydan TV journalists each be remanded in custody for four months. They were reportedly arrested on 06.12.24. The homes of some of the journalists were searched and items of equipment and personal items were seized. They apparently stand accused of joint smuggling. Meydan TV has rejected the accusations against its employees. On the same days, a further media representative without any links to Meydan TV was reportedly also arrested and similarly remanded in custody for four months. In all, seven additional persons are said to have been arrested on 06.12.24, including three dependants of the individuals who have now been remanded in custody. The three dependants have since been released.

Meydan TV is known to be critical of the government. Criminal proceedings were previously instituted against the news portal back in 2015 and its staff were banned from leaving the country. Access to the online portal is said to be currently restricted in Azerbaijan.

The freedom of the media as a whole is reportedly highly constrained in the country. In addition to the journalists who have now been remanded in custody, the BBC has reported that 17 other media representatives are also in custody, including several from Abzas Media (cf. BN of 22.01.24), Toplum-TV, Kanal 13 and one each from Azadlıq Radiosu (RFE/RL) and Kanal 11.

It was reported on 04.12.24 that human rights defender Rūfət Səfərov had been arrested. Later in December 2024, Səfərov was due to travel to the USA to receive an award for human rights defenders from the US State Department. He has reportedly also been remanded in custody for four months, on charges of fraud and hooliganism.⁴

Burkina Faso

Prime minister dismissed; government dissolved

On 06.12.24 the interim president of the Burkinabe military government, Ibrahim Traoré, dissolved his entire government and removed the prime minister, Apollinaire Joachim Kyélem de Tambèla, from office. He issued a decree announcing, among other provisions, that the ministers are to continue to discharge their duties until a new government is formed. According to reports in the media, no grounds have been stated for Tambèla's dismissal. Since his nomination in October 2022, Tambèla had reportedly been appointed as prime minister three times. On 07.12.24 Traoré appointed the former minister of communications, culture and tourism, Rimalba Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo, as the new prime minister in a decree which was announced on television.⁵

Colombia

Commander-in-chief: Armed groups exploiting peace talks to consolidate strength

In an interview with the Reuters news agency on 02.12.24 Francisco Cubides, commander-in-chief of the Colombian armed forces, warned that illegal armed groups were exploiting the government's ongoing peace negotiations to consolidate their military and economic strength. Cubides alleged that these groups had broadened their influence in particular in the areas of drug trafficking and illegal mining. According to Cubides, the military have seized 560 tonnes of cocaine - a key source of income for armed groups - in 2024 to date, highlighting the need to take action against these groups. He claimed that the groups and their support networks currently comprised more than 20,000 people - a complex crime network in which groups were fighting each other in some parts of Colombia while in other regions they were forming alliances to secure success in illegal economies. Cubides

additionally stated that the groups had lost their ideological aims and were now fully focused on illegal sources of income.

Since 2022, security policy has been driven by the Paz Total strategy. The government is endeavouring to end the violence through bilateral ceasefires and negotiations with groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), dissident factions of the demobilised Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Clan del Golfo. The negotiations are being hampered by setbacks, such as broken ceasefires and acts of violence, however.⁶

Georgia

Escalation in violence against demonstrators in Tbilisi

New clashes occurred between demonstrators and security forces in Tbilisi last week in the ongoing pro-European protests involving tens of thousands of people. The police deployed water cannons and tear gas to disperse the largely peaceful protesters. In response, some demonstrators threw fireworks and stones in the direction of the police. People in uniforms were subsequently seen beating and kicking demonstrators. Hundreds of security forces equipped with shields and truncheons advanced towards Rustaveli Avenue, accompanied by heavy-duty vehicles. Large numbers of people were reportedly arrested and injured during the clashes, including opposition figures and journalists. The authorities had banned the use of pyrotechnics ahead of the demonstrations.

Videos showing scenes of extreme violence have appeared in social networks: Groups of masked men in black clothing can be seen attacking peacefully demonstrating people, hitting and kicking them severely. A reporter from the opposition television channel TV Pirveli is also said to have been beaten to the ground. Various media have reported that the police stood by and watched without intervening.

The pro-European president, Salome Zourabichvili, accused the authoritarian leadership in Moscow of being behind these mysterious attacks, adding that these masked men had also broken down the doors of opposition offices on a number of occasions and manhandled the politicians who they found on the premises. MP Mamuka Mdinardse of the governing Georgian Dream party has stated that the men in black were not acting on behalf of the Georgian government and that their aim was evidently to cause unrest and chaos.

The pro-European protests began in Tbilisi and other Georgian towns and cities on the evening of 28.11.24 and have been ongoing ever since. The protests are directed in particular against prime minister Irakli Kobachidse's announcement that EU accession negotiations for the country are to be postponed until 2028 (cf. BN of 02.12.24). Those attending the protests are now no longer just demonstrating primarily for accession to the EU and against police violence but also for the release of several hundred people who have been arrested.⁷

Ghana

Parliamentary and presidential elections: Victory for opposition party NDC

Ghana's announced parliamentary and presidential elections went off largely peacefully on 07.12.24. Initial projections and reports in the media indicate that the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) party won both the parliamentary and the presidential election. This means that Ghana's former president, John Dramani Mahama (in office from 2012 to 2016) managed to defeat his rival from the governing New Patriotic Party (NPP), Mahamudu Bawumia, who is the current vice-president. The Electoral Commission (EC) has yet to announce any official election results. According to the EC, the vote counting process is being held up due to interference by supporters of both parties. Fighting is reported to have occurred at a number of local counting centres. The EC has requested support from the police. At a press conference on 08.12.24, presidential candidate Bawumia conceded defeat, however, and reported that he had called Mahama to congratulate him. He said he had decided to concede defeat in order to avoid further tensions in the country.⁸

Iran

Additional prison term for convicted activist

A human rights organisation based in Norway reported on 05.12.24 that a women's rights activist who was sentenced to a number of years in prison in November 2024 has been handed down an additional two-year prison term (cf. BN of 02.12.24).

According to her lawyer, the latest sentence has been imposed for spreading falsehoods when she was temporarily released from custody for medical treatment. The new custodial sentence has been added to the previously imposed sentences. She has also been banned from online activity for two years.⁹

Prison term for prominent Kurdish human rights activist

A foreign medium reported on 05.12.24 that a well-known Kurdish civil rights activist was taken to the central prison in Urmia (West-Azerbaijan province) on 03.12.24 to serve a three-month prison term.

The woman was apparently first of all sent a police summons under a pretext in the city of Bukan. She was then arrested by judicial order and taken to the prison. As a prominent activist for the Kurdish minority in Iran, she has reportedly also been a victim of state repression in the past.¹⁰

Lebanon

Fragile ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel

The ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel has largely held to date, although both sides are accusing each other of breaches of the agreement. Isolated exchanges of fire and targeted air strikes still occur.¹¹

Nigeria

Lagos State: Stepping up the fight against gender-based violence

The Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency (DSVA) of Lagos State has mandated 16 traditional rulers to step up the fight against gender-based violence. In the longer term, the agency aims to involve further rulers in the region. According to reports in the media, this measure forms part of a 16-day international campaign to eradicate all forms of violence against women and girls which was launched on 25.11.24. Traditional rulers play a major role in shaping social norms and continue to wield considerable influence in large parts of the country (cf. BN of 05.02., 22.07. and 18.11.24).¹²

Lagos State: Progress in the treatment of people infected with HIV

According to reports in the media citing information provided by the Lagos State Aids Control Agency (LSACA) to mark World AIDS Day on 01.12.24, 120,000 people infected with HIV are receiving antiretroviral therapy in Lagos State. More than 1,200 children aged between one and nine are said to be among those infected. Over one million people are reported to have been reached by measures to establish an awareness of means of preventing infection and tests. The progress in treating HIV reflects the LSACA's efforts to achieve the targets defined in the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS): 95 % of all infected people are to be aware of their status, 95 % of these are to be in treatment and 95 % of these are to be undergoing antiretroviral therapy to suppress their HI viral load. Although the corresponding reporting suggests positive developments are being achieved in the health system with a degree of regularity, e.g. successful vaccination campaigns (cf. BN of 18.12.23, 24.06. and 22.07.24), the public health service is considered to be underfunded and subject to a highly restricted infrastructure in some areas. There is also a disparity between urban and rural areas with regard to the available levels of healthcare (cf. BN of 13.11.23).¹³

Palestinian territories / Israel

Gaza Strip: Current developments; humanitarian situation

According to information released by the Hamas-run health ministry on 03.12.24, at least 44,502 Palestinians have been killed and 105,454 injured in the Gaza Strip since the war began on 07.10.23. The ministry does not officially differentiate between combatants and civilians. According to information released by the Israeli military on 03.12.24, a total of 380 members of the Israeli military have been killed and 2,463 injured since the ground offensives began. Meanwhile, the war continues. Air strikes and hostilities occur on a daily basis.

On 06.12.24 Hamas released a video message from hostage Matan Zangauker which shows him to be alive.

As the prospects of a new hostage deal gather pace, it emerged on 07.12.24 that Hamas appears to be calling on other Palestinian armed groups in Gaza to report to them on any hostages whom they are holding.¹⁴

Syria

Assad government overthrown

After further governorate capitals had been captured largely without a fight (Hama on 05.12.24, Homs on 07.12.24), the capital, Damascus, finally fell under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on the morning of 08.12.24.

The offensive from the north-west (cf. BN 02.12.24) sparked spontaneous armed uprisings in other regions, thus taking in Suweida and Dar'a governorates as well. On 06.12.24 the Russian embassy in Damascus called on its citizens to leave the country and the Iranian military left the country via the border crossings into Iraq and Lebanon or by means of the air and sea route via Latakia.

According to reports in the media, the Syrian army left its posts in large numbers, leaving military equipment and stores behind. Thousands of soldiers are said to have deserted, replaced their uniforms with civilian clothing and mingled with the civilian population. According to the HTS militia, the country's governmental institutions are to remain for the time being under the supervision of the present prime minister, who is to oversee the transition period. It is not currently known whether HTS fighters have advanced into the governorate capitals on the Syrian coast - Latakia and Tartus -, where the vast majority of the country's Alawites live and which serve as a power base of former president Assad, who has reportedly fled to Moscow with Russian support. Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, leader of the Islamist HTS militia, staged a PR coup when he entered the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus on 08.12.24, where he held a speech celebrating victory over Assad's rule and "Iranian ambitions" in Syria.

The capture of the infamous Sednaya prison complex, where many men, women and children were freed, also drew much attention. The prison complex reportedly incorporates various underground levels, some of which are barricaded. Rescue forces had not yet been able to fully access all these levels on the morning of 09.12.24. An investigation by the UN in 2016 revealed that so many people had been tortured to death in the prisons that it used the term "annihilation" in its report.

After emerging from the protests against Assad's hegemony which began in 2011 against the backdrop of the so-called Arab Spring, the opposition never managed to formulate a joint vision of a new political order for the time after Assad, beyond calling for the overthrow of the government.¹⁵

Northern Syria: SNA and Turkish army attack SDF

According to various consistent reports, on 08.12.24 the Turkish army attacked positions of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Manjib in the north of Aleppo governorate with drones, following fighting on the previous day between the SDF and the Syrian National Army (SNA). The SDF has stated that at least 22 of its fighters were killed and 40 injured.

The UN has reported that as per 05.12.24 some 60,000 to 80,000 people had already fled sustained fighting between the SDF and the SNA.

While both the SDF and the SNA have welcomed the fall of the Assad government, they remain hostile towards one another over control of the northern territories (some of which have majority Kurdish populations). The US defence secretary and the Turkish minister of defence spoke to each other on the telephone after the hostilities, with the aim of de-escalating the situation.¹⁶

USA bombs IS positions; Israel secures Golan Heights

The USA announced on 08.12.24 that it had attacked dozens of IS positions in central Syria from the air. In all, 75 targets are said to have been hit. There have apparently been no reports of any civilian casualties. The attacks are said to have been timed so as to prevent the IS from exploiting the volatile political situation for its own ends.

According to a newspaper report, on 08.12.24 the Israeli military moved into Syrian territory beyond the annexed Golan Heights for the first time since the October War or Yom Kippur War of 1973. The mountain region in Syria's Quneitra governorate around the summit of Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in Syria, has reportedly been secured in order to establish a temporary "buffer zone" until an agreement on the vicinity is reached with the new rulers in Damascus.

In addition, the Israeli air force reportedly also bombed various Syrian military installations on 07.12. and 08.12.24. The country's remaining arsenal of chemical weapons is believed to have been stored there. In the course of the bombing, elements of Russian air defence systems and an arsenal of ballistic ground-to-ground missiles were also destroyed.¹⁷

Ukraine

Civilian casualties

According to official information, one person died in a Russian drone attack on Ternopil's energy supply infrastructure on the night of 02.12.24. According to information in the media, ten people died in the city of Zaporizhzhia and two in the city of Kryvyi Rih in Russian attacks on 06.12.24.¹⁸

Course of the war

According to consistent information from Ukrainian and Russian military blogs on 02.12.24, parts of the embattled eastern Ukrainian city of Kurakhove are already in Russian hands. The Russian army is less than 5 km away from Pokrovsk. An analysis of data from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) by the AFP news agency has revealed that the Russian armed forces captured around 725 km² of territory in November 2024. Almost 90 % of these territorial gains was located in the Donetsk region. This means that Ukraine now controls barely one third of the Donetsk region, compared to over 40 % at the beginning of 2024. According to information from president Zelenskyy, a total of 43,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed and 370,000 injured since 24.02.22. Half of those injured have returned to action.

According to the ISW's assessment, Russia's drone warfare strategy has changed. The Russian side is increasingly deploying 80 to 100 Iranian-designed Shahed drones at night. In turn, Ukraine has adapted its electronic defence strategy such that the majority of the drones are not shot down, but electronically jammed, forced to land or redirected. There has reportedly also been an increase in the number of Russian drones redirected to Belarus.¹⁹

Energy infrastructure

According to information from the authorities, Russian drone attacks on energy installations of the western Ukrainian cities of Rivne and Ternopil on the night of 02.12.24 resulted in a partial blackout in Ternopil. Drone attacks on the region had already inflicted considerable damage on Ternopil's power supply grid in the previous week.²⁰

Ukrainian civilians in Russian prisons; sentence passed by Russian court in Crimea

President Zelenskyy stated on 05.12.24 that among the thousands of Ukrainian civilians in Russian prisons there are at least six mayors and district council leaders. Official sources confirmed this week that Yevhen Matvieyev, the mayor of the city of Dniprorudne (Zaporizhzhia region), who was taken prisoner back in March 2022, had died in Russian captivity. Ukraine's human rights commissioner, Dmytro Lubinets, has spoken of more than 16,000 civilians being held in captivity. According to Lubinets, 3,767 Ukrainians, in particular prisoners of war, have returned from Russian captivity to date.

According to information released by the public prosecutor's office on 04.12.24, a Russian court on the Russian-occupied Crimean Peninsula has sentenced a man to 15 years in prison for treason. The man was convicted of spying for the Ukrainian secret service in a trial which took place in camera.²¹

Venezuela

Austerities continue for opposition figures in refuge at embassy

According to reports in the media, the Argentinian embassy in Caracas, which is currently being run by Brazil and in which six of opposition leader Machado's staff have been staying in diplomatic asylum since March 2024 (cf. BN of 08.04., 05.08. and 09.09.24), has most recently been surrounded by security forces amid threats that the building will be stormed. The embassy's power supply has been cut off for several weeks now, and in recent days deliveries of food to those in the embassy have been hindered. Argentina has repeatedly called on the Venezuelan government to guarantee free passage out of the country for those in refuge at the embassy and to end the siege.²²

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