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Group 22 – Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

9 November 2015

Afghanistan

Security situation

Attacks and combat operations are continuing. Again and again, individual districts are run over by Taliban insurgents, with the Afghan security forces often succeeding in pushing them back.

Military clashes

In southeastern Paktia province, fighting has been going on between Taliban members and security forces for several days now. The worst hit area is Dand-i-Patan district. On 2 November 2015, Afghan forces retook Atghar district (southern Zabul province), which had been under Taliban control for the last six months. In southeastern Ghazni province, the Taliban insurgents are still active. Locals say they do not dare to travel to the provincial capital for fear of attacks. A similar situation occurs in the northeastern city of Kunduz, where people are worried about the presence of the Taliban and about fighting in the surrounding area. For instance, in Imam Sahib district, three policemen were killed in fights on 3 November, and on 5 November, a new attack on Kunduz City could be fended off. Between 5 and 7 November, more than 30 IS fighters were killed in Achin district (Nangarhar province). Security forces plan to establish more checkpoints there. Reports from southeastern Paktika province say that on 5 November 2015, the Taliban besieged Waza Khwa district and that the district capital was in danger of falling to them. On 6 November, two civilians were killed in an operation by Afghan special units in southeastern Khost. Also on 6 November, the Afghan military started a major offensive against the Taliban in southern Helmand province (Marjah and Nad Ali districts). In northern Takhar province, the Taliban could be driven out of Ghwaja Ghar district on 7 November. The districts Khak-i-Afghan and Arghandab of southern Zabul province have been bitterly fought over by Taliban and IS fighters since 7 November. In northeastern Badakhshan, the Taliban blocked the water supply for small farms and cut off electricity on 8 November 2015.

Targeted attacks

On 7 November 2015, an attack failed on the German consulate general in Mazar-e Sharif (northern Balkh province). On 8 November, a vehicle of the Norwegian Refugee Council was attacked in Jalalabad (capital of eastern Nangarhar province). In southeastern Paktika, five tribal leaders have been killed by the Taliban in the last months. In Zabul, three men and three women were abducted and decapitated on 8 November. Apparently, the victims were Shiite Hazara and the perpetrators IS supporters.

Woman stoned to death

At the end of October/beginning of November 2015, a young woman was stoned to death and her partner lashed for sexual activities outside of marriage. The woman had been promised for marriage to an elderly man and had escaped with another man. A member of the high spiritual council and advisor of Afghanistan's President said that stoning of adulterous women was necessary and demanded under Sharia law. The only issue left to be examined was whether due process had been ensured, he said. The female governor of Ghor province condemned the stoning; in Kabul, some dozen activists took to the streets in protest.

Split-up of Taliban

Apparently, a dissent Taliban group has announced its own leader, Mullah Mohammad Rasool, who is a veteran Taliban opposed to the official Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansoor.

Iraq

Army halts offensive to retake Ramadi

As was reported on 5 November 2015, heavy rainfalls have halted the offensive of the Iraqi military to retake the city of Ramadi (Anbar province) from the IS insurgents. Apparently, the army is now focussing on strengthening their defence positions.

Severe weather damage in camps for displaced people

On 29 October 2015, heavy flash floods devastated large parts of the country, particularly in settlements of displaced people located in Tuz Khurmato (eastern part of Salahaddin province), near Fallujah (Anbar province) as well as in and around Baghdad.

The Iraqi health ministry says that at least 58 people have lost their lives in various parts of the country, most of them by electrocution in rain-related incidents.

Vaccination campaign

The Iraqi health ministry has announced the beginning of a massive vaccination campaign to combat the recent outbreak of cholera. The World Health Organization has provided 510,000 doses of oral cholera vaccine to be administered to an estimated 250,000 displaced people in Iraq.

Iraq/Syria

USA: more air raids on IS

On 6 November 2015, the U.S. announced to increase their airstrikes against IS militants in Syria and Iraq. However, support is waning among the Sunni Muslim supporters, in particular Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, since their air forces are contributing to the fight against the Shiite Houthi militia in Yemen.

Syria

Russia: airstrikes and fighting

On 3 November 2015, at least 42 people were killed in the city of ar-Raqqah, among them 15 IS militants, in attacks of the Russian air force. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported on 6 November that after fierce fights, rebels including fighters from the Ahrar al-Sham movement, have recaptured the village of Atshan (which had been taken by the Syrian army and allied militiamen on 10 October) and two other villages north of the city of Hama. On 7 November, the Observatory stated that the Syrian army, supported by Russian aircraft, had retaken Tel Skak and Atshan in Hama province; on 8 November, the Syrian army advanced to Hama City. Rebel fighters, among them members of Ahrar al-Sham, succeeded in driving IS extremists out of the village of Tal Soussin (Aleppo province). Also Tal Krah (in the northern part of Aleppo province) saw fierce fights between rebels and IS insurgents.

IS releases 37 abducted Christians

On 7 November 2015, the IS group released 37 of the 250 Syrian Christians who had been captured by the terror group in February and held hostage since. Recently, small groups of the hostages were already set free. Apparently, a total of 168 people are still in the hands of the IS militants. In the beginning of October, a video had appeared showing the execution of three Christians in Khabur Valley and threats of more killings if the ransom the IS insurgents demanded were not paid.

Lebanon

Bomb attack in Aرسال

On 5 November 2015, police reported a bomb attack in the town of Aرسال bordering Syria, which killed at least five people (other sources cite six and seven casualties) and injured dozens more. The attack was targeted at a meeting of Muslim scholars, most of whom were from Syria.

Pakistan

EU readmission agreement suspended

On 7 November 2015, Pakistan temporarily suspended the EU refugee readmission agreement, as was reported in the press. The only exception was the United Kingdom, the reports say. Pakistan's interior minister accused the EU of misusing the agreement, saying that Pakistani citizens were often deported on charges of terrorism without proper verification.

Bangladesh

Another atheist blogger murdered

During the weekend, another secular blogger was slain in Dhaka, raising the death toll to five this year.

Turkey

Operations against PKK, IS and Hizmet

Since 2 November 2015, the Turkish military has launched a new series of airstrikes against PKK positions both in the southern Turkish city of Hakkari and in northern Iraq, killing at least 16 PKK combatants until 4 November. According to media reports, security forces also launched an operation against the YDG-H, the PKK's youth group, in southeastern Diyarbakir and Hakkari provinces on 3 November. Three people were reported to have been killed in the fighting. A curfew was imposed on parts of Diyarbakir's Silvan district. In Gaziantep, nine suspected IS members were arrested for having planned an attack. In an operation covering 18 provinces, raids were carried out against the Hizmet movement of cleric Fethullah Gülen. In Izmir province, police detained more than 40 alleged supporters of Gülen. Turkey has put the Hizmet movement on its list of terror organisations.

PKK ends unilateral ceasefire

After the election victory of the Islamic-conservative AKP party, the PKK has resumed operations against the government. The unilateral halt to hostilities has come to an end because of the AKP's war policy and the latest attacks, a press statement said. On 10 October 2015, the PKK had declared to suspend its military activities until the elections of 1 November 2015.

Israel

Also last week saw clashes between Palestinians and Israelis. The Israeli foreign ministry said that since the beginning of October, ten Israeli citizens have been killed in attacks carried out by Palestinians. The Palestinian health ministry stated that in the same time period, a total of 80 Palestinians have lost their lives in clashes with the Israeli army and police.

Iran

US citizen and two journalists arrested

In October, Siamak Namazi, a businessman with dual U.S. and Iranian citizenship, was arrested when he visited Tehran.

On 2 November 2015, Ilna news agency reported the arrest of Issa Saharchis and Ehsan Mazandari, two pro-reform journalists.

Issa Saharchis has repeatedly been critical in recent months of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other high-rank government officials in interviews with foreign media. Ehsan Mazandari had been previously arrested in 2009 during the protests against the re-election of President Ahmadinejad. He runs the reformist newspaper Farhikhtegan.

Yemen

Bomb explosion kills 16 soldiers

On 8 November 2015, a roadside bomb killed at least 16 soldiers of a pro-government militia in Mareb province. So far, no-one has claimed responsibility for the attack. In recent months, the province of Mareb has been the scene of repeated clashes between Houthi rebels and government forces.

Somalia

Severe flooding

Severe flooding has hit the central and southern regions of Somalia. According to UN figures, about 90,000 people have been affected, nearly 42,000 had to leave their homes. While rains and river levels have now eased, thousands of people in the low lying areas remain at risk, the UN said.

Nigeria

Unrest after annulment of Taraba State governorship elections

On 7 November 2015, an electoral court in Abuja declared Aisha Alhassan, the candidate of the governing APC party, to be the winner of the governorship elections held on 11 April 2015 in central Taraba State. At the same time, the election of Darius Ishaku (PDP) as governor was nullified due to errors in the nomination process. This led to violent clashes between Alhassan's followers (Muslims) and Ishaku's supporters (Christians) in the city of Wukari on 8 and 9 November. According to police, the fighting killed 7 people and injured 15 more. Representatives of Christians and Muslims reported a total of 13 dead and 39 injured.

Burundi

New violence after presidential ultimatum

On 2 November 2015, President Pierre Nkurunziza urged all armed fighters to hand over their firearms until 7 November, otherwise they would be treated as public enemies. After expiry of this time limit, houses would be searched by security forces, he said. On 8 November, police started the search operation in Mutakura district of the capital Bujumbura, considered a stronghold of the opposition.

Since April 2015, armed clashes between security forces and unspecified groups have continued to occur. About 200,000 people have fled to neighbouring countries. So far, around 200 people have died, including 24 fatalities in the time period between 31 October and 8 November 2015. On 6 November, Willy Nzitonda, the son of well-known human rights activist Pierre Claver Mbonimpa, was found dead; only a few hours earlier, he had been arrested by police.

On 5 November, the International Crisis Group warned of the country heading for civil war. On 9 November, the UN Security Council meets to discuss the situation.

Ukraine

Ministerial meeting on the situation in Ukraine

On 6 November 2015, the foreign ministers of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine met in Berlin to monitor the implementation of the Minsk agreement (Minsk II) reached in February 2015, and to find a solution to the conflict in Ukraine. They agreed on a heavy weapons withdrawal from the front line by the beginning of December and on mine clearance operations. Both the Ukrainian army and the separatists have recently announced to withdraw their light weapons (mortars of less than 100mm calibre). As from 10 November 2015, OSCE will monitor the withdrawal.

Western Balkans countries

Serbia builds more shelters for refugees

Serbia intends to raise its actual accommodation capacity from 3,000 to 6,000 for the temporary admission of refugees. A representative of the UNHCR confirmed that the country is to receive about a quarter of all additional financial means to cope with the crisis in the Balkans in the winter months. (On 24 October 2015, the participants to the Western Balkans conference had agreed to set up 50,000 reception places along the Balkan route, see BN of 26 October 2015).

Since the beginning of the year, approx. 250,000 migrants have arrived in Serbia. 600 of them requested asylum and 26 underwent the procedure. 15-20 people have been granted asylum.

The influx of refugees via the so-called Balkan route does not stop. After the end of a four-day ferry strike in Greece, more than 10,000 people reached the Greek-Macedonian border on the weekend of 7 November 2015. According to UNHCR estimates, approx. 5,000 refugees will arrive daily in Serbia during the winter months.