

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

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Afghanistan

More than 500,000 Afghan refugees returned home in 2019

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), more than 500,000 Afghans returned home from the neighbouring countries of Iran and Pakistan in 2019, 485,000 of them from Iran alone and a further 25,500 from Turkey. In 2019, more than 360 rejected asylum seekers were returned to Afghanistan from Germany.

Attacks and military operations

Attacks, hostilities and military operations continued over the past week. On 26.01.20, at least 20 persons were injured in an attack in the province of Khost (eastern Afghanistan). According to UNAMA, the number of casualties resulting from air strikes has risen since 2018. On 26.01.20, at least seven people were killed in an air strike carried out by the Afghan military in Balkh province (northern Afghanistan).

Dozens of health centres closed down

At least 162 health centres out of a total of 3,500 were destroyed or closed in Afghanistan in 2019 as a result of the conflict in the country, a Health Ministry official said, adding that at least 30 health centres have been forced to close in five districts in eastern Nangarhar province due to a lack of resources and medicines. The World Health Organization (WHO) says a total of approximately 3,100 health facilities were functional in 2018. However, it says many of them are obsolete and that there is a lack of skilled workers in many places. Those who have the necessary financial means are resorting to medical treatment in Iran, Pakistan or India.

Albania

Venice Commission to probe Albania's media law

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has asked the Venice Commission - its constitutional advisory body - to prepare an opinion on the controversial media law adopted by the Albanian Parliament on 18.12.19. This was indicated in an online report issued by the Venice Commission.

The media law, which is literally called the Anti-Defamation Package (Paketa anti-shpifje), creates the possibility to review the content of online media outlets and levy heavy fines (cf. BN of 13.01.20).

President Ilir Meta shares the view that the laws are anti-constitutional and returned them to parliament. However, a simple majority in parliament allows them to override Meta's objections. After that, the laws will enter into force. A vote against the presidential decree is still outstanding.

Burkina Faso

36 civilians killed in terrorist attack

32 civilians were killed in terrorist attacks in Nagraogo village (Centre-Nord Region, Snnmatenga province), northern Burkina Faso on 20.01.20 where the market was burned to the ground, local media reported. The assailants then attacked Alamou village, killing four more people.

President Roch Marc Kabore declared two days of national mourning beginning on 22.01.20.

Recruitment of volunteers to fight terrorism

In response to the recent terrorist attack carried out on 20.01.20, parliament unanimously passed a law on 21.01.20 that is intended to facilitate the recruitment of volunteers in the fight against Islamist militias. The volunteers must be at least 18 years old and are to be equipped with light arms once they have completed 14 days of military training.

China

Spread of pneumonia

An outbreak of a pneumonia virus which began in the city of Wuhan has been spreading in China since December 2019. It is thought that the first few cases of the infection with a previously unknown coronavirus (2019-nCoV) occurred at a fish and seafood market in the capital of Hubei province that has a population of around eleven million. The authorities closed the market where wild animals were also being sold illegally. More than 2,700 cases have been confirmed in China to date, 80 persons have died; several parts of the country are affected. Flights and train connections as well as local public transport have been suspended in Wuhan. Residents are no longer allowed to leave the city. At least 14 other cities in Hubei imposed traffic restrictions. Elsewhere, bus services have also been suspended. In total, more than 45 million people have been cut off from the outside world as a result of these measures. China is currently celebrating the Lunar New Year (Spring Festival; the Year of the Rat/Mouse began on 25.01.20). In what is probably the world's largest wave of travel, several hundred million people return to their homes each year for the celebrations.

The 2019-nCoV virus is related to the SARS virus (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) which spread globally from China in 2002/2003, killing almost 800 people.

Hong Kong: protests

On 26.01.20, violent clashes erupted with the police when residents demonstrated against the possible establishment of a quarantine centre in connection with the feared spread of the new coronavirus.

Several thousand people demonstrated in front of a detention centre on 22.01.20 where people arrested in connection with anti-government protests are being held. More than 7,000 people have been detained so far. Further protests on 25.01.20 and 26.01.20 resulted in violent clashes between demonstrators and the police.

Ethiopia

Date scheduled for parliamentary elections

According to a proposal by the National Election Board of Ethiopia, parliamentary elections are to take place in Ethiopia on 16.08.20. The elections were originally scheduled for May 2020, but logistical problems made it necessary to postpone them, the Election Board says. However, some critics say the date is unsuitable because it is a fasting day for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and falls during the rainy season. The constitution stipulates that the new government must take up its work by October 2020 at the latest

The elections, which take place every five years, are eagerly awaited. They will be the first in which Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who has been in office since April 2018, will have to face the electorate. Ethiopia is undergoing unprecedented political change under Abiy. Opposition members have been released from prison, party bans have been lifted and a peace agreement has been reached with Eritrea, for which Abiy was also awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. However, his reforms have also given rise to ethnic rivalries that have spilled into violence, causing deaths and some 2.4 million displaced persons. Opposition politicians have repeatedly warned that delays in the election could further fuel unrest and damage Abiy's democratic credibility.

India

Violence against protestors

The protests against the amendment to the Citizenship Law (cf. BN of 16.12.19) which entered into force on 10.01.20 that have flared up throughout India since December 2019, have brought together hundreds of thousands of people of different faiths and origins because they see the change in the law as a threat to the hitherto pluralistic society in secular India.

Violent action was taken against demonstrations in individual cases and protestors were arrested. There are also reports of detainees being mistreated in police custody. Police used violence to disperse peaceful student protests at two Muslim universities in New Delhi and in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Protests at the renowned Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi were disrupted by members of the Hindu national student organisation Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Prime Minister Narendra Modi played down the measures taken against the protests that it believes were orchestrated by the opposition.

Military parade and protests on Republic Day

A large military parade took place in the capital New Delhi on 26.01.20 to mark Republic Day. The nationwide protests against the new citizenship law continued. Seven million people are said to have participated in a human chain in the southern state of Kerala. Another demonstration was directed against Brazil's President Jair Messias Bolsonaro who was on a visit to India. Republic Day marks the anniversary of India officially adopting its constitution which entered into force in 1950.

Iran

Growing government pressure on artists boycotting film festival

According to media reports, the Culture and Media Prosecutor's Office summoned the actress Taraneh Alidosti, who is famous in Iran, on 21.01.20 and interrogated her on charges of propaganda against the regime. She was released on bail. The editor-in-chief and judicial officer of the news portal Mizan, Mohammad Farahani, posted on Twitter on 22.01.20 that proceedings dating back to 2018 and not recent developments were the reason for the public prosecutor's interrogation. At present, efforts are being made to bring the proceedings to a conclusion. Alidosti is one of the artists who boycotted this year's national film festival (cf. BN of 20.01.20). She had posted on Instagram on 14.01.20 using the slogans "Mourning 176 people" and "We are captives" that she would be boycotting the international Fajr film festival this year once again following revelations that the Revolutionary Guards had shot down a Ukrainian passenger airplane. Alidosti had criticised the security forces' response to the riots prompted by the hike in fuel prices, the poor economic situation and the shooting down of the plane back in November 2019 and in January of this year.

No identity cards for Baha'i who are forbidden by their faith to lie about their religion

Several minority rights activists as well as users of social media reported on 23.01.20 that an "other religions" option has recently been removed from the identity card application. For the past two months, members of the Baha'i religion have been forced to tick one of the four officially recognised religions on the application form. Under Iranian law, Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are the only religious minorities accepted alongside Muslims. They say anyone refusing to tick one of these four religions has not been given an identity card. Not having a national identity card compounds problems for the Baha'i by essentially making it impossible for them to conduct official transactions. Iranians living abroad also need a valid identity card to renew their Iranian passport.

Drug dealers executed

A drug kingpin and his accomplice have been executed in Iran, according to an announcement made by the Ministry of Justice, the ISNA news agency says. More than 100 tonnes of drugs were confiscated from them when they were arrested last year. Eighteen other members of the cartel known as the "Crocodile of the Persian Gulf" were sentenced to heavy prison sentences and fines.

Iraq

Violent crackdown on anti-government protesters continues

On 20.01.20, the National Security Council authorised the Iraqi security forces to arrest people blocking roads and roundabouts outside the authorised protest sites. According to security sources, at least nine persons were subsequently arrested in Baghdad. Between 20.01.20 and 22.01.20, security forces cracked down on anti-government protestors in Baghdad, Karbala, Baaquba (Diyala) and Basra, and in some other cities. According to the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, twelve demonstrators were killed and 230 others were injured.

Al-Sadr withdraws support for anti-government protests

On 24.01.20, thousands of followers of the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr protested against the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Since the march was largely unsupported by the anti-government protesters who had been demonstrating since 01.01.19, al-Sadr withdrew his support for these protests and called on his followers to leave the protest camps in Baghdad and other cities. Since 25.01.20, security forces have been firing live rounds and tear gas canisters against anti-government protesters. In Baghdad, Basra, Nasriyah and other cities, security forces and unknown third parties burned down protestors' tents, including those providing medical care. At least four demonstrators were killed and dozens more were injured. The protestors are currently re-erecting tents that had been destroyed.

Renewed missile attack against U.S. embassy in Baghdad

According to media reports, five missiles went down in the heavily fortified "Green Zone" in Baghdad on 27.01.20 where the US Embassy is also located. The embassy was directly hit and three people were injured. The last missile attack occurred on 20.01.20.

UN warns against nationwide suspension of international aid

On 16.01.20, the Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, Marta Ruedas, expressed her strong concern regarding the nationwide suspension of humanitarian aid. Every month, humanitarian actors in the country receive access letters allowing them to pass checkpoints. As of the first week of January 2020, access letters for almost all humanitarian actors have expired, and no new authorisations have been issued. As far back as November 2019, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that the curfews imposed as part of the anti-government protests and the shutdown of the Internet had delayed or hindered relief efforts. Since the beginning of December 2019, more than 2,460 humanitarian missions have been cancelled, approximately 2.4 million people in need have been affected by the restrictions on humanitarian movements. 6.7 million people are currently dependent on humanitarian aid.

Israel/ Palestinian Autonomous Territories

Gaza Strip: air strikes in response to explosive balloons

On 25.01.20, Israeli aircraft reportedly attacked targets in the Gaza Strip. There are no reports of casualties. The strikes came in response to explosives-laden balloons that were sent across the border from Gaza into Israel. In the recent past, these attacks have proven to be an effective means of asymmetric warfare, as they have caused great damage at low cost. Agricultural land in southern Israel has repeatedly needed to be saved from rapidly spreading fires. Hamas officials claim that the balloons were launched randomly by individual Palestinians, but the population is being encouraged to continue with the attacks.

Kazakhstan/China

Court rules against deportation of ethnic Kazakhs

On 21.01.20, a Kazakh court ruled against the deportation of two ethnic Kazakhs from China. However, the two men were sentenced to one year in prison in Kazakhstan for illegally crossing the Kazakh-Chinese border. The two men may have faced incarceration in China at one of the re-education camps in the autonomous Chinese province of Xinjiang.

A week earlier, a court in the Kazakh city of Zharkent had already prevented the deportation of an ethnic Kazakh from China after he too had been charged with illegal border crossing. Today, there are about 1.5 million ethnic Kazakhs living in China, of which about ten thousand ethnic Kazakhs are said to be detained in the re-education camps in Xinjiang. The Kazakh Government is reluctant to comment on this issue and has declared it a domestic matter.

Libya

Arms embargo and ceasefire broken

The arms embargo for Libya, which was reaffirmed at the Berlin Libya Conference on 19.01.20, has been flouted by several summit participants, according to the UN. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) reported that several planes landed at airports in western and eastern Libya last week, bringing arms, armoured vehicles, fighters and advisers into the country. Several of the countries responsible for this had participated in the Berlin conference. The ceasefire agreed at the Libya conference is also said to have been breached. According to Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Libyan general Khalifa Haftar has repeatedly violated the ceasefire. The internationally recognised Libyan government of Prime Minister Fayez Mustafa al-Sarraj also spoke of "repeated violations" by Haftar's troops. According to militia sources, Haftar's troops are advancing towards the strategically important city of Misrata in the west of the country. The health department in Tripoli also reported renewed fighting in the capital, in which at least one civilian is said to have been killed. Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) sources claim six LNA soldiers were killed in skirmishes with al-Sarraj government troops.

Mali

Soldiers killed in series of attacks

19 soldiers were reportedly killed and at least five were wounded in an attack carried out by suspected jihadists on a military base on 26.01.20. The attack took place at Sokolo military camp in the Segou region, where armed fighters linked to al-Qaeda are known to operate.

On 22.01.20, seven soldiers were reportedly killed and several others were injured in an attack on a military post in the Mopti region near the border with Burkina Faso. Armed men opened fire on a Malian army post in Dioungani early in the morning. So far, nothing is known about the assailants.

Mauritania

LGBTI persons arrested

A video featuring an alleged wedding ceremony of a gay couple in Nouakchott, which according to media reports was recorded by a girl and circulated on social media, led to the arrest of the homosexual couple and at least ten other people on 23.01.20. The police issued a search alert for further persons. The public's response on social media showed that homosexual acts are still taboo. The Mauritanian criminal code prohibits homosexual acts between adult Muslims and punishes them with the death penalty. However, there have been no executions since 1987. Homosexual practices between women are subject to a prison sentence of three months to two years and a fine.

Myanmar

Ruling by the International Court of Justice

On 23.01.20, the International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled that Myanmar must take immediate action to protect the estimated 600,000 Rohingya still living in Myanmar. Although the ruling on the emergency measures does not represent a final decision, it is seen to be sending an important signal. The Gambia had brought the case against Myanmar to the court for acts of violence committed by the army against this Muslim minority, invoking the Genocide Convention. Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto head of government, had defended the military's actions before the UN court and denied the accusation of genocide.

Nigeria

ISWAP pastor executed

On 20.01.20, the Islamic terrorist organisation Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) beheaded Reverend Lawan Andimi who had been in their custody. He had been abducted on 02.01.20 in an attack carried on his hometown Michika (Local Government Area of Adamawa state) by ISWAP. Andimi was pastor of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria (EYM) and chairman of the local branch of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).

Pakistan

PTM leader arrested

On 26.01.20, Manzoor Pashteen, leader of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), was arrested near Peshawar (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa). The Pashtun rights movement is known for its criticism of Pakistan's powerful military, which it accuses of human rights violations and extrajudicial killings.

Russian Federation

Suspended prison sentence for Jehovah's witnesses

On 21.01.20, the District Court of Nadezhdinski in Russia's Far East province of Primorye sentenced the Jehovah's witness Grigory Bubnov to a six-year suspended prison sentence. The judge found him guilty of organising the activities of a banned group. The Supreme Court had classified the organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses in April 2017 as an extremist organisation and had banned it.

Syria

Idlib: offensive by regime soldiers

40 soldiers from the Syrian regime's forces were killed during a major attack carried out by armed opposition groups in Idlib and parts of Aleppo on 21.01.20, according to rescue forces. The air strikes supported a ground offensive by Assad-led forces, including Iranian militias.

By 26.01.20, the Syrian army and its allies are said to have conquered at least six villages around the strategically located city of Maaret an-Numan. According to rebel sources, the city is said to be almost deserted.

Rebel attacks on Aleppo

Syrian state television say three civilians were killed in a rocket attack launched from the rebel area in the capital of the Aleppo province on 21.01.20.

According to Russian state media, an attack by the rebels on Aleppo was repelled on 24.01.20. Eight civilians are said to have been killed and 22 injured within 24 hours in the attack on the western part of the city.

North-eastern Syria: deadly attack in Azaz

On 26.01.20, a car bomb exploded in front of a restaurant in the Turkish-occupied city of Azaz, killing eight people, according to Syrian state media and the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. More than a dozen people are said to have been injured.

Currency crisis

On 18.01.20, Syria's government led by Bashar al-Assad responded to the dramatic fall of the Syrian pound by issuing a decree, drastically increasing penalties for the use of foreign currencies. In future, a penalty of at least seven years of forced labour is looming. Since 2013, penalties have been restricted to between six months and three years' imprisonment.

In addition, a campaign entitled “Our pound is our pride” has been launched, urging traders and service providers to sell any staple or service for just one Syrian pound. The campaign is intended to lift the morale of the war-stricken population.

According to UN figures, eight out of ten Syrians earn less than USD 100 a month. Before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, the Syrian pound was 47:1 against the US dollar, and last week it was 1,000:1.

Uzbekistan

Blogger flees to Ukraine

On 20.01.20, the blogger Nafosat Ollashukurova fled from Uzbekistan to Ukraine after being arrested by the police in September 2019 following her publication of critical online reports. She was placed in a pre-trial detention facility for a 10-day period on charges of hooliganism. Ollashukurova claimed to have been beaten and threatened in police custody when she refused to make a false confession. After she had served her prison sentence, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital against her will, where she was also allegedly threatened several times. She was released from the hospital at the end of December 2019.

Western Balkans

Anti-corruption efforts in Balkan countries falter in 2019

According to recent press reports relating to the 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the corruption indicator published by Transparency International, there are signs that anti-corruption efforts in the Balkans reached a stalemate in 2019. In the Western Balkans region, Bosnia and Herzegovina slipped down the ranking, sharing 106th position (2019) among 180 countries (compared to 89th position in 2018). North Macedonia slipped from 93rd position in 2018 to 101st position in 2019, together with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia is another country that has remained on the same level since 2018, slipping slightly from 87th position in 2018 to 91st position in 2019). Montenegro is the only country showing consistency, having slipped just one point (from 67th in 2018 to 66th in 2019).

Yemen

Fighting escalates in Sanaa Governorate

The fighting between the Houthi rebels and the coalition led by Saudi Arabia has escalated in the eastern part of the Sanaa Governorate. This was preceded by an attack on a government military camp in Marib on 18.01.20, presumably perpetrated by the Houthis (cf. BN of 20.01.20). The pro-government coalition then launched a series of air strikes against the Houthi rebels. Several people were killed and families have been forced to flee.