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Group 22 - Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

2 March 2015

Afghanistan

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Security situation

Military operations were carried out last week in the provinces of Kunduz, Badakhshan (north-east), Sari Pul (north), Helmand (south) and Herat (west). A large number of insurgents and some troops and civilians were killed. On 24 February 2015, insurgents attacked a military convoy in Kapisa province in central Afghanistan. At least 16 persons were killed in the gunfire exchange that lasted eight hours. Three civilians were killed when a roadside bomb exploded in Khost province (south-east). Masked gunmen stopped a bus in Zabul province in southern Afghanistan on 24 February 2015 and abducted 30 men from the Hazara ethnic and religious minority. The gunmen were wearing Afghan army uniforms but did not speak the native language. The District Governor suspects that the gunmen were foreign supporters of the "Islamic State" (ISIS). On 25 February 2015, five members of the Afghan security forces were killed in bomb blasts in Khost (south-east) and Uruzgan (south). On 26 February 2015, two persons were killed in a suicide bombing carried out by the Taliban on a NATO convoy in the capital Kabul. On 27 February 2015, the Taliban carried out a suicide bombing on the convoy of an MP in Jalalabad (Nangarhar, province in eastern Afghanistan), killing three persons and wounding 13. On 28 February 2015, three women were killed in a bomb blast in Faryab province in northern Afghanistan. On 2 March 2015, two children were killed in a bomb blast in Jalalabad.

Iraq

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Security situation

According to Iraq Body Count (IBC), 1,472 civilians were killed in February 2015.

According to the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), 611 civilians were killed and 1,353 were wounded in February 2015. 492 Iraqi army troops, Peshmerga fighters and other allies (not including those killed in Anbar operations) and 927 other allies were wounded.

Baghdad was the hardest hit with 1,204 civilian casualties (329 of whom were killed and 875 of whom were wounded). In Diyala province, 73 persons were killed and 69 were wounded, in Salahaddin province 39 persons were killed and 54 were wounded and in Niniveh province 40 persons were killed and 17 were wounded.

According to information provided by UNAMI, there were 372 civilian casualties in Anbar province (81 of whom were killed, 291 of whom were wounded), with 23 fatalities and 196 civilian wounded in Ramadi and 58 civilian killed and 95 wounded in Fallujah. These are minimum statistics as the number of victims cannot be verified in the war-torn regions.

The US and its allies continue to fly airstrikes against ISIS strongholds.

Iraqi army launches offensive

The Iraqi army has launched an offensive against ISIS in order to regain control of the city of Tikrit (in Salahaddin province). 20,000 troops are reportedly taking part in the offensive. Tikrit is around 170 kilometres north of Baghdad along the road between Baghdad and Mosul (Niniveh province).

UN report

According to a UN report published on 23 February 2015, ISIS is systematically persecuting members of a number of ethnic and religious communities (Turkmen, Shabak, Christians, Yezidi, Kakai to name but a few). The acts of violence are apparently aimed at oppression, displacement and destruction.

There are no statistics available on the number of persons who have died as a result of the "secondary consequences" of the armed clashes, such as the lack of drinking water, food and medication, it said in the report. Furthermore, the Iraqi security forces and the groups affiliated with them are guilty of serious violations of humanitarian international law.

Kurds cut off the ISIS supply route

According to press reports, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters have managed to cut off the ISIS supply route between Mosul and Syria. They have also managed to recapture two border checkpoints north-west of Mosul.

ISIS preparing to defend Mosul

According to media reports, ISIS is gearing itself to defend Mosul (Ninive province). ISIS has begun fortifying its positions in and around the city of Mosul. There is evidence to suggest that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi is residing in Mosul.

Leading ISIS members killed

Leading members of ISIS were reportedly killed in airstrikes carried out by the international coalition near Al-Kaim (Anbar province along the border with Syria, around 350 kilometres west of Baghdad).

Arab refugees prevented from returning home

According to a report issued by Human Rights Watch, Kurdish security forces prevented thousands of Arab refugees from returning to their homes in parts of Niniveh and Erbil provinces. They are reportedly being detained in so-called security zones in northern Iraq which have been recaptured from ISIS since August 2014. Kurds have been permitted to return to these regions without any restrictions. In January 2015, some restrictions were reportedly loosened.

Turkey

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Wiretapping affair – raids and arrest warrants

On 25 February 2015, there was a new wave of dawn raids in over 20 cities against suspects accused of wiretapping senior officials. 54 suspects were temporarily detained, 37 of whom were still being held by the afternoon. The backdrop to these latest raids is the wiretapping against the then prime minister and current president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and several of his staff in late 2013, when allegedly bugged telephone conversations purporting to implicate Erdogan and his inner circle in corruption allegations were leaked and posted on the Internet. The government said the leaks were fabrications and took action against them. According to judiciary sources, at least 17 people who had previously been arrested in connection with the case are still being detained. Most of those detained are members of the Turkish security forces and some are from the media sector.

On 24 February 2015, an Istanbul court also issued another arrest warrant for Fethullah Gülen. According to media reports, the Public Prosecutor's Office accuses the Muslim preacher and the journalist and former police official Emre Uslu, who is also a critic of the government – both of whom are living in the USA – of establishing and leading an armed terrorist organisation. This increases the severity of the charges levelled against Gülen. Back in December 2014, an Istanbul court had issued an arrest warrant against him, accusing his Hizmet movement of being a criminal organisation.

Öcalan urges end to armed struggle

The imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan last week called on his supporters to take an "historic" decision to lay down arms, thereby creating new hope for an end to the Kurdish conflict. "We are in the process of ending this 30-year-old conflict in the form of a perpetual peace," he said in a message read out by a pro-Kurdish deputy on 28 February 2015. Öcalan called on the PKK "to hold a general extraordinary congress during the spring months to take the historic and strategic decision on disarmament". In return, he listed ten

measures that the government in Ankara needed to implement to ensure peace, including drafting a new constitution.

In a statement issued on 1 March 2015, the PKK rejected a call for it to lay down its arms, saying it had already implemented a ceasefire and that Turkey's government must first take steps to advance democracy.

Syria

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Islamic State (ISIS) abducts Assyrian Christians

According to local clerics, several hundred inhabitants of Christian villages in the region of Al-Hassaka (northern Syria) have been kidnapped by ISIS. On 26 February 2015 alone, at least 220 people, including women and children, were reportedly abducted. According to the latest report issued by the Assyrian Human Rights Network, 19 hostages were freed on 1 March 2015 after a ransom was paid for their release.

Ceasefire in Aleppo uncertain

On 1 March 2015, the UN confirmed arrangements with the Syrian government under which UN experts would be allowed to enter the embattled city of Aleppo to organise aid supplies for civilians. A prerequisite for the humanitarian aid is a ceasefire on both sides, which has not been officially confirmed. The Syrian government is willing to suspend airstrikes and artillery fire on Aleppo for six weeks. On 1 March 2015, the ceasefire plan was officially rejected by opposition leaders, who are demanding a more comprehensive solution and the president's resignation.

Humanitarian situation

The UN announced on 26 February 2015 that two million people throughout Syria are without water and electricity. Around 212,000 people who are prevented from leaving their residential districts are dependent on aid supplies.

Lebanon

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ISIS expansion?

According to the Lebanese newspaper The Daily Star, quoting information obtained from secret service sources, ISIS is planning on expanding its caliphate to Lebanon. This is consistent with reports that ISIS is starting to infiltrate towns in the north-east. In Aarsal, where tens of thousands of Syrian refugees are living, ISIS is reportedly setting up a parallel state as well as sharia courts. Back in early February 2015, The Daily Star had reported on plans by ISIS to capture Bekaa Valley and turn it into an Emirate. According to reports by UNHCR, approximately 413,000 Syrian refugees are residing there (as at 26 February 2015).

Egypt

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Suicide bombings

Several bombs exploded in Giza near Cairo on 26 February 2015, killing one person and wounding seven. The bombs detonated in front of a restaurant, two shops and a police station. Two persons were killed in Aswan on 1 March 2015 when a car bomb exploded close to a police station. Since President Mohamed Morsi was overthrown, there has been a sharp rise in the number of suicide bombings carried out, most of which are targeted against security forces.

Hamas classified as terrorist organisation

After a court classified the al Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, as a terrorist organisation in late January 2015, Hamas itself has now been declared a terrorist organisation following a further court decision at the weekend. Egypt's Urgent Matters Court based its ruling on Hamas in part on claims submitted by several petitioners that the organisation had supported jihadists who have staged attacks against security forces in the north of the Sinai Peninsula.

Leader of the Muslim Brotherhood convicted

The head of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Badie, along with 14 other leading members of the group, were sentenced to life in prison by a court in Cairo. The court also sentenced four other Islamists to the death penalty. Those sentenced are being held responsible for the death of protesters in late June 2013. The death sentences are subject to appeal. Mohammed Badie has already been sentenced to life, which carries a maximum of 25 years in prison in Egypt, in two other cases, and has also been handed down a death sentence.

25,000 Egyptians return from Libya

According to a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry in Cairo on 27 February 2015, around 21,400 Egyptians have crossed the border at Sallum into Egypt since the murder of Coptic Christians, most of whom were Egyptian nationals, by the Libyan branch of the ISIS terrorist militia. Another 4,100 Egyptians have been flown to Cairo via Djerba/Tunisia. Eastern Libya, in particular, is a popular destination for Egyptian labour migrants.

Libya

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UN Security Council calls for international coast guard

The UN Security Council's Panel of Experts on Libya called for the establishment of an international coast-guard on 26 February 2015. It said that the Libyan government was unable to halt the illicit trade in oil or the flow of weapons in and out of the country. Earlier in the month, the internationally recognised Libyan government had, in a special session, asked the UN Security Council to lift the arms embargo on Libya and to help build Libya's army to tackle Islamic State and other militants.

Somalia

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USA planning to fill ambassador's post in Mogadishu

President Obama has nominated a career diplomat, Katherine Simonds Dhanani, who has significant African experience, to fill the post of US Ambassador to Somalia, which has been vacant since 1991. The Senate needs to approve her nomination. A spokesperson for the State Department said the nomination was a sign of the deepening relationship between the United States and Somalia.

Attack on presidential palace

On 26 February 2015, a security guard was killed when mortar shells struck the parking area surrounding the presidential palace. The rebel movement Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Nigeria

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Suicide bombings and attacks by Boko Haram

A suicide bomber detonated his explosives at Tashar Gandu bus station on the outskirts of the town of Biu in north-eastern Nigeria's Borno state on 26 February 2015. A second suicide bomber was shot dead by security forces before he could detonate his explosives. At least 17 persons were killed.

On 26 February 2015, explosives were thrown at two crowds from a moving car on a large parking lot on Bauchi Road in Jos (capital of the central Nigerian Plateau state) and on the same road opposite the main entrance to the university. At least 12 persons were killed.

On 24 February 2015, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive device in Potiskum city (the economic metropolis of north-eastern Yobe state), having boarded a crowded minibus at Dan-Borno bus station. At least 15 persons, including the suicide bomber, were killed; other sources say 53 persons were killed and 53 were wounded.

On 24 February 2015, two young men blew themselves up in a crowded bus at a Kano Line bus station in Kofar Nsarava district in Kano (capital of Kano state in the north of Nigeria). According to police reports, ten persons were killed. However, according to a local representative of the drivers' trade union, 34 persons, including 21 passengers, were killed.

Boko Haram is being blamed for the attacks.

Democratic Republic of Congo

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Army offensive launched against the FDLR

On 24 February 2015, the Congolese army launched its first military operations ("Sukola 2") against the Rwandan Hutu rebel organisation FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda) in South Kivu province on the high plateau close to Uvira town (which is located around 10 km from the border with Burundi), using combat helicopters and heavy weaponry. Contrary to original plans, the offensive will not be supported by troops of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), which numbers around 3,000 men, nor will it receive logistics support from the UN peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). The reason for this is that MONUSCO refused to cooperate with two generals of the government army involved in the offensive because they are under suspicion of having been involved in violations of human rights. The FDLR, which is estimated to have around 1,400 militants, is currently the strongest rebel organisation in eastern Congo. The main contingent of the FDLR is deployed in North Kivu province.

Kenya

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Controversial Security Law watered down

Following a ruling handed down by Kenya's High Court on 23 February 2015, two clauses of the Security Laws (Amendment) Bill, which entered into force on 19 December 2014, are unlawful. On limiting the number of refugees in the country to 150,000 as per section 48 of the Act, the judges ruled that the provision should be deleted. In January 2015, around 650,000 refugees and asylum seekers were residing in Kenya, the majority of whom are from Somalia. A restriction on media reporting on terrorist attacks and the associated penalty of up to three years in prison was also eliminated. Other provisions, such as the possibility to detain terrorist suspects for up to 360 days, were upheld. On 2 January 2015, Kenya's High Court approved a motion filed by Kenya National Human Rights Commission (KNHRC) and the opposition Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD), suspending parts of the law until a review on their constitutionality is carried out.

According to police reports, 173 persons were killed in terrorist attacks in Kenya during 2014 and a total of 312 persons have been killed since 2012.

Central African Republic

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Movements of refugees

On 24 February 2015, UNHCR reported that an upsurge in violence had forced the displacement of almost 50,000 people since the start of the year. This includes an estimated 30,000 persons who have become internally displaced since January 2015. Since December 2013, more than 19,000 people have fled from Kouango district in Ouaka prefecture to Bosobolo territory in the north of Equateur (Democratic Republic of the Congo). Many were escaping violence associated with seasonal movements of livestock and clashes between herders and the local and agricultural populations with the predominantly Christian anti-Balaka militia. Some herders had reportedly turned to the mainly Muslim Seleka rebel group for protection.

Mali

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Peace agreement

On 1 March 2015, the Malian government signed an "agreement on peace and reconciliation" with rebel groups in Algiers. The agreement proposes more devolved powers for the north as well as the creation of a regional security force. It left open the question of Azawad's political identity to a national conference between Malian parties. The MNLA and MAA did not sign the document and demanded more time to consult their grassroots. There have been demonstrations against the agreement in Kidal.

Ukraine

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Situation in the East

The situation remains unclear. The ceasefire agreement has led to a decrease in the number of clashes, but fighting has not stopped completely. There have been inconsistent reports about the withdrawal of heavy weapons that was agreed as part of the ceasefire. The deputy head of the OSCE observer mission to Ukraine said he was cautiously optimistic about the ceasefire and the withdrawal of weapons from the war zone.

Russian Federation

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Well-known opposition politician assassinated in Moscow

Late on the evening of 27 February 2015, Boris Nemtsov, one of the most prominent opposition politicians and government critics, was murdered in Moscow. The mass rally which the opposition had originally planned to hold on 1 March 2015 to protest against President Vladimir Putin's Ukraine policy was cancelled as a result. Instead, a funeral march was held in memory of Nemtsov and it was reportedly joined by several thousand people. Boris Nemtsov was regarded as one of Putin's fiercest opponents and as a supporter of the Ukrainian leadership's pro-Western course. The Russian investigators view Nemtsov's severe criticism of Russia's policy on Ukraine as a possible motive for the crime.

Kazakhstan

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Former Kazakh ambassador to Austria found dead in prison cell

Rakhat Aliyev, a former Kazakh ambassador to Austria, was found hanging in his prison cell in Vienna on 24 February 2015. Aliyev had been married to a daughter of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and had held high offices in Kazakhstan until he fell out of favour with the President. In 2008, he was sentenced to 40 years in jail in absentia in his home country on charges including the murder of two bankers and extortion. Austria had turned down extradition requests on the grounds that he would not receive a fair trial in Kazakhstan.

China

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Protesters arrested at rally in Hong Kong

On 2 March 2015, Hong Kong police arrested around 36 protesters for offences including possession of offensive weapons, assault, disorder and fighting. Several hundred people had blocked the area's main street near the border with China and protested against entry permits and about so-called parallel traders, who buy goods in Hong Kong to sell at a profit across the border. Clashes broke out with the police during the demonstration.

Bangladesh

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Anti-Islam blogger hacked to death

On 27 February 2015, the blogger Avijit Roy, who was well known in Bangladesh, and his wife were attacked on a street in Dhaka by unknown perpetrators wielding machetes and knives. The blogger was killed and his wife was seriously injured. Roy had criticised religious fanaticism in his blog and had supported the rights of homosexuals. An obscure militant group, Ansar Bangla 7, claimed responsibility for the attack. It accused the blogger on the Internet of committing "crimes against Islam".