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Group 62 – Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

15 April 2019

Afghanistan

Taliban announce spring offensive

Amid peace negotiations with US-representatives, the Taliban have announced their annual spring offensive, named this time ‘Operation Fath’ (meaning ‘victory’ in Arabic). The announcement is largely symbolic, since the Taliban have not suspended their fight against the Afghan government in the last months.

International Committee of the Red Cross suspends activities in Afghanistan

For unknown reasons, the Taliban have withdrawn security guarantees for the ICRC. Following this move, the ICRC has suspended its activities in the country. Already in August 2018, the Taliban had temporarily withdrawn safety guarantees for the ICRC for approx. two months (see BN of 20 August 2018). Also affected is the World Health Organisation (WHO), which has been accused by the Taliban of ‘suspicious actions’ during a vaccination campaign.

Algeria

Unbroken protest

Neither President Bouteflika’s resignation from office nor the announcement of elections scheduled for 7 July 2019 were sufficient to prevent huge rallies on 12 April for the eighth Friday in a row. Thousands of people gathered, among them for the first time members of the influential judges’ club who announced that they would refuse to supervise the planned elections. The protesters are demanding that the whole economic and power elite around Bouteflika (‘le pouvoir’) steps down. In clashes with the protesters, 27 police officers were injured and 108 people were detained, official reports say.

Belarus

News agency Belsat searched by security authorities

On 9 April 2019, officers of the Belarussian investigative committee searched the office of Belsat news agency in Minsk and confiscated the agency’s computers. On 11 April, the computers were returned by officers of the investigative committee. The spokesperson for the committee said that the search was linked to an unspecified libel case. According to the head of the Belsat office, the search action served to restrict the journalistic work of the TV channel.

The Warsaw-based TV channel Belsat transmits programmes in the Belarussian language. Already in 2017, the Belarussian police had conducted raids in the TV station’s two offices in Minsk, seized the equipment and arrested journalists. They were later sentenced to fines for disorderly conduct.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Plans for Gay Pride parade prompts homophobic reactions

In September 2019, the first-ever gay pride parade is scheduled to be held in the country. Since the announcement, LGBTI persons are increasingly targeted by hate and harassment, with social media being flooded with homophobic insults. Some comments say that homosexuality is a disease, others glorify the Sultan of Brunei who has recently introduced the death penalty for homosexual acts. The BH police academy created a poll asking if the police should provide security at the parade or detain its participants. 57 percent of the total of 3,600 respondents voted for detention.

Discrimination because of sexual orientation and hate crimes are prohibited in BH. In reality, however, LGBTI persons are exposed to verbal and physical attacks time and again.

China

Hong Kong: ‘Umbrella’ protesters found guilty

On 9 April 2019, a Hong Kong court found nine pro-democratic activists of the so-called ‘umbrella movement’ of 2014 guilty of disrupting the public order and of other offences. Among the defendants were members of parliament, scientists and student leaders. They are facing sentences of up to seven years imprisonment. The verdict is due to be announced on 24 April 2019.

In the autumn of 2014, protesters had unsuccessfully blocked parts of the inner city for 79 days, protecting themselves against tear gas attacks of the security forces by using umbrellas (hence the name of the movement, which is also known as Occupy Central Movement).

Hong Kong, former British colony, was given back to China as a special administrative zone in 1997 under a ‘one country, two systems’ model of partially democratic governance. Human rights activists deplore the gradual undermining of this principle and the ongoing restriction of democratic freedoms by the People’s Republic.

Columbia

Congress votes in favour of Special Jurisdiction for Peace

On 8 April 2019, the Colombian congress voted 110-44 in favour of retaining the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (Jurisdicción Especial de la Paz – JEP). This special tribunal was created as part of a 2016 peace deal between the government under the then President Juan Manuel Santos and the rebel organisation Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). It deals with crimes committed during the 50 year-long conflict between the government and the rebels. In March 2019, Santos’ successor in office Iván Duque had vetoed parts of the peace agreement, provoking a parliamentary vote on the special court which had started its first trial already in 2018. The senate has not yet voted on the matter.

DR Congo

WHO: Ebola not a public health emergency of international concern

On 12 April 2019, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in Geneva that the Ebola outbreak in the DRC is presently not considered an international health emergency, since the disease has not yet spread to the neighbouring countries Uganda, Rwanda and South Sudan. As of 10 April 2019, a total of 1,206 infections have been registered (1,140 confirmed cases and 66 probable cases) and 764 deaths (698 confirmed and 66 suspected cases). The Ebola outbreak in DRC which began in August 2018 has so far been the second-deadliest in history, behind the West African one from 2013-14 that killed around 11,300 people.

India

BJP presents its election manifesto

Immediately prior to the parliamentary elections, the ruling Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya-Janata-Party (BJP) has presented its manifesto setting 75 targets for India. In case of a renewed election victory, several reforms are planned, among them reserving a third of seats in the national parliament and in state assemblies for women. Also, the introduction of a uniform civil code is promised, which shall be independent of religious affiliations. Another issue relates to the adoption of a new law on nationality, providing Indian citizenship to non-Muslim immigrants from neighbouring countries. Also featuring in the manifesto is the planned abolition of article 370 of the Constitution granting special status to the federal state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Iran

More than 250 executions

A recent report published by Amnesty International says that in 2018, a total of 253 executions were carried out in Iran. With regard to the number of death sentences, Iran is second only to China. Official reports from the judicial body say that 90 percent of all executions are carried out for drug-related crimes. Since the Islamic Revolution, however, numerous political and human rights activists have been executed. Amnesty International also reports that Iran is one of the few remaining countries to execute people for crimes committed when they were younger than 18 years.

Anti-hijab protester jailed

Vida Movahed was sentenced to one year in prison for indecent behaviour and inciting public unrest. She has become a symbol for the nationwide protest wave against the law requiring women to wear the traditional headscarf. She is eligible for a pardon to be issued by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

Iraq

Security situation

Reports on security-related incidents are continuing. For example, clashes between the Iraqi Federal Police and the paramilitary Hashd al-Shaabi militias occurred on 14 April 2019 when police prevented the militiamen from moving beyond their checkpoint as they had no tasks assigned to them in the area. The Hashd al-Shaabi militia was founded in 2014 to support the Iraqi forces in the fight against IS insurgents. However, its members are accused of exploiting their positions and of committing human rights violations.

Also on 14 April 2019, an Iraqi soldier was shot dead in Diyala province by unidentified gunmen.

On 12 April, four IS fighters were killed in Diyala province in clashes between Iraqi forces and IS members.

During a security operation in Anbar province, three IS militants were killed.

On 11 April, a large-scale security operation in the Hamrin Mountains claimed the lives of twelve IS insurgents.

On 10 April, a bomb attack killed a tribal leader and wounded two of his relatives in Shura (near Mosul). Two policemen were injured by a bomb near Hawija.

Trial proceedings for hundreds of suspected IS members

Judicial sources say that Iraq has started trial proceedings for hundreds suspected members of the Islamic State group. The competent specialised terrorism court has begun setting dates for the trial in batches.

Israel/Palestinian Autonomous Areas

21st Knesset elections

In the parliamentary elections held on 9 April 2019, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party was able to secure most votes, earning 36 of the total of 120 parliamentary seats. The second largest bloc is formed by centrist Kahol Lavan, party of the most promising challengers Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid, which secured 35 seats. Prime Minister Netanyahu announced to seek alliance with ultra-orthodox parties

and the settler movement which would secure parliamentary majority with 65 Knesset seats in total. The Labour Movement Avoda, formerly the dominant political power in Israel, gained only six seats. Voter turnout among the 20 percent Arab minority population was just around 50 percent, a historically low level. The main reason was apparently a massive boycott campaign since many Arabs are disillusioned not only with Israeli politics but also with their own Knesset members.

Libya

Reconciliation conference postponed

Due to renewed fighting, a reconciliation conference mediated by the United Nations and scheduled to be held on 14 April 2019 in the town of Ghadames was postponed for an indefinite period on short notice. The conference, due to be attended by all actors involved, had been prepared for more than 18 months. On 4 April 2019, general Khalifa Haftar had started a military offensive on Tripoli with the support of the parallel government in Benghazi which opposes the Tripoli administration. According to information provided by the WHO on 14 April 2019, at least 121 people have been killed and another 561 wounded so far. At least 8,000 people have been displaced from their homes.

Pakistan

Market bomb blast in Quetta

On 12 April 2019, a suicide bomber launched an attack on a market in Quetta, capital of Balochistan province, killing at least 20 people and injuring scores of others. A police spokesperson said that the attack targeted members of the Shia Muslim Hazara community and that the market, operated mainly by Hazara members, was permanently guarded by security forces. Among the dead were seven Hazara members and one security personnel. The IS militant group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Pakistan/India

Pakistan releases 100 Indian prisoners

On 8 April 2019, the Pakistani government released 100 Indian prisoners, most of them fisherman, from a prison in Karachi. Pakistan and India regularly detain each other's citizens for suspected border violation and entry into their own territorial waters. These defendants are often detained for months in prison. The Pakistani foreign minister has announced to set free a total of up to 360 Indian prisoners by the end of April. In return, Pakistan hopes that India will release around 350 Pakistani citizens presently held in prisons in India.

Russian Federation

2 suspected IS members killed in security operation

On 12 April 2019, two members of the Islamic State terrorist group were killed in a security operation in Tyumen city (Western Siberia), the Russian investigative committee said. In the operation, two explosive devices and more material for their production were seized. According to the committee, the two suspects had planned terrorist attacks in the region.

Environmentalists arrested

Following a demonstration in Arkhangelsk on 7 April 2019 against the construction of a landfill near the town of Shiyes, an organizer and several local activists were detained by the Russian security forces on 8 April. The protesters fear that improper storage of the waste might cause environmental damage and health risks to the local population. The region is one of many allocated for waste from Moscow.

Serbia

Ban of corporal punishment as a means of education

The latest amendment of the family law includes a complete prohibition of corporal punishment as an educational tool. Parents are offered non-violent education training in order to bring about a change of attitudes and practices. However, nobody will be punished for a pat on the behind.

Hitherto, 'humiliating acts and punishments offending the child's human dignity' have been prohibited according to article 69 of the family law; however, there was no explicit prohibition of corporal punishment.

Somalia

Attacks

On 8 April 2019, three civilians were killed in an explosion.

On 10 April, an assassination attempt targeting a Somali policeman in Mogadishu injured one civilian.

On 11 April, six individuals were injured in Bosaso (Puntland) in an assassination attempt of a police officer by al-Shabaab insurgents.

Also on 11 April, at least six people died when armed men opened fire at a bus carrying civilians near the Elash region (15 kilometres west of Mogadishu).

Fighting

On 9 April 2019, the US Africa Command (US AFRICOM) launched an air strike against al-Shabaab near Jilib in Lower Jubba region, apparently killing one al-Shabaab fighter. On 14 April, the deputy IS leader was reportedly killed by an air strike in the Bari region. After Amnesty International reported that AFRICOM airstrikes had caused a total of 14 civilian fatalities in 2017 and 2018 (see BN of 8 April 2019), AFRICOM temporarily halted its air attacks in Somalia.

On 6 April, al-Shabaab reportedly seized the village of Dag Adey in Lower Jubba region from the national security forces.

On 9 April, armed confrontations between rival clans occurred over a dispute about a control post in Wanlaweyn district (Lower Shabelle region). At least 7 individuals lost their lives in the incident.

137,000 displaced between January and March

On 11 April 2019, UNHCR reported that more than 137 000 people were displaced between January and March due to drought, ongoing conflicts and forced evictions. Somaliland and Puntland as well as the Mudug and Galgaduud regions have been hit hardest by the drought, with scores of people escaping to urban areas. According to the UN, there are currently around 2.6 million internally displaced people in Somalia.

Sudan

President al-Bashir ousted

After continuing protests (see BN of 8 April 2019), the military ousted and arrested the country's long-standing President Omar al-Bashir on 11 April 2019. The new military leadership of Lt Gen Abdel Fattah Burhan has announced to seek agreement with the opposition regarding an interim government. The union alliance Sudan Professionals Association (SPA), which organised the demonstrations, demands the complete transfer of power into civilian hands. Meanwhile, protests are continuing in the capital Khartoum. Since the beginning of the protests, dozens of people have been killed.

General Burhan has lifted the curfew imposed by his predecessor Ibn Auf, and he has announced to release all political prisoners arrested in connection with the last months' protests.

In 1989, Omar al-Bashir had seized power in a coup backed by Islamists. He has been subjected to an international arrest warrant over allegations of genocide for years. However, the new rulers refuse to hand him over to the International Criminal Court.

Syria

Syria's state news agency SANA reports an attack against a military base in Masyaf (Hama province) by Israeli fighter jets on 13 April 2019. Apparently, the strike targeted a military school and a training camp. Other sources say that soldiers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and other Iran-backed fighters are stationed in the Syrian army base.

Turkey

Ban on elected HDP mayors

A week after the local elections of 31 March 2019, several elected mayors of the pro-Kurdish HDP party were deprived of their victory by the electoral commission on the grounds that they had been dismissed from civil service and were therefore barred from holding public office. According to the high electoral commission, the candidates who came second were to serve in the post instead. All these candidates are members of the governing AKP party. According to the HDP party, the towns of Edremit, Tuşba and Çaldıran on Lake Van are affected by this move, as well as the towns of Tekman in Erzurum province and Dağpınar in Kars province are affected. Media reports say that also the community of Bağlar is affected.

Venezuela

Expansion of armed militia

On 13 April (commemoration day of the founding of the National Bolivarian Militia), President Nicolas Maduro announced to expand the civilian militia from presently 2 to 3 million members by the end of the year. The militia, which is armed with rifles and reports directly to the President, is designed to supplement the armed forces. President Maduro has called on the militiamen to engage in agriculture and to support the food production in the crisis-stricken country.

Hyperinflation

The International Monetary Fund expects Venezuela's inflation rate to reach approx. 10,000,000 percent this year. Economic development is estimated at -25 percent, following a decrease of 18 percent already last year.

Protests

Anti-government rallies are going on in the whole country, e.g. on 6 and 10 April 2019. The protests remained largely peaceful.

Spectacular drop in oil output recorded in March

OPEC reports that Venezuela's oil production decreased from 1.1 million barrels per day in February to 732,000 barrels per day in March. Thus the trend seen in the last years has considerably accelerated; in 2017, the average production per day had been around 1.9 million barrels. The oil producing industry is the country's most important source of revenues. The availability of foreign currency is considerably limited by the decline in oil production.

Humanitarian aid

On 10 April 2019, President Nicolás Maduro announced his agreement to the distribution of humanitarian aid by the Red Cross.

Power blackouts

Long power blackouts continue to occur practically everywhere in Venezuela. For example, in the night from 9 to 10 April, the capital Caracas and 20 of the 23 federal states were without power supply.

Western Balkan Countries

Increased labour migration to Germany

The German Federal Statistical Office reports a notable increase in labour migration by citizens from the Western Balkan Countries. At the end of 2018 Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and northern Macedonia made up just under 25 percent of all foreigners holding a residence title for the purpose of gainful employment. At the end of 2015, the share had been at only approx. 9 percent. The increase is attributed in part to the classification of these countries as safe countries of origin in 2014 and 2015, which impeded access to humanitarian permits for their citizens, while their access to the German labour market was facilitated in 2016. Therefore, the number of people holding a humanitarian title has increased only slightly (+7,000) since the end of 2015, while the number of people with a residence title for the purpose of gainful employment has increased from 13,000 to 66,000 (+53,000). In turn, this massive migration contributes to weakening the societies of the Western Balkan region.

Yemen

Attacks and combat operations

On 10 April 2019, two Saudi Arabian airstrikes hit strategic bases of the Houthi rebels in the capital Sanaa.

On 7 April, a suspected US drone strike hit a vehicle with fighters of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Shibam, Hadramawt governorate.

On 8 April 2019, fights were reported between government forces and Houthi rebels in the southern part of al-Dhali governorate.

Mass displacement in Hajjah governorate

Recent fighting in Abs district (Hajjah governorate) has forced 18,000 people to leave their homes and flee to the city of Abs and surrounding areas, the organisation Doctors Without Borders reports. At present, there are more than 50,000 internally displaced people in Abs and its surroundings. On 12 April 2019, Saudi Arabia attacked Houthi rebels in Abs. Since the end of March, the Yemeni government has stepped up its campaign to take over control of the area.

Yemeni parliament convenes for the first time since war started

On 13 April 2019, members of parliament loyal to President Hadi convened for the first time since the civil war broke out. The session was held in the city of Sayoun which is under control of the government forces. The Yemeni parliament is split between government supporters, Houthi supporters and so-called 'independent parliamentarians'. According to government sources, roughly half of the lawmakers were present last Saturday, meaning that the quorum was achieved and decisions could have been taken. Apparently, the local authorities in Aden, who are allied to the UEA, had refused to allow the parliament to convene there. On the same day, also the Houthi rebels held parliamentary elections to fill the remaining seats.