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Briefing Notes

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Afghanistan

Peace talks remain open-ended

On 21 June 2019, dozens of Afghan politicians attended the two-day conference ‘Lahore Process’ in the Punjabi town of Burban in neighbouring Pakistan to discuss possible contributions to the stabilisation of the country. 40 years after the Soviet invasion in 1979, peace for Afghanistan is not in sight. For months now, peace negotiations have been going on between the Taliban leadership and US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in Qatar’s capital Doha, as the Taliban refuse to hold direct talks with the Afghan government. Besides, negotiations are being held in Moscow, with the participation of the Russian government, Taliban representatives and an Afghan delegation headed by former President Hamid Karzai, focussing mainly on the Taliban’s demand for a complete withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. Both the U.S. and NATO have always underlined that a lasting ceasefire would be the precondition for withdrawal.

A new UN report says that in the first quarter of 2019, Afghan and international forces killed more civilians in raids and attacks than Taliban insurgents. The last major Taliban strike took place shortly after the beginning of Ramadan with an attack on the office of an international NGO in the country’s capital Kabul (see BN of 13 May 2019). At present, there are around 14,000 US soldiers deployed in Afghanistan and roughly 9,000 soldiers from other countries involved in the Resolute Support Mission providing assistance and training to the Afghan security institutions and forces (among them up to 1,300 German troops).

More than 200,000 Afghans have returned home from neighbouring countries

The International Organisation for Migration IOM has stated that since the beginning of the year, more than 205,000 undocumented Afghans have returned home from neighbouring countries (195,000 from Iran and 10,000 from Pakistan). Due to the U.S. sanctions and the deteriorating economic situation in Iran, Afghan workers, who are often in informal employment, hardly find any jobs there. Besides, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs OCHA notes that since the beginning of the year, over 127,000 people have been forced to leave their villages and towns due to fighting.

Albania/North Macedonia

Postponement of EU accession negotiations

On 18 June 2019, the EU ministers for European affairs met in Luxembourg and once again postponed the start of formal accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia despite a positive recommendation from the EU Commission. One major factor for the delays was, among others, the lacking parliamentary approval in Germany, without which the Federal government cannot consent to the start of negotiations at EU level. Also, the EU Member States France, Netherlands and Denmark have expressed fundamental reservations against an accession of the two Balkan countries. While the two candidates have done their best to implement reforms after the talks held last year, they are still suffering from corruption and organised crime, with the situation in Albania significantly worse than that in North Macedonia, it was stated. Another important factor cited was the simmering unrest ahead of the local elections in Albania scheduled for 30 June 2019. New talks on the accession of the two countries are planned to be held in October 2019 at the latest.

Cameroon

Over 80 percent of all schools closed down in the two Anglophone regions

On 21 June 2019, UNICEF reported that 80 percent of all schools have been closed and 74 destroyed in the country's Anglophone regions North West and South West. The militias had imposed the obligation to close all educational institutions. In the past, pupils have been kidnapped and were released only on the condition that they would stay away from lessons or that their school would be closed down.

Chad

11 soldiers killed in fights with Boko Haram

At least 11 soldiers have been killed and 6 injured in fights with the Islamist terror group Boko Haram, regional authorities stated on 23 June 2019. Also, 26 Boko Haram insurgents were apparently killed in fights. On 21 June, Boko Haram had attacked a village in the Lake Chad region and stolen thousands of cattle. When the army persecuted them, a group of soldiers ran into an ambush. At a different place, a second group of soldiers engaged in a battle with Boko Haram fighters.

Chadian rebel leader arrested in France

The French judiciary has initiated investigations against Chadian rebel leader Mahamat Nouri on charges of crimes against humanity. On 17 June 2019, the exiled leader of the Union of Forces for Democracy and Development UFDD was detained at his home in Paris and remanded in custody. The UFDD, an alliance of several rebel groups, has been fighting against Chad's president Idriss Déby for years. Nouri was an ally of former president Hissène Habré who had been ousted by Déby in 1990. For years, he continued to be a member of Déby's government, holding several ministerial positions. After Déby's re-election in 2006, he joined the rebels who were fighting against Déby from Sudan. In Chad, Nouri had been sentenced to death in absentia in 2008.

China

Hong Kong: continuing protests

In response to the latest mass protests, Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam apologised for failures of the government on 18 June 2019. The Hong Kong Journalists Association HKJA has lodged a complaint concerning abuses against the press by police officers to Hong Kong's Independent Police Complaints Council IPCC. The detention was upheld in the case of several dozen people who had been arrested following the protests of 12 June (see BN of 17 June 2019). On 19 June, student representatives demanded the total withdrawal of the amendments to the extradition bill by 20 June 2019 and not only a suspension for an indefinite period of time. Otherwise, protests and actions of civil disobedience would continue. Hong Kong's government did not react to the demands made by the students. On 21 June 2019, protesters first gathered in front of various government buildings; then, thousands blocked the Hong Kong police headquarters.

DR Congo

More than 300,000 displaced in Ituri province since the beginning of June

On 18 June 2019, UNHCR stated that in northeastern Ituri province, over 300,000 people have been displaced since early June due to clashes between ethnic Hema herders and ethnic Lendu farmers. There are also reports of fierce fighting between the army and non-state armed groups in Djugu territory. Of the five territories of Ituri province, Djugu, Mahagi and Irumu are affected by conflict displacement. On 16 June, the chiefdom leader of Bahema-North district said that a total of 161 people have been killed in their area alone. Ongoing rivalry between ethnic Hema and Lendu had claimed thousands of lives between 2008 and 2013.

Egypt

Mohamed Morsi dead

On 17 June 2019, former President Mohamed Morsi, the first democratically elected President of Egypt, collapsed in a court session and died later on in a hospital. The cause of his death that was officially given is a heart attack. He had been suffering for a long time from diabetes and hepatopathy and received poor medical treatment, his son said. This was confirmed by British lawmakers who were allowed to visit him in 2018. For years, the former president had been held in solitary confinement and lost most of sight on one eye in 2018. Limited information given in reports on his prison conditions mention insufficient and partly spoiled food; also, he appears not to have had a bed in his cell. Death in detention, presumably due to inhuman prison conditions, is not uncommon in Egypt.

Compensation for expropriated Nubian families

From 25 June to 16 July 2019, entitled persons may lodge requests for compensation with the administration of Aswan governorate. This includes the legalisation of settlements where Nubian families have been living, partly illegally, since their expulsion. The compensation measures, however, do not refer to the expulsion of Nubians during the construction of the modern Aswan Dam in the 1960ies, but rather to expulsions in the year 1902 in the context of the first dam which had flooded 44 Nubian villages. Many compensation claims are still to be settled, and numerous members of the Nubian minority are regularly protesting against the expulsions and the comprehensive expropriations.

Eritrea

UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights deplores persecution of Christians in Eritrea

In a statement released on 21 June 2019, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Daniela Kravetz, accused the government of persecuting Christians. She said that in recent weeks, members of Orthodox and Christian congregations have been arbitrarily arrested and detained. Also the Catholic church had recently expressed concern about oppression by the Asmara government, which had ordered the church to hand over its health centres to the authorities. Patients and medical staff were ordered to go home, and the health facilities were closed down, the Special Rapporteur said. The move followed a call by the Catholic bishops to establish a truth and reconciliation commission. The Rapporteur also condemned the arrest of more than 170 Pentecostal Christians in May, among them women and children.

Ethiopia

Army chief and regional president killed in coup attempt

On 22 June 2019, two leading generals and two high-rank politicians were killed in what seemed two coordinated attacks. The victims were known to be close allies of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed who has been in office since April 2018. In a TV address, the Prime Minister spoke of a coup attempt targeted against the Ethiopian government. The situation was under control, and most of the attackers were arrested, the government said.

Reports say that the security chief of Amhara regional state Asamnew Tsige and several soldiers burst into the office of governor Ambachew Mekonnen and killed him along with one of his advisers in Bahir Dar, capital of Amhara state. A few hours later, the chief of staff of the national security forces General Seare Mekonnen and one of his guests were killed by his body guard in his home in Addis Ababa. Within the military, strong opposition continues to exist against the Prime Minister's leadership style.

Background

Despite a series of reforms initiated by Prime Minister Abiy, ambitions for autonomy have intensified in some regional states. There is a conflict between radical ethno-nationalist groups on the one side, and pro-democratic factions advocating the status quo of a centrally governed country on the other. In order to maintain the central power, Ethiopia has so far relied on an authoritarian system under long-standing Prime

Minister Meles Zenawi, but also under his predecessor, Stalinist dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam. By contrast, Prime Minister Abiy has expressly stated willingness to grant more rights to the regions. However, more autonomy may lead to a failure of the state control mechanisms, qualified observers say.

In Ethiopia, every region has its own militia which is directly subordinated to the regional president and supported by regional military and police units. This is particularly the case in Amhara state where the second largest ethnic group lives. Recently, conflicts between the Gumzu and Amhara ethnic groups have claimed dozens of lives (see BN of 6 May 2019). Subsequently, security chief Asamnew Tsige had called upon the population of Amhara state to take up arms and establish self-defence units. It was this call to arms that governor Ambachew Mekonnen and his advisers were discussing when the attack was launched.

Georgia

Ongoing protests in Tbilisi

On 23 June 2019, thousands of protesters gathered for the fourth straight day in front of the Georgian parliament building in the country's capital. The protests started on 20 June when Russian politician Sergei Gavrilov delivered a speech from the parliamentary speaker's seat. Subsequently, opposition lawmakers in Georgia's parliament called for protests. Thousands gathered on Tbilisi's Rustaveli Avenue and tried to storm the parliament building; the Georgian security forces responded with the use of tear gas, water guns and rubber bullets. Media reports say at least 200 people were injured in the incident; apparently, 300 people were arrested. On 21 June, parliament speaker Irakli Kobakhitze resigned from office, as was demanded by the demonstrators. In the following days, the protests continued, with demonstrators voicing resentment at the growing influence of Russia and also at their own government. Demands were also made for the resignation of interior minister Giorgi Gakharia due to his harsh handling of the unrest on 21 June.

India

PM Modi sends diplomatic signals to Pakistan

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party BJP, who was re-elected for another five-year term of office on 30 May 2019, has signalled openness for a cooperative exchange to Pakistan. In a letter to Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan he said that it was important to build an environment of trust, free of terror, violence and hostility. The BJP Party won the preceding national elections, which had taken six weeks, by a large majority (see BN of 27 May 2019). With around 600 million votes counted, Narendra Modi's party won 303 out of 545 seats in the lower house of parliament (Lok Sabha), thus performing even better than in the previous elections held in 2014 when the BJP had gained 282 seats and became the first party in 30 years to win an absolute majority.

Iran

30 yoga class students arrested

After the arrest of 30 individuals for taking part in a private yoga class in the city of Gorgan, several people indicated to the Centre for Human Rights in Iran CHRI that such arrests were not unusual but only rarely confirmed in public by the authorities. A women's rights activist stated that the government only rarely allowed people to officially practice yoga. Therefore, adherents to the ancient Hinduist discipline usually do it in secret. Although yoga has become more and more popular recently, both government and religious leaders consider the practice of yoga a violation of Shiite morale.

Disillusionment of young Iranians: suicide rate on the rise

According to figures recently released by the health ministry, a total of 21 million Iranians are suffering from mental disorders, which means that one in four people is affected by the illness. Recent statistics show that last year, 23.4 percent of adults in Iran experienced a psychic disorder, of which 27.6 percent were women and 19.4 percent men. Depression also accounts for about a third of all mental illnesses, the report says.

Suicides among children aged 14 and older is also an emerging phenomenon in Iran. The failure of the Iranian regime in bringing about social, cultural, economic and political progress in the past 40 years has led to depression and disillusionment in the society.

Iraq

Security situation

Attacks are continuing in Iraq. Last week, rocket, mortar and IED assaults were reported in particular from Diyala, Ninive, Baghdad and Babil provinces. In Baghdad alone, at least 10 people were killed and another 17 wounded in a suicide attack on a Shiite mosque in Sadr City district on 21 June 2019.

Rocket attack

On 19 June 2019, a Katyusha rocket hit a compound housing several international oil companies near Basra city, injuring three people.

Kenya

Attacks on police camp

On 21 June 2019, suspected al-Shabab militants attacked a police camp in Fafi in Kenya's eastern Garissa County near the Somalian border. The attack was repulsed; 3 assailants were killed in the fight.

Libya

Fighting to take Tripoli

On 17 June 2019, the WHO confirmed that the conflict in and around Tripoli has claimed 691 dead and 4,012 injured since 4 April 2019. In the following days, fights intensified, particularly around the defunct International Airport. On 19 June 2019, militias supporting the National Accord GNA stated that the Libyan National Army LNA had used cluster bombs and phosphorus bombs.

Series of health projects started

With 13m€ assistance, the Libyan health ministry has started a number of projects mainly intended to improve basic health care for the civilian population. At present, the major part of the Libyan health care system must be considered non-operational. The new projects include basic care, safety improvements in the field of blood transfusion, training of nurses and midwives and treatment of mental and chronic diseases.

Mali

Two attacks on villages in the central region claim scores of lives

On 17 and 18 June 2019, the villages of Gangafari and Yoro (Mopti region) were apparently attacked by gunmen on motorbikes who killed at least 41 people and injured many others. So far, no group has claimed responsibility for the assault.

Niger

18 dead in operation against Islamist terrorist group

In a joint operation against the West African branch of the Islamic State IS between 8 and 18 June 2019, US forces and members of the French mission Barkhane killed 18 IS insurgents. On 20 June, defence minister Kalla Moutari communicated that during the mission, 5 terrorists were taken prisoners near Tongo Tongo close to the Malian border.

Nigeria

ISWA attack on island on Lake Chad

On 21 June 2019, militants of the terrorist group Islamic State in West Africa ISWA, who had split from Boko Haram in 2016, attacked the island of Doron Naira on Lake Chad. The Multinational Joint Task Force MNJTF states that 42 Islamists and 1 soldier lost their lives during the fighting on the island and in the surrounding area. IS also reported on the incident, however saying that a suicide bomber killed 15 MNJTF soldiers by igniting his explosive device near the town of Garo.

Triple suicide attack of suspected Islamists on viewers of a soccer match

On 16 June 2019 at about 8 p.m., 3 suicide bombers (2 female, 1 male) blew themselves up in Madarari village (Borno State, Konduga Local Government Area), killing least 30 people and injuring over 42 more. The victims were watching a soccer match on a large-format screen. So far, nobody has claimed responsibility for the attack. Boko Haram regards soccer matches as un-Islamic activities.

Russian Federation

Human rights activist Oyub Titiev released from penal colony

On 10 June 2019, the city court of Shali in the North Caucasian Russian Republic of Chechnya granted the human rights activist and head of the Chechen office of the Memorial Human Rights Centre eligibility for early release from the penal colony in Argun. On 21 June, Oyub Titiev was released on parole. He had been arrested by the police in January 2018 for possessing illegal drugs and was condemned in March 2019 to a 4 years term in the Argun penal colony. Titiev and the Memorial Centre had rejected the accusations, stating that the charges were politically motivated due to the organisation's human rights activities in Chechnya.

Saudi Arabia

Death sentences against young man cancelled

US TV station CNN reports that the death sentence against a Saudi Arabian detained at the age of 13 has been pardoned. Murtaja Qureiris, who meanwhile is 18 years old, was spared execution and sentenced to 12 years in prison for participating in anti-government protests, among other delicts. Given the detention period already served and a 4-years reduction on probation of his prison term, he might be released in 3 years' time, the report says. The death penalty imposed on him had given rise to criticism worldwide. Murtaja Qureiris belongs to the Shiite minority in the ultraconservative kingdom. Last April, Saudi-Arabia executed 37 people convicted of terrorism. Among them were prisoners convicted of crimes they had allegedly committed while they were under age. According to Amnesty International, 149 executions were carried out in 2018 in the country which is strictly following the Wahabi version of Islam.

Somalia

Combat actions

Reports say that two al-Shabaab militants were killed by air attacks of the United States Africa Command AFRICOM near Jilib (Middle Juba region) on 16 June 2019.

On 17 June, clashes occurred between the militia of Mukhtar Robow and al-Shabaab insurgents in the Bakool region.

On 21 June, al-Shabaab militants attacked Ethiopian AMISOM forces in Baidoa Town (South West State) and killed 5 soldiers.

Sudan

Talks between military and protesters

After the violent repression of the protests on 3 June 2019 (see BN of 17 June 2019), military and opposition have resumed negotiations with the mediating help of Ethiopian diplomat Mahmoud Drir. On 22 June, the diplomat announced that the opposition Alliance for Freedom and Change AFC had agreed to the proposal for the formation of a 15-member sovereign council consisting of 7 civilians, 7 members of the military and 1 independent individual. However, this proposal was refused by the military on 23 June. Meanwhile, the African Union AU is also trying to mediate between the military and the opposition forces.

Syria

Fights in the north-west claim several lives

On 20 June 2019, air strikes of the Syrian government forces apparently claimed at least 9 dead, including 2 ambulance workers in the embattled rebel enclave. Estimates say that about 330,000 civilians have lost their homes and moved to the northern areas close to the Turkish border since the most recent fights began on 30 April 2019.

On 18 June 2019, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres appealed to Russia and Turkey and asked the two protective powers of the conflict parties to engage in efforts to stabilise Syria's northwestern region.

Civilians killed in attack launched from rebel area

On 17 June 2019, missiles launched from the neighbouring rebel area killed 14 civilians during a wedding party in the village of Wadehi in the government-controlled northern part of Aleppo province. Also, 15 individuals were injured in the incident. Both the Syrian state media and the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that several children were among the dead.

Car bomb in Qamishli

On 17 June 2019, a suicide bomber tried to enter the headquarters of the Kurdish security forces in northeastern Qamishli with an explosive-laden vehicle. When his plan failed, he blew up two explosive devices in front of the building, injuring 7 people. Apparently, the attacker was an IS fighter.

Turkey

Victory of opposition candidate in Istanbul

With almost all votes counted in the rerun of the Istanbul mayoral elections held on 23 June 2019, opposition candidate Ekrem Imamoglu of the CHP party is clearly leading with approx. 750,000 votes, i.e. nearly 9 percentage points. His rival Binali Yildirim of the governing AKP party conceded his defeat; meanwhile, also President Erdogan has congratulated Imamoglu on his electoral success.

In the first run held on 31 March 2019, Imamoglu had gained a lead of just over 20,000 votes. Following a complaint of the AKP regarding irregularities in ballot counting, the electoral commission had annulled the result in the beginning of May. The decision was explained with the fact that, among others, there had been several cases of electoral councils which, contrary to the legal regulations, were not presided by public officials. The annulment had attracted international criticism.

Life sentences for former top military staff

Nearly three years after the coup attempt of 15 July 2016, media reported that last week the main trial ended with life sentences imposed on 151 of the accused. 128 defendants received aggravated prison terms, 23 others normal terms. However, figures are differing across reports.

Among the convicted are also 17 former top militaries, including the ex-commander of the Turkish air force Akin Öztürk; all of them were sentenced to 141 life sentences each, reports say. The judiciary had accused them, among others, to have attempted to topple the government. They were also held responsible for the deaths of 251 people who lost their lives during the coup attempt. According to the Turkish government, Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen and his supporters are responsible for the coup. Akin Öztürk was the

second main suspect behind Gülen. He was believed to have headed a body which coordinated the soldiers involved in the coup attempt in that night.

Of the total of 224 defendants, 33 were acquitted. For 13 others, the trials were separated. This includes the proceedings against Fethullah Gülen and 12 other defendants who apparently are all staying abroad.

The trial is one of almost 300 criminal proceedings conducted in connection with the failed coup attempt.

Venezuela

Visit of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet

During a visit to Venezuela, Human Rights Commissioner Bachelet met with politicians of both camps. She was given access to several prisons and was able to talk with victims of human rights violations who confirmed her impression that the inmates of several Venezuelan prisons are subject to inhuman abuses and torture. This is true especially for political prisoners. The Commissioner demanded the release all those who had only peacefully exercised their civil rights. Surprisingly, detained opposition politician Gilber Caro was released during her visit.

Yemen

91,600 dead

The non-governmental organisation Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project ACLED reports that since 2015, about 91,600 people have been killed in the Yemen war. 2018 was the most violent year, mainly due to clashes in Hodeidah. While fighting there has decreased following the UN brokered Stockholm Agreement, ACLED notes an escalation of the situation in al-Dhali governorate.

Food aid partially suspended

The World Food Programme WFP has partially suspended its food aid to the capital Sanaa, because the Houthi rebels cannot ensure distribution of the goods to those in need (see BN of 27 May 2019).

Combat actions

On 14 and 15 June 2019, the Saudi-led coalition launched air strikes on the Yemeni capital Sanaa.

On 18 June, Houthi rebels apparently killed 5 civilians in an attack on a village in the Hajar region, al-Dhali governorate. On 19 June they killed several soldiers of the Saudi-led coalition in Khab district, al-Jawf governorate.

Last week, 8 militants of Islamic State in Yemen IS-Y apparently lost their lives in clashes between IS-Y and fighters of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula AQAP in the Qayfa region of al-Bayda governorate.

On 21 June 2019, suspected AQAP militants killed 7 soldiers in an attack on a unit of Yemeni soldiers loyal to President Hadi in the town of al Qatan, Hadramawt governorate. In another attack launched in al-Mahfad district in Abyan governorate, one soldier was killed and several others injured.

Between 19 and 21 June 2019, clashes erupted between government forces loyal to President Hadi and units of the Shabwani Elite Forces (who are supported by the UAE).

On 21 June 2019, armed men attacked a military checkpoint in the town of Coton, Hadramawt governorate, killing 3 soldiers and injuring another 4 individuals.

Attacks targeting Saudi Arabian airports

On 23 June 2019, Houthi rebels launched drone attacks on Abha International Airport and Jizan Airport. One individual died, and several others were injured. Already on 12 June, a total of 26 people were injured in a Houthi attack on Abha Airport (see BN of 17 June 2019).