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Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

25 February 2019

Egypt

Executions

Nine persons who had been convicted of participating in a bombing that killed the prosecutor, Hisham Barakat, in 2015 were executed on 20 February 2019. Amnesty International had called for the executions to be halted. No group had claimed responsibility for the assassination of Hisham Barakat in 2015 but the Muslim Brotherhood is being blamed for it.

Afghanistan

Suicide bombings and attacks

Hostilities and attacks have been reported in the following provinces: Nangarhar, Laghman (eastern Afghanistan), Ghazni, Paktika (south-eastern Afghanistan) Kandahar, Uruzgan, Helmand, Zabul (southern Afghanistan), Jawzjan, Samangan, Faryab (northern Afghanistan), Kapisa (central Afghanistan).

Welthungerhilfe: humanitarian situation deteriorates

According to the organisation's world hunger index, Afghanistan currently ranks 111th out of 119 countries. Around 10 million out of the population of around 35 million are currently in urgent need of humanitarian aid. The index claims that 40 percent of children under the age of five are suffering from malnutrition. The relief organisation's possibilities of taking action are greatly limited by the security situation. The UN also claims almost two-thirds of the population are affected by food shortages.

Iran frees Afghan prisoners and sends them home to Afghanistan

On 20 February 2019, Iran sent 620 prisoners home to Afghanistan as part of a prisoner swap agreement signed between the two neighbours a year ago according to which Afghanistan will take back Afghan detainees from Iran and will examine their cases based on Afghan law. Iran has so far transferred 1,280 Afghan convicts to Afghanistan. According to reports, around 5,000 Afghan prisoners are currently being held in Iranian prisons with some on death row after being found guilty of drug smuggling.

UNAMA report on civilian casualties

On 24 February 2019, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) published its 2018 Annual Report on civilian casualties of the conflict. Last year, UNAMA documented 10,993 civilian casualties (3,804 of whom were killed and 7,189 of whom were wounded). In total, the number of casualties rose by five percent compared to the previous year. The government opponents (Taliban, ISIS) are responsible for 63 percent of the victims. Suicide attacks and attacks with booby traps were the main cause, accounting for 42 percent. The province of Kabul had the highest number of casualties (1,866), followed by Nangarhar (1,815) and Helmand (880). The highest percentage increase over the previous year was recorded in the province of Wardak, where 224 civilian casualties represent an increase of 170 percent.

Albania

Opposition members quit Parliament

On 21 February 2019, all 33 deputies of the Democratic Party (PD) under Lulzim Basha, accompanied by thousands of protestors, gave up their parliamentary mandates. The opposition wants to build up pressure with this step. It accuses the government of corruption and links with organised crime and is calling for new elections (cf. Briefing Notes of 18 February 2019).

As a result, the country is facing a domestic political blockade. The USA and the EU criticise decisions that are undermining democracy and the EU integration process. Albania has been a candidate for EU membership since 2014 and hopes to open accession talks soon. It remains to be seen whether the EU Member States will agree to initiate talks in June.

Algeria

Protests continue against fifth term for President Bouteflika

Demonstrations were held in 15 provinces of Algeria on 22 and 24 February 2019 against the renewed candidacy of the ailing, 81-year-old President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for the presidential election scheduled for 18 April 2019 (cf. Briefing Notes of 18 February 2019). The protests went off peacefully. Only in Algiers, where more than 10,000 people took to the streets on Friday, did the police use tear gas and water cannons after the protestors approached the presidential palace. A total of 41 people are said to have been temporarily arrested; however, they were released after a few hours.

China

Xinjiang: prisoners transferred

As Radio Free Asia reported on 21 February 2019, citing local sources, an unknown number of detainees were transferred from re-education camps in Xinjiang to prisons in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Sichuan Province.

India/Pakistan

Relationship with neighbouring countries remains tense

The situation between Pakistan and India remains tense after the attack on Indian security forces in the Indian part of Kashmir (cf. Briefing Notes of 18 February 2019). At least 150 separatists were arrested in the state of Jammu and Kashmir after the attack. Among those arrested were leading members of the Jamaat-e-Islami and Jammu-Kashmir Liberation Front organisations. Kashmiris have been targeted in several parts of India. According to media reports, a Pakistani inmate sentenced to life imprisonment was stoned to death by fellow prisoners in Jaipur prison in the north-western state of Rajasthan on 20 February 2019.

The tense relationship between the two neighbouring countries was further strained by the legal dispute about an alleged Indian spy that was brought before the International Court of Justice in The Hague. India had sued Pakistan before the United Nations Supreme Court after former naval officer Kulbhushan Jadhav had been sentenced to death for espionage and terrorism by a military tribunal in Pakistan in April 2017. He was reportedly denied consular assistance which breached the Vienna Convention. India is demanding his immediate release.

Iraq

Security situation

Attacks by insurgents continue unabated. Iraqi security forces are also carrying out raids against ISIS fighters. On 19 February 2019, two security officers were killed in an attack carried out by ISIS fighters on a security checkpoint in the al-Qayyarah district of Niniveh province. Also on 19 February 2019, Brigadier

General Yaha Rasool, spokesperson for the Joint Operations Command Brigade, announced that the Iraqi security forces had increased their presence along the Iraqi-Syrian border. On 20 February 2019, unknown gunmen shot a security officer of the Popular Mobilisation Unit (PMU) in the south of Kirkuk. Two border policemen were killed and another border policeman was injured in a bomb explosion at the border crossing to Saudi Arabia on 20 February 2019. Also on 20 February 2019, the Diyala Operations Command announced the killing of six ISIS fighters and the destruction of several caves occupied by ISIS fighters northeast of Baquba. On 22 February 2019, two ISIS fighters were killed in an airstrike carried out in the Makhoul Mountains. Also on 22 February 2019, Iraqi security forces in Kirkuk killed a member of ISIS. On 23 February 2019, the bodies of five fishermen were found near Lake Tharthar north of Falluja, Anbar Province. The bodies showed signs of gunshot wounds. Iraqi security forces assume they were attacked by ISIS fighters.

Mass grave discovered

On 21 February 2019, Iraqi security forces discovered a mass grave containing 26 bodies showing signs of gunshot wounds and traces of torture in the town of Bazwaya, east of Mosul. The victims belonged to the Shabak minority.

Teachers protest

On 17 February 2019, teachers across the country went on strike to demonstrate for reform of the education system. Among other things, they demanded the construction of new schools and pay increases.

Iran

Converts arrested

In the Northern Iranian city of Rasht, six people have been arrested in the past four weeks for converting from Islam to Christianity. This was reported by the website of the human rights organisation “International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran” (ICHRI) on 20 February 2019, according to which four people were arrested at a meeting in a house church and two others in their apartment in Rasht. According to the latest surveys, there are about 66,700 Protestant Christians in Iran. They also include Muslims converts.

Increase in the number of single mothers

In Iran, around 3.5 million single mothers were counted in 2018, who have to earn their own living. This was announced by the Council of the Iranian Ministry of Labour which is responsible for supporting women in the labour market. Most of the women affected earn little and urgently need support because of their difficult financial situation, the Council said. Seven committees are to be set up to look after the women affected.

Domestic violence against women

According to studies, 20 percent of Iranian women have experienced physical abuse and 50-60 percent verbal or psychological abuse by their spouse. For years Iranian women’s rights activists have been calling on the legislator not only to ensure equal rights to divorce but also to protect women from domestic violence. Violence in marriage is not a criminal offence enshrined in Iran’s Criminal Code. If a woman is beaten by her husband, she can only take action against him in accordance with Article 619 of Iran’s Criminal Code. It regulates the punishment for harassment of women or children in public. Women’s rights activists also criticise the fact that women affected by domestic abuse are often asked if they have witnesses who can confirm the abuse.

Yemen

Civilians killed and wounded

On 19 February 2019, according to UN sources, eight civilians were killed and ten were injured when an artillery shell landed on Al Azeeb market in Hodeidah.

On 20 February 2019, at least one woman was killed and three children were wounded in an attack on a house in the Kushar district (Hajjah governorate).

Cameroon

Anglophone crisis: 170 kidnapped pupils released

On 16 February 2019, shortly after six o'clock in the morning, unknown armed men, presumably separatists, entered the campus of the church Saint Augustine's College in Kumbo (capital of the district of Bui, northwest region) and kidnapped 170 students, two guards, a teacher and three of his children. After negotiations with the kidnappers, all the hostages were released on the afternoon of 17 February 2019. The school was closed as requested by the kidnappers. Until then it was the only school still open in the district.

Kenya

Ruling on decriminalisation of homosexuality postponed

On 22 February 2019, Kenya's High Court postponed a decision announced for that day on the decriminalisation of homosexual acts until May 2019. The court said it needed more time to examine the facts, a spokesperson said. An "unnatural" sexual relationship" can be punished with up to 14 years imprisonment under the British Colonial Penal Code. NGOs campaigning for the rights of lesbians and gays had complained that the provisions were unconstitutional.

Violence and discrimination against LGBTI people has occurred, as well as assaults by police officers.

Libya

Airstrikes on Murzuq

As part of the LNA campaign led by Khalifa Haftar to gain control of the Fezzan, airstrikes repeatedly struck the city of Murzuq in February. During airstrikes and fighting the erupted on 10 February 2019, a hospital in Murzuq confirmed that 23 persons had been killed.

Mali

Renewed attacks in Mali

On 24 February 2019, suspected Islamists attacked Camp Gecko, an EU training camp with missiles, pistols and cars loaded with explosives near the town of Koulikoro. Two Malian troops were killed, three other military personnel and one civilian were injured, according to the Ministry of Security in Bamako. On 23 February 2019, three bluehelmet soldiers from Guinea were killed and another was injured. The troops belonged to the UN mission MINUSMA and were attacked about 50 kilometres from Bamako, according to Guinea's Defence Minister Mohammed Diane. The identity of the perpetrators remains unknown.

Morocco

Teachers protest

Moroccan security forces used water cannons and batons against teachers taking part in protests in Rabat on 20 February 2019. Several people were injured. The teachers demonstrated for permanent contracts. Since 2016, the number of temporary teachers is said to have risen sharply. Temporary teachers are not covered by health and pension insurance and are not paid by the state, but by the schools themselves.

Arrests after same-sex wedding ceremony

Two gay men aged 24 and 26 wanted to hold a same-sex wedding ceremony in a tourist complex in Saada, a suburb of Marrakesh. Homosexuality is prohibited in Morocco and is punishable by imprisonment and fines.

The local security forces interrupted the event. The wedding party initially managed to escape, but eight of its participants were arrested by the police while attempting to flee.

Moldova

Stalemate after parliamentary elections

No party won an absolute majority in the parliamentary elections held on 24 February 2019. Pro-Russian and pro-Western forces are almost equal. According to initial results, the Pro-Russian Socialists (PSRM) of President Igor Dodon led by around 31 percent, followed by the pro-European ACUM (Now) alliance, which has not yet been represented in parliament, with almost 26 percent. The current formally pro-European Democrats (PDM) led by Vlad Plahotniuc are in third place with 24 percent. Voter turnout was only 49 percent. Since various parties have excluded certain coalitions, it will be difficult to form a government. If a government is not formed within 45 days, new elections must take place.

Moldova with its population of 3.5 million is one of the poorest countries in Europe. Many citizens work as migrants in the EU and Russia. Moldovans protested against brain drain in their country by taking part in a silent march on 23 February 2019.

Nigeria

Nigeria goes to the polls

Presidential and parliamentary elections took place on 23 February 2019 that had been postponed by a week for logistics reasons (cf. Briefing Notes of 18 February 2019). In a small number of places, polling stations were also open on 24 February 2019 due to incidents of violence, late arrival of voting materials and problems with electronic voting machines. According to an association of over 70 civil society groups, 39 people were killed in violence related to the election. Major riots took place at the last two elections in 2015 and 2011, especially after the elections. Approximately 73 million voters were able to decide among 73 candidates for the office of head of state in the presidential election. It is assumed that it will be a close tie between former President Muhammadu Buhari (76) of the ruling APC party and former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar (72) of the largest opposition party, the PDP. First trend results are not expected to be announced before 26 February 2019 at the earliest.

ISWA attack on Maiduguri?

On the morning of 23 February 2019, shortly before polling stations opened, Maiduguri (capital of the state of Borno) was shaken by several explosions and gunfire. According to security reports, Boko Haram insurgents attacked the city with grenades. However, the attackers were pushed back by soldiers. According to official army reports, the noise heard was caused by military exercises. On 23 February 2019, the ISWA group (Islamic State in West Africa), split off from the terrorist organisation Boko Haram, declared that it had attacked the airport, an army base and a government building in Maiduguri.

Boko Haram kill 18 firewood merchants

On 18 February 2019, suspected insurgents belonging to the terrorist organisation Boko Haram attacked a group of firewood and charcoal merchants near Koshebe (Jere Local Government Area, Borno State) who were in the bush. At least 18 of them were killed.

Russian Federation

Accusations of torture

In a statement published by Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia on 19 February 2019, at least seven persons were reportedly tortured by officials of the Russian investigative committee during police interrogations. The interrogations are related to house searches carried out by the local police against members of Jehovah's Witnesses in the north-western Siberian city of Surgut on 15 February 2019. In the process, 19 members of

the local community were charged with running an extremist organisation, and three people are still in detention. After initially denying the allegations of torture, an official of the Russian investigating committee declared that they would investigate the matter.

Memorial events for Boris Nemtsov

On 24 February 2019, thousands of people took part in memorial events in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other Russian cities to commemorate the Kremlin critic Boris Nemtsov, who was murdered four years ago. A representative of the political opposition, Ilya Yashin, declared that the march was an opportunity both to honour Nemtsov and to protest for democratic reforms. According to the media, the commemoration ceremonies went off peacefully.

Saudi Arabia

Rising number of Saudi asylum seekers

More and more Saudi Arabians are fleeing the arch-conservative Wahabist kingdom and are seeking asylum. According to an Amnesty International spokesperson, the number of asylum seekers has tripled worldwide in 2017. The rising number of asylum seekers and the repression of government activists and critics are an alarming sign of the disregard for freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia. According to the European Statistical Office Eurostat, almost 700 applications for asylum have been filed by Saudi Arabian nationals in the EU in the past four years. In the previous four years - from 2011 to 2014 - there were only 210 applications. According to human rights activists, young women in particular are increasingly trying to flee the country.

Senegal

Government claims Macky Sall has won the presidential election

President Macky Sall (who has been in office since 2012) was re-elected in the presidential election held on 24 February 2019, according to the government lobby. Prime Minister Mahammed Boun Abdallah Dionne announced in Dakar that Sall had received at least 57 percent of the votes in the first round of elections. If this is confirmed, no run-off will be required. However, there is no official result yet. 6.7 million voters were called to the polls. Sall had four challengers. His potentially most promising rivals, the former mayor of Dakar, Khalifa Sall, and the son of ex-president Abdoulaye Wade, Karim Wade, had been excluded from the election on corruption charges. The most important challenger was former Prime Minister Idrissa Seck, along with Ousmane Soko, Madické Niang and Issa Sall. Senegal is one of the few countries in the region that has never experienced a coup and has so far been spared jihadist attacks, making it a prime example of stability in West Africa.

Somalia

Attacks

On 20 February 2019, the Deputy Attorney General of the Somali Federal Government was murdered by Al-Shabaab fighters in the Hodan district of Mogadishu.

Two booby traps laid by Al-Shabaab exploded on 20 February 2019 destroying the armoured personnel carrier of an Ethiopian AMISOM patrol in Bardheere (Gedo region). The number of casualties is unknown.

Al-Shabaab claimed to have killed Somali and American troops travelling in convoy in a roadside bomb attack on the outskirts of Afgoye (Lower Shabelle region) on 21 February 2019. The attack has not been confirmed.

Hostilities

On 21 February 2019, Al-Shabaab fighters attacked a Somali army base near Balad (Middle Shabelle region). There were losses on both sides. The extremists claimed to have conquered large parts of the city. According to local media, this is not the case.

AU demands withdrawal of Burundi units

On 21 February 2019, Al-Shabaab fighters attacked a Somali army base near Balad (Middle Shabelle region). The Burundi government is refusing to comply with the African Union's (AU) demand that Burundi withdraw 1,000 troops from its 5,400-man contingent from Somalia by the end of February. It is threatening to withdraw all its troops if the AU insists on its demand. Burundi provides about a quarter of the AMISOM troops, the second largest contingent after Uganda. In the course of the mission 800 to 1,000 Burundian soldiers have been killed. After talks, President Pierre Nkurunziza and Somalia's President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo demanded a meeting an emergency meeting of the AU on the question of troop withdrawal.

Participation in AMISOM is a hard currency source of income for Burundi. The AU is paying around USD 18 million per quarter for the contingent.

Sudan

State of emergency declared

President Omar al-Bashir declared a state of emergency on 22 February 2019 because of the anti-government protests and demonstrations that have been taking place since December 2018 (cf. Briefing Notes of 21 January 19). This will be valid for one year, the head of state announced in a television broadcast. He said the Federal Government as well as the governments of the federal states would be dissolved. He himself will resign as chairman of the National Congress Party, but will remain head of state. He will not stand in the elections to be held in 2020.

The initiators of the protests announced that they would demonstrate until Al-Bashir resigns.

In the run-up to protests planned for 21 February 2019 in Khartoum, security forces arrested ten leaders of opposition parties, including Mariam Sadiq al-Mahdi, deputy chairperson of the Umma Party, and Mokhtar al-Khatib, chairman of the Communist Party.

Syria

Small contingent of U.S. troops to remain in Syria

On 22 February 2019, the U.S. government spokesperson Sarah Sanders declared that the U.S. intended to keep a small contingent of troops in Syria for a period of time after the withdrawal of its troops from Syria. According to the plan, up to 400 soldiers will remain there to secure peace. According to the White House, President Trump had also discussed the situation in Syria in a telephone conversation with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Both had agreed to continue working on the creation of a possible security zone. It is still unclear where exactly the U.S. troops will be deployed and for how long they will stay.

Civilians from Baghus evacuated and prisons transferred

By 20 February 2019, more than 2,000 civilians and family members of ISIS fighters had left the last remaining stronghold of the ISIS terrorist militia in Syria. Trucks of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) drove them from Baghus to a camp of Kurdish fighters. In addition, the SDF units handed over 130 Iraqi ISIS supporters to Iraqi security forces after leaving Baghus. Most of them were wanted by the Iraqi judiciary, according to information from the Iraqi security forces.

Attack claims lives

According to the pro-opposition Syrian Human Rights Observatory, at least 20 persons were killed in a roadside bomb attack in Deir Ez-zor province on 22 February 2019. They are said to be employees of an oil field and fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces. The oil field serves the SDF units as a base in the fight against ISIS in the village of Baghus.

Tajikistan

Opposition activist returns

According to various human rights groups, opposition activist Sharofiddin Gadoev was forcibly returned to Tajikistan on 15 February 2019. Gadoev is a founding member of the opposition movement Group 24, which

is banned in Tajikistan. Since 2015 he has been in self-imposed exile in the Netherlands. After returning to his homeland, the Tajik government published a series of videos in which Gadoev says he returned voluntarily and criticises the opposition. Shortly afterwards Gadoev's colleagues published a video on 19 February 2019 which the activist had recorded in the run-up to his trip to Moscow for a meeting with officials of the Russian Security Council. In the video, Gadoev said that he would not return to Tajikistan voluntarily. After the opposition activist had been under house arrest for several days, his whereabouts are currently unknown. He is charged with possession of contraband and counterfeit goods.

Turkey

Arrest warrants

On 22 February 2019, the Turkish public prosecutor's office again applied for arrest warrants for a total of 295 active military officers who are said to have maintained contact with the banned Gülen movement. The officers from the army, navy and air force are under investigation for making suspicious calls from landline telephones or public telephone booths. They are said to have communicated with contact persons of the Gülen movement.

In the past few weeks, there have already been a number active army officers have been arrested for such alleged telephone contacts. (cf. Briefing Notes of 21 January 2019).

Convictions upheld

On 19 February 2019, a court of appeal in Istanbul upheld the convictions of former journalists and employees of the opposition daily Cumhuriyet. It rejected the appeal of the 14 defendants, who had been sentenced in April 2018 to several years in prison.

The defendants were arrested in October 2016. They were accused of having supported the Gülen movement, the PKK and the terrorist group DHKP-C and were therefore sentenced to prison terms of between two and a half and eight years.

The seven defendants, who received sentences of more than five years imprisonment, can now appeal to the Supreme Court of Appeal. Among them are ex-editor-in-chief Murat Sabuncu, ex-editor Akin Atalay, ex-investigative journalist and current member of parliament Ahmet Sik and the well-known columnist Aydin Engin. The former Cumhuriyet employees with prison sentences under five years must return to prison to serve the remainder of their sentence. Most of the accused had been released for the remainder of the trial after spending several months in custody.

The proceedings against two absent defendants - including former editor-in-chief Can Dündar, who lives in exile in Germany - have been suspended and will continue.

Venezuela

Most recent trends of the national crisis

In order to prevent the import of aid from the USA and other western states, the Venezuelan government closed all land crossings for humanitarian aid on 19 February 2019 as well as the sea border to the Dutch Antilles. However, it is very doubtful how effective it is to control the several thousand kilometre long borders to neighbouring countries or sea areas. The National Assembly, which stands behind Guaidó, authorised the import of aid.

At the same time, there were extensive desertions, though no exact figures are available. A commander of the GNB publicly announced his support for Guaidó and met with him in Colombia - he saluted Guaidó in the media. According to the Colombian migration authority, 156 members of the armed forces deserted at the weekend alone and left Venezuela, 146 of them in Cúcuta. Desertions also occurred on the border with Brazil.

Persons killed and wounded in the border region

On the weekend from 22 February 2019 to 24 February 2019, several people were killed and injured when violence broke out in the Venezuelan border regions with opposition activists trying to resist the government ban and bring food and medical supplies into the country. Similar scenes occurred at border crossings with Brazil. UN sources report at least 300 persons were wounded in Cúcuta alone. According to different figures, the number of persons killed is currently between three and five.

Offer of aid from Russia

On 19 February 2019, Maduro announced that the Russian Federation had offered to deliver about 300 tons of humanitarian aid. He said this offer would be accepted. Maduro thus moved away from the position that there was no implicit need for humanitarian aid in the country. Offers of help had been accepted occasionally in the previous years, for instance, medical supplies from China, while all assistance from Latin American state initiatives and the USA was rejected.

West Balkans

Wave of protests

In the Western Balkans resistance against increasingly authoritarian and corrupt politicians is building. As in Serbia, Bosnia and Albania, large crowds have been taking to the streets in Montenegro since the beginning of the year. Protests have also been held against corruption and people are calling for President Milo Djukanovic's resignation. He has been in office almost continuously since 1991, either as Prime Minister or as President. A protest rally was again held in Belgrade on 23 February 2019, where thousands of people have taken to the streets every Saturday since the beginning of December to protest against Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and for freedom of the media. In Albania, violent riots took place during a rally led by the opposition in mid-February.

The state of affairs bemoaned and the motivation of the demonstrators show cross-border similarities. Almost everywhere there is an economic and social standstill, which goes hand in hand with an undermining of constitutional principles. North Macedonia is the only country to have recently made positive headlines.

Increase in the number of asylum seekers during the winter months

The number of asylum seekers from the Western Balkan countries (especially Albania, Serbia and Macedonia) is increasing again, as it tends to particularly in the winter months. During this period, an increasing number of people from the Western Balkans enter Germany to seek shelter from the impending winter. However, not all of them apply for asylum. Many families only register with the city authorities and ask for protection. Approximately 2,000 people are expected to intentionally spend the winter in Cologne alone.

The increase in immigration can be explained by the fact that the comparatively harsh winter is a particularly difficult time for the poor population in the Western Balkans. The economic and social situation remains difficult. Poverty and unemployment rates are relatively high, and public social protection and health systems are generally weak.