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Briefing Notes

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Afghanistan

Security situation

According to media reports, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) beheaded two individuals in Diwa-Gul Dara (Chawkey District), Kunar province, on 20.01.24, accusing them of spying on behalf of the Taliban. In a similar incident that occurred on 05.01.24, members of the ISKP beheaded an individual in the same district facing the same accusations. On 08.01.24, a Taliban fighter was killed by members of the ISKP in Nangarhar province (Dara-e Noor district). It would seem that the Taliban too are aware of the surge in ISKP activity in Kunar province; the Taliban's Ministry of Information and Culture distributed booklets entitled "Army of Satan" to students in both public and private schools in the province on 25.12.23 as part of an anti-ISKP campaign.¹

Governance and persecution

According to media reports issued on 18.01.2024, the Taliban seized at least 100 books, encompassing religious and political themes, from bookstores and libraries in Kabul which are considered to oppose the Taliban regime, including seven religious books, 21 history books and countless political books. Students in Kabul have also reported that the Taliban's Ministry of Higher Education has removed books from university libraries that oppose Taliban views. In the past week, over 2,000 books were reportedly removed from bookstores in the cities of Kunduz and Pul-e Khumri. According to sources, the Taliban are focusing on books about well-known "non-Pashtun" individuals from the former anti-Taliban movement (e.g. Ahmad Shah Massoud, Abdul Ali Mazari), books about the history of the various ethnic groups in Afghanistan and books about Shi'ism.

The Taliban Ministry of Education has revised the primary school curriculum in order to align it to their own interpretation of "Sharia". The spokesperson for the Taliban Ministry of Education told the Taliban-run RTA channel that subjects which were not in line with "Sharia and the culture of Afghanistan" had been removed from the curriculum. However, he did not specify which subjects had been eliminated.

The Taliban passport office in Kabul announced on 21.01.23 that it had suspended in-person passport applications for the time being, as the office did not have the capacity to handle the large influx of applicants (cf. BN of 15.01.24). The directorate stated that it would only process passport applications online and only for persons with medical conditions and persons who have other urgent reasons.

According to media reports issued on 16.01.24, the Taliban arrested six young girls in Balkh province for allegedly violating the dress code. The Taliban had already arrested two girls in Balkh on 16.01.24 for the same reasons. They had been wearing white socks and shoes, the colour of the Taliban flag. Several girls were arrested in Kabul and the province of Ghazni between 01.01.24 and 05.01.24 for allegedly failing to observe the dress code (cf. BN of 08.01.24). The Taliban stormed a local radio station in Khost province on 16.01.24. The raid involved the forcible entry of Taliban security forces into the station's premises, leading to the detention of four staff members, specifically a reporter, two producers, and an administrative staff member. On the same day, the Taliban shut down another radio station in Khost. Four of the station's employees were detained briefly but were released two hours later. However, the radio station owner's brother, who was arrested a week ago, remains in custody.

According to reports, the Taliban shot dead a former military officer of the previous government in Kabul upon his return from Iran.²

Angola

CARE: number one on the list of under-reported humanitarian crises

The humanitarian aid organisation CARE reported on the 10 humanitarian crises that failed to make headlines in the global media in 2023 in the "Breaking the Silence" report it published in January 2024. The report says that the humanitarian crisis in Angola had the least number of articles published about it in relative terms in the reporting period. Angola had already ranked first in the NGO's previous year's report (cf. BN of 16.01.23).

The report says around 7.3 million people are currently in need of humanitarian aid. This is almost twice as many people as in the previous year and can be attributed to natural disasters such as floods, forest fires and droughts. Given that around 85% of the Angolan population are employed in the agricultural sector, the persistent droughts in the centre and south of the country in particular are leading to food insecurity and malnutrition. It can be assumed that the extreme weather conditions will become even more frequent in the future as a result of climate change.

Other problems that are exacerbating the humanitarian situation of Angola's population include poverty, unemployment (especially among young people in urban areas), inadequate sanitation and hygiene facilities (especially in rural areas), gender inequality and the continuing high level of landmine contamination that dates back to the Angolan Civil War.³

Azerbaijan

Crackdown on journalists

According to a media report, a total of eight journalists were arrested between the end of November and the end of December 2023. Four journalists working for the media company Abzas Media and four journalists from Kanal 13, an online TV channel that distributes its content via YouTube, were affected. The individuals concerned are facing a number of different charges. One journalist from Kanal 13 has already been handed a 30-day prison sentence on charges of petty hooliganism and disobeying the police.

According to additional reports, access to Kanal 13 was restricted by a court decision on 11.12.23. The international NGO Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has called upon the Azerbaijani authorities to stop this "hunt for journalists" on the social network X. Two other journalists, Elnarə Qasımova from the online publication Abzas Media and Şahin Rzayev from CAMnews, were also arrested. Qasımova was sentenced to around two and a half months in prison on charges of smuggling cash a few days after her arrest on 15.01.24 – a charge that has also been made against the other members of her editorial team. The sum of EUR 40,000 was reportedly found on their premises.

As early as November 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the ambassadors of the US, Germany and France to protest against the financial support Abzas Media has received from their countries. The US, the EU and the Council of Europe, among others, had expressed concern about the Azerbaijani authorities' crackdown on independent media, as had the OSCE. On 19.01.24, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) also issued a joint statement criticizing the "wave of repression".

In the RSF's World Press Freedom Index for 2023, Azerbaijan ranks 153rd out of the 180 countries under review. Early presidential elections are scheduled to take place on 07.02.24 (cf. BN of 18.12.23).⁴

Burkina Faso

Arrests on grounds of conspiracy against Traoré

After a coup attempt against the head of the military government, Ibrahim Traoré, was successfully thwarted on 26.09.23, his supporters called for participation in a demonstration on social media on 13.01.24 in a bid to prevent a possible change of power. Supporters of Traoré say he has been receiving death threats. Several suspects have reportedly been arrested.

On 14.01.24, armed gunmen abducted and arrested four members of the Burkinabe military in the capital Ouagadougou who were allegedly conspiring against Traoré. According to media reports, Lieutenant Colonel Evrard Somda, former chief of staff of the national gendarmerie, was among them. Traoré had removed Somda from the leadership of the national gendarmerie at the beginning of October 2023.

There had already been reports of kidnappings and arrests in the past. At the end of December 2023, unknown individuals arrested and abducted the former foreign minister and chairman of the Alternative Faso opposition party (Le Faso Autrement), Ablassé Ouédraogo, in Ouagadougou (cf. BN of 08.01.24).⁵

Foiled coup attempt

The Burkinabe military government confirmed on 18.01.24 that another coup attempt had been thwarted and that a search operation had been launched for a network of former and active members of the military and activist civilians who are alleged to have attempted the coup. According to media reports, several of the alleged coup plotters have already been arrested. The military government says a coup was planned for 13.01.24 that was aimed at destabilising the country. According to the Burkinabe authorities, this is the fourth thwarted coup attempt since Ibrahim Traoré was appointed President of the country on 05.10.22 (cf. BN of 10.10.22). The intelligence and security services are said to have foiled a coup attempt on 26.09.23, in which four officers and other suspected leaders were arrested (cf. BN of 09.10.23).⁶

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Parliamentary elections and Tshisekedi's swearing in

On 14.01.24, the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) published the preliminary results of the parliamentary elections held along with the presidential elections on 20.12.23. The CENI has published the names of 477 of the 500 deputies. It says the coalition and President Felix Tshisekedi who has been re-elected in office, the Sacred Union of the Nation (in French: l'Union sacrée de la nation), are well on their way to reaching the majority. Tshisekedi's party alone, the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS)), is said to have won 69 seats in parliament. According to media reports, five out of the 40 or so parties and political groups that won seats in parliament are opposition parties. Together, these parties only won around 30 seats. Some opposition parties such as former President Joseph Kabila's People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction et la Démocratie (PPRD)) and supporters of Martin Fayulu in the Lamuka coalition had boycotted the parliamentary elections; others failed to reach the 1% threshold required to gain seats in the national assembly. Petitions can be filed with the Constitutional Court challenging the results of the parliamentary elections up until the national assembly is officially inaugurated at the end of January 2024.

The list of national deputies remains incomplete for the time being for a number of reasons. On the one hand, the elections in Kwamouth in Maï-Ndombe and in the areas of Masisi and Rutshuru in North Kivu could not be held due to the activities of armed groups. On the other hand, the CENI had annulled the elections in the constituencies of Masimanimba in Kwilu and Yakoma in North Ubangi due to electoral fraud, declaring the votes of 82 candidates invalid.

According to media reports, the Independent National Electoral Commission has come in for harsh criticism. It has failed to account for the use of USD 400 million in state funds, it has not been transparent regarding the awarding of public contracts and it has overrun its budget.

Felix Tshisekedi was sworn in as President once again on 20.01.24. Opposition candidates such as Martin Fayulu and Moïse Katumbi had called for protests on inauguration day, media reports say. Supporters of the President cheered at the ceremony held in the capital Kinshasa. No protests were held there and no incidents were reported at smaller demonstrations held in other cities.⁷

Improved prison conditions in Goma

Reports have been issued in the media that there has been a significant drop in the mortality rate at Munzenze central prison in the city of Goma in North Kivu province. In the last quarter of 2023, seven detainees died at the prison. In the previous months, the prison had reported 10 to 15 deaths per month. The director reported that the government had made significant efforts to improve accommodation and healthcare conditions and to relieve

congestion at the prison. Initially designed to accommodate 350 inmates but with currently more than 3,680 inmates, congestion continues to be a problem. Human rights organisations report frequently on the nationwide problems of overcrowding in Congolese prisons. Makala in Kinshasa, the largest prison in the country, which was originally built to accommodate 1,500 people, currently has around 13,600 inmates.⁸

Ecuador

Security situation: public prosecutor assassinated, Fito remains at large

On 17.01.24, public prosecutor César Suárez was killed in Guayaquil. Among other things, he was responsible for investigating the criminal proceedings against 13 people who had been arrested for the on-air assault on the television station TC Televisión in Guayaquil on 09.01.24. Although Suárez, who specialised in investigating cases of corruption and organized crime, occasionally had police protection in the past, he did not have any police protection at the time of the most recent attack. It is said to have been a contract killing. Since 09.01.24, thousands of security operations have been carried out, leading to numerous people being arrested, escaped detainees being recaptured and weapons being confiscated. However, the leader of the Los Choneros gang, alias Fito, remains at large (cf. BN of 15.01.24). Notwithstanding this, members of his family were recently arrested and deported to Ecuador.⁹

Ghana

Increase in the number of attacks on journalists

Various media outlets have reported an increase in the number of attacks being carried out on journalists in Ghana following a review of the year 2023. The reports say the attacks involve physical assaults, intimidation and threats via the internet. Investigative journalists are said to be the group most affected. Political actors and state security authorities have also been identified as the main group of perpetrators. The Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) documented a total of 45 attacks on journalists and media institutions between 2019 and 2023, with the highest number of attacks occurring in the year 2023.

There is allegedly reason to fear that the situation could deteriorate further in the year of the planned parliamentary and presidential elections which are due to be held in December 2024. The GJA held a workshop on "Promoting peaceful journalistic media platforms ahead of the 2024 elections" on 12.01.24 in cooperation with the US Embassy. The GJA chairperson urged the participating journalists and members of political parties to protect the crucial role of objective media for non-violent and credible elections.

As recently as 04.01.24, individuals who are allegedly supporters of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) assaulted the journalist David Kobbina who works for Cape FM in the city of Cape Coast. Media associations and NGOs are urging the Ghanaian authorities to take responsibility, to investigate attacks on journalists independently, effectively and transparently and to prosecute them consistently.

In addition to the increase in the number of attacks, another reason for these demands is reportedly the murder of investigative journalist Ahmed Hussein-Suale Divela ahead of the fifth anniversary of his death on 16.01.24. The journalist was shot dead on the street by unidentified gunmen. He had previously received death threats, inter alia, from individuals involved in public life. The authorities have not been able to announce any progress in the investigations they launched, even five years after the murder.

For many years, Ghana stood for a climate of freedom of expression and freedom of the media without significant restrictions, especially by regional comparison. However, the World Press Freedom Index compiled annually by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has observed a downward trend in freedom of the press for the second year in a row.¹⁰

Guinea-Bissau

Further developments after renewed dissolution of parliament

President Umaro Sissoco Embaló announced on 18.01.24 that the parliamentary elections which have been brought forward once again will take place in October or November 2024. He had dissolved the National People's Assembly

(Assembleia Nacional Popular) (ANP) on 04.12.23 (cf. BN of 11.12.23). According to reports, protests against the current political situation were held on 08.01.2014. These were immediately broken up by the well-prepared security forces, who also used tear gas to disperse the crowds. Three people were reportedly injured. The party coalition Inclusive Alliance Platform – Terra Ranka (Plataforma Aliança Inclusiva – Terra Ranka (PAI)), which held an absolute majority in the dissolved parliament, had called for the demonstrations. Security forces nipped another protest attempt, also on 18.01.24, in the bud. According to the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (Partei Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC)), which leads the PAI, four of its members were briefly detained. Protests have been banned by decree due to an alleged operation to seize weapons that are in circulation.¹¹

Haiti

Security situation: gang violence in the Solino neighbourhood, six nuns kidnapped

There has been a massive surge in gang violence, also in the Solino neighbourhood in Port-au-Prince, since January 2024; there has been an increase in the number of reports of shootings, arson attacks and at least two dozen deaths. There are hence fears that gang violence could spread from there to other neighbourhoods, most of which have been peaceful up to now. According to information provided by the Vatican, six nuns were also kidnapped in the capital on 19.01.24. In October 2023, the UN Security Council approved the deployment of a multinational force led by Kenya to combat gang violence, but this deployment remains blocked by an injunction. The decision on this blockade is to be made by a Kenyan judge on 26.01.24.¹²

Iran

Narges Mohammadi handed additional sentence

According to media reports issued on 15.01.24, the well-known human rights activist and winner of the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize who is currently being detained in prison has been sentenced to an additional 15 months in prison. The defendant is accused of spreading propaganda against the system. The activist is currently imprisoned in Tehran's Evin Prison and has already served around 12 years of several prison sentences imposed on her. She has been arrested and sentenced several times for her work as a human rights defender. The 51-year-old has so far been sentenced to a total of 31 years in prison and has received additional sentences, including bans on leaving the country and lashes.¹³

New criminal proceedings against released journalists

According to media reports issued on 16.01.24, further criminal proceedings were instituted against two female journalists shortly after they were released from prison (cf. BN of 15.01.24). According to the Iranian judiciary, the women are accused of appearing in public and in the media without wearing the compulsory veil (hijab) after their release from Tehran's Evin prison.¹⁴

Officer killed in the province of Sistan and Baluchestan

According to reports issued by an Iranian news agency, a high-ranking member of the Army of Guardians of the Islamic Revolution (known as: Sepah e Pasdaran, IRGC, for short) was killed in an attack carried out in the province of Sistan and Baluchestan on 17.01.24. The officer was reportedly shot and killed on a country road. The Sunni separatist group Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice) has claimed responsibility for the assassination and for killing two of the man's bodyguards.¹⁵

Iraq

Erbil: Iranian missile attack on residential building

On 15.01.24, several missiles hit the home of a businessman in Erbil, killing at least four civilians and injuring 17 others.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has claimed responsibility for the attack. The IRGC says an Israeli spy headquarters was located in the residential building. This accusation has been rejected by both the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdish regional government. The Iraqi government officially lodged a complaint with the UN Security Council regarding the incident on 16.01.24.

Iran had also claimed to have attacked a Mossad headquarters in a similar attack carried out on a residential building in Erbil in March 2022.¹⁶

Attacks on facilities of the anti-ISIS coalition

According to the Kurdish Counter-Terrorism Group, a drone targeting the US-led global coalition against the Islamic State (ISIS) base near Erbil International Airport was intercepted on 18.01.24. The so-called Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an alliance of militias loyal to Iran, has claimed responsibility for the attack.

On 20.01.24, 15 missiles were fired on the Ain al-Assad (Anbar province) air base, two of which hit their targets, killing at least one Iraqi soldier and wounding several US soldiers. Islamic Resistance in Iraq has also claimed responsibility for this attack.

Islamic Resistance in Iraq has long been demanding the immediate withdrawal of all US troops and has stepped up attacks on US targets in Iraq in this context since October 2023.¹⁷

Lebanon

Situation along the border between Lebanon and Israel

Regular exchanges of fire continue unabated between Hezbollah and the Israeli army. Due to the large number of incidents taking place, developments will be summarized.

Diplomatic sources have repeatedly reported that all sides have indicated they do not want the situation to spiral into full-scale war. Meanwhile, 82% of the Lebanese population is experiencing multidimensional poverty, a situation that is further exacerbated by the ongoing attacks being carried out by both sides. Various important figures from all major denominations and ethnic groups continue to advocate that Lebanon maintain neutrality in the war between Hamas and Israel.

Attacks from both sides are a daily occurrence. On 20.01.24, another targeted attack was carried out on a senior Hezbollah member around 20 km north of the border. On the Lebanese side, more than 197 people have now been killed, including around 20 civilians and more than 150 Hezbollah militants, one Lebanese soldier and fighters of various other militant groups; on the Israeli side, over 19 people have been killed so far, seven of them civilians.

According to aid organisations, around 76,000 people inside Lebanon and according to press reports, 115,000 people in Israel remain internally displaced by the escalation along the border. However, donor pledges undertaken at a recent donor conference for WFP aid were significantly lower than those undertaken in previous years, which is making it more difficult to provide assistance to Lebanon.¹⁸

Nigeria

Katsina State: attack on military base

More than 100 armed men stormed a military base in Batsari Local Government Area (LGA) in Katsina State on 14.01.24, setting vehicles and other properties ablaze. According to media reports, the attackers overpowered security forces at the military base following a battle that raged on for several hours. They also moved on to the village of Nahuta, where they stole valuables and livestock. The residents of Nahuta had fled to other villages. Katsina State has already been the target of attacks on communities by armed groups in the past (cf. BN of 11.09.23, 13.11.23 and 15.01.24).¹⁹

Zamfara State: dozens of people kidnapped

Armed gunmen described as bandits invaded a village in Kaura Namoda Local Government Area in Zamfara State on 14.01.24, killing three people and kidnapping around 50, at least 36 of whom were women, according to media reports. The violent bandits went from house to house looking for possible kidnap victims. Several people were injured. Local security forces were outnumbered and were unable to prevent the attack. Kidnappings have been

taking place with some regularity in northwestern Nigeria in recent times (cf. BN of 23.10.23, 27.11.23 and 04.12.23).²⁰

FCT Abuja: dozens abducted

Violent actors attacked several travellers on the main Abuja-Kaduna road in the Kachia Local Government Area of Kaduna State in the second week of January 2024, abducting more than 30 of them. According to media reports, this is the first time security measures along the main artery have been breached. In addition, gunmen kidnapped at least 10 people from a village in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja on 07.01.24. According to media reports, three of the abductees were killed because relatives had failed to pay the ransom. On 02.01.2024, unidentified bandits kidnapped six sisters in Bwari LGA in the FCT. One of them was killed on 12.01.24 because the ransom was not paid. Nigerian security forces and police officers managed to locate and free five of the young girls in Kajuru forest in Kaduna state during a joint operation carried out on 20.01.24.²¹

Pakistan

Elections 2024: backdrop; Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz launches election campaign in Punjab

The election campaign for the parliamentary elections scheduled for 08.02.24 is being overshadowed by allegations of manipulation due to the crackdown on the former ruling party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the imprisonment of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. The Supreme Court has banned the PTI from using its previous electoral symbol; party members are only allowed to run independently using their own symbols. In a country that has a literacy rate as low as 60%, electoral symbols are important since they enable voters to recognize the parties on the ballot paper.

On 15.01.24, the election campaign of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, led by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who previously served several non-consecutive terms in office, was launched with a rally in the city of Okara in the province of Punjab which will decide the election. On 18.01.24, Sharif made his first public appearance at an election rally held at the stadium in Hafizabad. He said his party's declared aim is to boost the economy and end unemployment.²²

Attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

On 19.01.24, a physician was killed by unknown perpetrators in the tribal district of Bajaur. The victim is said to have been the coordinator of the polio vaccination campaign in the region. Several security personnel who had been guarding a polio vaccination team had already been killed on 09.01.24 (cf. BN of 15.01.24).

On 19.01.24, unknown perpetrators in the North Waziristan tribal district shot dead five truck drivers who were not residents of the region, according to media reports.²³

Pakistan / Iran

Iranian missile attacks on targets in Balochistan province

Pakistan has condemned the Iranian airstrike carried out on targets inside Balochistan province on 16.01.24, which killed two children and injured three others. The attacks, carried out by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards using precision missiles and drones, targeted two strongholds of the Sunni militant group Jaish al-Adl in the Koh-e-Sabz region, as reported by the Iranian news agency Tasnim.²⁴

Pakistani airstrikes on targets in Iran as a response

According to media reports issued on 18.01.24, the Pakistani air force attacked targets in the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan with drones in response to the Iranian missile attacks launched on 16.01.24. According to the Iranian news agency IRNA, three women and four children were killed in a village near the town of Saravan. Foreign media have already reported at least nine casualties. Later, more specific reports issued by IRNA said 10 people had been killed. All of them are said to have been Pakistani nationals. The drones were reportedly used specifically in four residential areas. According to the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baloch separatists of Pakistani origin are taking refuge in the uncontrolled border areas on Iranian territory. According to the Pakistani military's media department, the operation targeted hideouts used in Iran by Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)

and Balochistan Liberation Front fighters. The BLA has confirmed that members of their group were among those killed.²⁵

Arrest of a suspected member of the Zainabiyoun Brigade in Karachi

Amid tensions between Islamabad and Tehran, the counter-terrorism authority in Sindh province reported on 20.01.24 that a suspected member of the Iran-backed Zainabiyoun Brigade, which has an estimated 1,000 members operating in Pakistan, had been arrested in Karachi. The arrested man is alleged, among other things, to have been involved in an assassination attempt on a high-ranking Pakistani cleric in 2019.²⁶

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

Current developments / humanitarian situation

According to media reports, the Israeli armed forces carried out their attacks in the Gaza Strip focusing on the central and southern parts of the coastal enclave. Meanwhile, local telecommunications outages lasting several days occurred. Palestinian militias attacked Israeli forces in the northern Gaza Strip, where Israeli units had previously carried out clearance operations against Hamas. After the Israeli military had reduced its presence in the north and switched to more targeted operations, the activity of Palestinian militias in the region had reportedly increased again. In the southern Gaza Strip around the city of Khan Younis, several attacks were carried out by Palestinian fighters as Israeli forces advanced. According to unconfirmed Palestinian reports, more than 30 Israeli military personnel were killed in the attacks. The Israeli military stated that dozens of Hamas fighters had been killed in combat operations in the city.

Several clashes erupted between the Israeli armed forces and Palestinian militias in the West Bank. The Israeli military continued to carry out raids and searches for enemy fighters in the Tulkarm refugee camp. According to Israeli reports, eight members of Palestinian militias were killed in the process. According to unverifiable eyewitness accounts, seven civilians were also killed.

According to media reports issued on 18.01.24, around 11 tonnes of essential medicines and relief supplies were delivered to the Gaza Strip via Egypt as part of an agreement brokered by Qatar and France. The agreement provides for the provision of medical care to Israeli hostages held by Hamas and, in return, the provision of medicines and humanitarian aid for the Palestinian civilian population. According to the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the organisation of the aid deliveries is proving to be difficult due to the widespread communications outages in the region.²⁷

Republic of the Congo

Increase in gender-based violence against children

A media outlet, referring to a UNICEF report, claims there has been an increase in gender-based violence against children. The report did not provide any information on the reporting period. The cases were allegedly documented in the departments of Brazzaville, Pointe-Noire and certain locations in the departments of Niari, Bouenza, Lékoumou, Sangha and Likouala. Sexualised violence seems to constitute the most widespread form of gender-based violence, accounting for over 90% of all registered cases. The prevalence of gender-based violence is reported to be particularly high in the capital, Brazzaville, and the major city of Pointe-Noire. It is alleged that 85% of all rapes committed in police stations are documented in these two cities alone. Gender-based violence mainly affects girls (around 97%), but also boys (around 3%). The average age at which children experience abuse for the first time is 12 years. Perpetrators of gender-based violence usually come from the victims' family or are someone they know. Less than a quarter of victims reportedly received medical aid, psychological care or legal support. Of the rape cases recorded by the police, only 2% were reportedly brought to court, 77% were not prosecuted and 21% were settled out of court.²⁸

Russian Federation

Several thousand people have taken to the streets in the Russian republic of Bashkortostan, located in the eastern part of European Russia, to protest against the conviction of local eco-activist Fail Alsynov. According to media

reports, Alsynov was sentenced to four years in prison on 17.01.24 for allegedly making racist comments. In the small town of Baymak, between 3,000 and 5,000 people gathered in front of the court building to support Alsynov. Observers spoke of one of the largest protests in Russia since the start of the war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The demonstrators chanted "Freedom for Alsynov" and demanded the resignation of regional head Radiy Khabirov, at whose request the trial against the eco-activist had been initiated. The protestors threw snowballs and chunks of ice at the police. The security forces used batons, stun grenades and tear gas to disperse the crowds. According to media reports, 15 people were injured, two of them seriously, and numerous people were arrested. They were reportedly being investigated for organising and participating in mass riots. As soon as 18.01.24, seventeen people were sentenced to prison terms of between eight and 15 days in summary proceedings in the Republic's capital Ufa. Several hundred people also demonstrated against Alsynov's conviction in Ufa on 19.01.24. Again, several people were temporarily arrested.

Alsynov was one of the leaders of the protests against the mining of the Kushtau limestone mountain in Bashkortostan for the soda factory located there. In the wake of the demonstrations, Kushtau was declared a protected natural monument in 2020. At the same time, Alsynov campaigned for greater autonomy for the republic and the protection of the Bashkir language. The Bashkort organisation he co-led was classified as extremist and banned in 2020. At the end of 2022, Alsynov was sentenced to a fine for writing a post on the Russian social network VKontakte, in which he described the war of aggression against Ukraine as "genocide against the Bashkir people" and voiced criticism that this "is not our war". According to media reports, the Bashkortostan region is one of the Russian regions that suffered above-average losses of soldiers in the war in Ukraine.²⁹

Senegal

Prison warden in court on charges of torture and ill-treatment

According to media reports, a warden from the prison in Ziguinchor, who was recently taken into prolonged police custody, has been charged with torture and ill-treatment of a minor inmate and has been remanded in custody. It was reported that the accused, who allegedly confessed to the police, had tortured and abused the victim, who had reported the offences himself and was in custody on rape charges, because he had felt provoked by the way the victim was looking at him.³⁰

HRW World Report 2024: critical human rights situation

The annual report issued by the NGO HRW on the human rights situation worldwide points to continued arbitrary arrests of opposition members and activists in Senegal. It also mentions unjustified restrictions on the freedom of civil society activities and reports on other human rights violations affecting various population groups. The authorities have cracked down on the media and dissent throughout the year, and arbitrary arrests and detentions have taken place.

The security forces have used excessive force to maintain public order. The authorities have banned demonstrations by the political opposition and have restricted access to the mobile internet and various social media.

In addition, LGBTIQ people and activists have continued to face abuse and physical violence as well as arbitrary arrests and threats.

Children sent to Koranic schools run by religious leaders, known as "talibés", have continued to be affected by human rights violations and violations of their rights, have suffered physical neglect and face generally harsh living conditions. Violence and abuse in ordinary schools has also been a serious and ongoing problem. Girls in particular have been subjected to significant levels of sexualised and gender-based violence, including rape and sexual exploitation.³¹

Opposition leaders Sonko and Wade excluded from presidential election

On 20.01.24, the Constitutional Council published the final list of candidates who will stand in the presidential election to be held on 25.02.24. The opposition leader Ousmane Sonko, who is in prison awaiting trial, was excluded from the election. He was declared ineligible due to a legally binding conviction in respect of a suspended sentence relevant under the electoral law (cf. BN of 08.01.24). Bassirou Diomaye Faye, a substitute candidate for Sonko who is also in custody awaiting trial (cf. BN of 05.12.23), was, however, admitted to the election. The same applies to Khalifa Sall, who was excluded from the 2019 presidential elections due to a criminal conviction and has since been

pardoned. As in 2019, the convicted and pardoned Karim Wade, son and former minister of ex-President Abdoulaye Wade, is not permitted to run. This time, Wade's exclusion from the elections was justified by his unauthorised possession of dual nationality. Wade criticised a scandalous decision that violates fundamental rights and spoke of a blatant attack on democracy.³²

Sierra Leone

Court allows former president to receive medical treatment abroad

According to an agency report, a high court has allowed former President Ernest Bai Koroma, who was recently charged with various high treason offences and placed under house arrest, to leave the country for Nigeria to undergo medical treatment (cf. BN of 08.01.24), at his request. However, the charges against Koroma, who has since left the country, have not been dropped, and the pending proceedings against him have been adjourned to 06.03.24. It is feared that the prosecution of Koroma could further exacerbate the political crisis in the country.³³

Somalia

Attack in Mogadishu

Several people have reportedly been killed and others injured in a suicide attack. Reports on the exact number of people killed vary between three and five. The attack took place in front of a restaurant in the Hamar Weyne district of Mogadishu on 16.01.24. The terrorist militia al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for the attack.³⁴

Sudan

General situation and ongoing fighting

On 18.01.24, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), met with leading members of IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) in Kampala to discuss his vision for ending the conflict in the country. He also met with the UN Special Envoy to Sudan and the EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa and reaffirmed his readiness to engage in negotiations. Due to Dagalo's participation in the IGAD meeting, Sudan's government withdrew its participation and announced it was suspending its membership in the IGAD organisation.

On 20.01.24, ten civilians were reportedly killed by a landmine in the north of the country. Twelve people were allegedly killed in airstrikes carried out in the RSF-controlled region of El Zurug (North Darfur) on 17.01.24. Meanwhile, fighting in and around Khartoum has led to power cuts and the interruption of water supply.³⁵

Humanitarian situation

According to the UN, organisations are considering transporting their aid supplies via a new route through South Sudan in order to reach as many parts of the country as possible. It says that currently, the majority of aid deliveries are being coordinated and distributed via Port Sudan. Many deliveries are allegedly later being looted and aid workers are being attacked. The organisations hope that the new route will make the distribution process less bureaucratic and more direct. With the takeover of Wad Mandani by the RSF in December 2023, aid organisations have lost important access to a humanitarian hub (cf. BN of 18.12.23 and 08.01.24). This further restricts the possibilities for aid deliveries. Healthcare is severely limited, particularly in the Khartoum region, and only a few healthcare facilities are operational. At the beginning of 2024, for the first time in 90 days, some aid organisations were granted a limited number of travel permits to access areas controlled by the RSF.

The UN expert on human rights in Sudan, Radhouane Nouicer, expressed concern about ongoing violations of human rights and international humanitarian law and called for an immediate cessation of hostilities. In particular, the displacement of the civilian population, the increasing human rights violations and the growing famine needed to be stopped. He said an increase in ethnically motivated and sexual violence and reports of the recruitment of children were also worrying. According to a recent UN report, 10,000 to 15,000 people were killed by members of the RSF and Arab militias in El Geneina (West Darfur) for ethnically motivated reasons in the course of 2023 alone.³⁶

Syria

Iranian airstrikes

On 15.01.24, missiles were fired at several targets in northern Syria by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. The Revolutionary Guard announced in a statement that the targets were "terrorist operations", including Islamic State targets.

The airstrikes were carried out in the wake of two ISIS suicide attacks in the Iranian city of Kerman, in which dozens of people were killed and hundreds were injured (cf. BN of 08.01.24).³⁷

Northeast: Turkish airstrikes

At least 10 people were injured in airstrikes carried out by the Turkish military on targets in northeast Syria on 15.01.24 and the preceding days (cf. BN of 15.01.24). According to local authorities, the destruction of important infrastructure led to power outages and disruptions to the water supply in large parts of the areas controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

On 16.01.24, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also announced a possible expansion of attacks on targets in Syria and Iraq after Turkish military personnel were killed in another attack carried out on a Turkish military base in Iraq.³⁸

South: Jordanian airstrikes

According to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), at least nine people were killed in a suspected Jordanian airstrike carried out on targets in southern Syria on 18.01.24.

The attack was reported to have been carried out on targets in the village of Arman in Al-Suwayda Governorate, resulting, among other things, in the deaths of two children and three women. According to another local source, 10 people were killed in the attack. There is also said to have been another attack on targets in the village of Malah, but no casualties were reported.

In recent months, the Jordanian military had stepped up its operations against drug traffickers on the Syrian-Jordanian border and repeatedly carried out airstrikes on targets that it allegedly linked to trafficking activities. According to the SOHR, however, the people killed in Arman are not believed to have had any connection to drug trafficking.³⁹

Damascus: Israeli airstrike

According to Iranian and Syrian state media, a suspected Israeli airstrike killed at least five members of the Iranian armed forces in an attack carried out on targets in the capital Damascus on 20.01.24. The target is said to have been a building used by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which was destroyed in the attack. The dead apparently included high-ranking members of the Revolutionary Guard, including the head of the intelligence service of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and his deputy.

The SOHR, however, initially reported that six people, including one Syrian, had been killed.⁴⁰

Türkiye

Arrest of pro-Kurdish activists

Turkish police carried out several raids in 28 provinces on 16.01.24 and arrested a total of 165 people, including members of the pro-Kurdish People's Equity and Democracy Party (DEM), for suspected links to terrorist organisations.

The Ministry of the Interior stated that the detainees had been arrested for allegedly supporting the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) or spreading PKK propaganda on social media. Among those detained were several members of the so-called Peace Mothers, a group of activists who have been campaigning for a peaceful solution to the conflict between the state and the PKK, as well as members of the DEM's youth and women's networks.⁴¹

Uganda

Opposition members under house arrest

According to reports, two leading opposition figures, Robert Kyagulanyi (aka Bobi Wine, National Unity Platform) and Kizza Besigye (Forum for Democratic Change), were prevented from taking part in anti-government protests on 18.01.24. They were reportedly prevented from leaving their homes by roadblocks and security forces surrounding their homes. Kyagulanyi claims he is under house arrest. Both politicians wanted to take part in protests addressing the poor state of the country's roads. The police described the detaining of the opposition members as a security deployment.⁴²

Ukraine

Development of the war

The Russian side is reported to have again significantly intensified its attacks on the ground in the east and south of Ukraine. It had previously been reported that the momentum on the front lines had slowed as part of a regrouping of the Russian armed forces. According to the reports, citing the Ukrainian General Staff, Russian ground troops made a total of 114 attempted attacks on 18.01.24, spread across eight sections of the front, 36 of them on Avdiivka (Donetsk Oblast) alone, which has been embattled for months. The battles near Kupiansk (Kharkiv Oblast), Lyman and Maryinka (both Donetsk Oblast) and around the Ukrainian bridgehead on the left bank of the Dnipro (Kherson Oblast) were reportedly also fierce. While the Ukrainian side declared that it had repelled the attacks, the Russian Federation claimed to have captured the village of Vesele (Donetsk Oblast). On 21.01.24, Ukraine conceded that the Russians had captured the village of Krokhmalne (Kharkiv Oblast on the border with Luhansk Oblast). After President Volodymyr Zelensky spoke of a new phase of the war in December 2023, and reports were issued about the planned construction of fortifications on the front as well as in other regions (cf. BN of 04.12.23 and 15.01.24), some experts expect Ukraine to pursue a strategy of "active defence", according to media reports claiming that Ukraine will attempt to hold the current positions and occasionally attack Russian positions behind the lines. In the meantime, the reports say that personnel can then be trained for later offensives, for example in 2025, adding that in order for such a strategy to work, there must be sufficient supplies of weapons from abroad. Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba is quoted as saying that Ukraine's priority in 2024 is to regain control over its skies. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced on 19.01.24 that Russian forces occupying the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant had once again planted mines along its perimeter.⁴³

Civilian war casualties

Meanwhile, Russian artillery fire on settlements near the front has continued. This was particularly intense on 21.01.24 in the Zaporizhzhia region, where one person was injured. On 17.01.24, it was reported that one person had been killed and five injured by Russian shelling in the Kherson region and that at least 17 people had been injured in Kharkiv as a result of two Russian missiles hitting the area. According to reports issued on 18.01.24, one person was killed and two others were injured by Russian shelling of the frontline city of Kupiansk (Kharkiv Oblast). It was also reported, citing Ukrainian sources, that a residential building was damaged and three people were injured in an overnight drone attack carried out in Odessa on 17.01.24. Representatives of the de facto authorities in the occupied major city of Donetsk reported that on 21.01.24, 28 people had been killed by Ukrainian artillery fire, of whom 27 alone were killed at a market. Twenty five people were injured. On the same day, Russian artillery fire killed one person and injured another in the town of Kurakhove, west of Donetsk, according to Ukrainian reports.⁴⁴

Economy grows after slump in 2022

According to media reports, President Zelensky announced in a video address that the Ukrainian economy grew by around 5% in 2023 despite the ongoing war. In the previous year, the country's economic output had slumped by almost 30%. According to Beata Javorcik, chief economist at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Ukraine needs financial and military aid to keep the economy running without having to resort to printing money. Discussions about the use of Russian assets frozen abroad – the amount of USD 300

billion is often mentioned in this regard – to support Ukraine were promoted by the United Kingdom at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. The Western countries have not yet made a decision on this.⁴⁵

Venezuela

Arrest of the president of an education workers' union for alleged conspiracy

On 17.01.24, the president of the National Federation of Education Workers in Venezuela, Fenatev, Víctor Venegas, was arrested at a meeting by members of the Bolivarian Intelligence Services, SEBIN, and the Barinas police in the city of Barinas. Venegas was involved in organising protests by teaching staff demanding higher wages and better working conditions, among other things. To mark Teacher's Day, held on 15.01.24, corresponding demonstrations had again increased across the country. Venezuelan Attorney General Tarek William Saab said that Venegas was being accused, among other things, of participating in a conspiracy.⁴⁶

Yemen

Activist sentenced to death

On 05.12.23, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in Sanaa sentenced the human rights activist Fatima al-Arwali to death on charges of espionage and cooperating with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Al-Arwali was arrested in August 2022 after returning from the UAE where she had been visiting members of her family. She was held in isolation from the outside world for around six months, and a lawyer assigned to her case was reportedly thrown out of the courtroom.

The SCC in Sanaa is considered to be controlled by the Houthis and is notorious for violating the basic principles governing the rule of law. This regularly leads to politically motivated trials and verdicts, allowing political opposition to be effectively suppressed under the guise of law and order.

Since they seized power in 2014, the Houthis have gradually stepped up the suppression of human rights in general and the rights of women in particular.⁴⁷

Situation in the Red Sea

The situation in the Red Sea remains, by and large, unchanged. The Houthis fired a number of missiles between 15.01.24 and 20.01.24, some of which hit cargo vessels, while the US-led coalition continues to carry out airstrikes on Houthi military targets in Yemen.

Meanwhile the US government designated the Houthis a terrorist organisation on 17.01.24. Former US President Donald Trump had called the Houthis terrorists before he left office in January 2021. However, after taking office in January 2021, US President Joe Biden removed the foreign terrorist organisation (FTO) label on the Houthis.

Numerous aid organizations have criticised this step, as it makes it more difficult to import aid supplies into the areas controlled by the Houthis, among other things. The US government has announced in this context that some exemptions will apply.⁴⁸

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