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Briefing Notes

15 July 2019

Afghanistan

Peace talks

Last week representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban met in Qatar for the first time for a two-day intra-Afghan dialogue that had been organised by Qatar and Germany. The government representatives (together with opposition politicians, representatives of the media and civil society) attended in a personal capacity, because the Taliban officially continue to refuse to talk to the Kabul government.

The joint communiqué issued at the end urges all parties to scale down the violence, not to attack public facilities and to lower the number of civilian victims "to zero". The security of schools, madrassas, hospitals, market places, dams and other places of work should be guaranteed. However, no reference was made to any cease-fire. The communiqué also dealt with the issues of the Islamic direction of Afghanistan, its independence of foreign influence, the return of (internal) refugees and the release of old, handicapped or sick prisoners.

Civilians dead after raid on hospital

Human Rights Watch reported that in the night of 8 to 9 July 2019 Afghan security forces searched a hospital operated by the Swedish Afghanistan Committee in Day Miradad district (Wardak province, centre) for Taliban. They arrested patients and staff and separated four people for questioning from the rest - the hospital's director, a lab assistant, a guard and a social worker. With the exception of the director all of them were found shot later on. It seems that in recent years the hospital had already been targeted several times by the security forces. In 2019 the number of so-called night raids by Afghan security forces have significantly increased.

Wedding party attacked

At least nine people died and another 40 were wounded in the suicide bombing of a wedding party in Nangarhar province (east) on 12 July 2019. Allegedly the attack was directed against the local head of a pro-government militia fighting the Taliban. The assassin reportedly was a 13-year-old boy.

Albania

A crisis-torn country

Since February the country has been going through an ever-deepening crisis. Mass protests are an almost weekly feature; the opposition, consisting of the Democratic Party (DP) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), has been boycotting parliament for months and did not participate in the recent local elections. The opposition accuses the acting government of Prime Minister Edi Rama of the Socialist Party (SP) to have bought votes on a massive scale in the 2017 parliamentary elections. Allegedly the Albanian investigation agencies possess wire tap recordings proving this. Prior to the local elections militant opposition followers set fire to several polling stations. Probably in response to the pressure exerted by the US and the EU the election remained relatively peaceful (see BN of 01 July 2019).

The two political camps have been confronting each other bitterly for decades, mutually accusing each other of corruption. In the opposition's view Prime Minister Edi Rama is the head of a drug cartel and the Socialists say that the opposition is so adamant only, because it is in particularly its power structures that will be

considerably impacted by the legal reform the government initiated. Despite the fact that some of the criticism is justified and some of the demands are legitimate, the opposition has neither the trust of the people nor the support of the West. The Democrats who ruled the country until 2013 are also considered to be corrupt.

Probably in October the European Council will decide, whether accession talks with Albania will be initiated according to the EU Commission's recent recommendation. However, current developments rather confirm the view of some European countries that Albania does not meet the accession criteria.

Algeria

Protests against the old ruling elite continue

For the 22nd time masses of Algerians took to the streets after Friday prayers to protest against the old power elite and for the new civilian government. In the capital Algiers 1,000 lawyers were among them demanding an independent judiciary and the release of those arrested during the June protests for carrying the banned Berber flag, which is the Berber's symbol for their fight for more rights.

Burundi

Government tightens control of the media

Human Rights Watch reported that the government of Burundi is tightening its control of the media. It appointed Eric Nshimirimana, a high-ranking official of the governing party, as director of the only public broadcaster of Burundi. Previously Nshimirimana was the chairman of the pro-government youth organization Imbonerakure. The UN classify this organization as a militia and hold it responsible for executions, kidnappings and torture of political opponents.

Cameroon

About 40 CRM prisoners released

On 12 July 2019 at least 39 of the supporters of the opposition party CRM (Cameroon Renaissance Movement) were released from Kondengui high security prison in Yaoundé. They had been arrested in January 2019. On the same day the military tribunal in Yaoundé had dropped all charges against them. Several CRM supporters still remain in Kondengui prison. They had been arrested at several protests against the results of the presidential elections and the detention of party leader Maurice Kamto which the CRM had organized in January and July 2019.

China

More violent protests in Hong Kong

Police and protesters clashed again last weekend (13/14 July 2019). The confrontations took place in Sha Tin, one of the cities in the north that belong to the so-called new territories of Hong Kong. Security forces used pepper spray and batons; some arrests are reported as well.

The protests were triggered by the disputed extradition law, which would allow the extradition of suspects to China. Although Hong Kong's government said that it would not implement the law, many of the protesters are still demanding the resignation of Chief Executive Carrie Lam. The organizers say that 110,000 people took part in the protests, the police puts the number at 28,000.

Columbia

High reward for arrest of ex-rebel leader

Columbian police offered a reward of up to three billion Colombian pesos (approx. 830,000 euros) for the capture of ex-Farc leader Jesús Santrich. President Iván Duque assumes that Santrich fled to neighbouring

Venezuela. The US are accusing the former guerrilla leader Santrich of drug trafficking and demand his extradition.

Santrich had disappeared in the north of Columbia at the end of June and failed to appear at a hearing of the Supreme Court on 09 July 2019. The court issued a warrant of arrest and asked Interpol for support. Santrich, who suffers from impaired eyesight, was one of the negotiators of the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the leftist rebels of the Revolutionary Forces of Columbia (Farc). The Farc fighters handed in their weapons and became a political party.

Eritrea

UN Special Rapporteur to continue observation of human rights situation in Eritrea

The UN Human Rights Council extended the Special Rapporteur's mandate for Eritrea. Daniela Kravetz will investigate human rights violations in Eritrea for another year, the United Nations informed in Geneva on 11 July 2019. 21 countries voted for the resolution, 13 abstained and another 13 countries voted against the mandate's extension, among them Eritrea that currently is a member of the Human Rights Council as a result of the rotation principle. The resolution invites the Eritrean government to cooperate with the Special Rapporteur. The government has been denying entry to the country to the UN Rapporteur for years, though. The draft resolution was submitted by Germany and other western countries.

The Special Rapporteur's recent report says that the situation of human rights in Eritrea remains difficult, despite the peace agreement reached with Ethiopia in mid-2018 and that no improvement can be expected in the future. The government's crackdown on the churches was criticized as well. It says that Orthodox priests had been arrested recently and Catholic hospitals had been closed down. Furthermore, members of the opposition are arbitrarily arrested and detained for years without proper court proceedings. Western diplomats, however, criticized the reports of the UN Human Rights Council, because they failed to evidence when, where and by whom which crimes had been committed. Saying they portrayed the situation in Eritrea in an 'unbalance' way.

India

Kashmir: BJP is planning camps to settle Hindus

A party spokesman of the governing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya-Janata Party (BJP) announced plans to set up secured camps in the predominantly Muslim state of Jammu and Kashmir to enable hundreds of thousands of Hindus to settle in the Kashmir valley.

Fatalities and displaced persons in India's north and north-east

Dozens of people were killed by floods and mud slides caused by heavy monsoon rains in India's north and north-east, more than one million people were driven from their homes. In Uttar Pradesh state electric shocks and collapsing houses have killed at least 19 people since 10 July 2019. In Assam state at least ten people died, and another nine in the states of Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram.

India/Pakistan

OHCHR report on the human rights situation in Kashmir

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a report on the situation of human rights in Kashmir that is administered by India and Pakistan. The report states a deterioration of the human rights situation in the reporting period of May 2018 to April 2019. In the Indian part, which is the state of Jammu and Kashmir, there were 586 casualties, including 160 civilians, 267 insurgents and 159 members of the security forces. This constitutes the highest number of victims since 2008.

The situation also worsened in the Pakistani part, that consists of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan (G-B). Freedom of opinion and of assembly are violated, the report says. Journalists are threatened and forced to exercise self-censorship. It also says that critics have disappeared.

Iraq

Executive order to fully integrate the Popular Mobilisation Unit

The Iraqi government's executive order no. 37 decrees that the Popular Mobilisation Unit (Hashd al-Shaabi) shall be fully integrated into the Iraqi security forces. The relevant militias have until 31 July 2019 to implement the order, e.g. by closing down the militias' offices. Formally the Popular Mobilisation Unit has been under the command of the prime minister since 2016.

Protests in Basra

On 03 July 2019 the national journalists' association of Iraq published its concerns about the security forces' treatment of journalists in Basra. Allegedly a member of the security forces had announced to have all journalists arrested who reported about unauthorised protests. Recently at least one journalist of the Iraqi broadcaster al-Sumaria had been arrested. Just as last year (see BN of 03 September 2018) protests had broken out in Basra triggered by the poor supply situation, unemployment and corruption.

Iran

Retirement home for Baha'i in Karaj threatened by closure

The Persian language news portal Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) reported that a retirement home for members of the Baha'i religious community in the city of Karaj will be closed on orders of the prosecutor's office. Previous attempts to clear the building had failed due to the inhabitants' resistance.

Artillery fire on Iraqi Kurdish areas

Kurdish media reported that Pasadaran units fired heavy artillery on Kurdish autonomous areas around the city of Sidakan in northern Iraq on 10 July 2019. This had been preceded by armed confrontations between Kurdish fighters and Iranian Pasadaran over the last four weeks. In early July a public statement of the Democratic Forces of Kurdistan (HDK) confirmed that a number of casualties on the Iranian side resulted from fighting between Peshmerga and Pasadaran. About 10 million Kurds are living in western Iran. But Iran repeatedly rejected any independence for the Kurdish regions and thereby generated tensions. As a consequence, dozens of Kurdish activists are in detention on charges of separatist activities.

Detained journalists on hunger strike

The news portal HRANA reported on 14 July 2019 that the detained journalist Sanaz Alahyari and her husband have been on hunger strike for more than eleven days. Alahyari's condition is critical. Both were arrested in January 2019 and have since been held at Tehran's Evin prison. Their arrest followed their reporting about labour struggles in Khuzestan province in southern Iran in November 2018. Their colleague Amir Amirgholi was arrested along with the couple. Criminal proceedings have been initiated against the journalists on charges of allegedly posing a threat to national security.

Almost 40 young offenders executed in the last five years

The Iranian Human Rights Organisation (IHRO) reports that at least 110 people were executed between 01 January and 30 June 2019, including two minors. Despite its signature of various international conventions Iran executed at least seven minors in 2018. Only some of the executions are publicly announced. 83 of those executed were sentenced to Qisas (an eye-for-an-eye punishment) or to retribution in the form of contributions in kind in line with the rules of the Sharia. Thirteen others were hanged for rape, nine for drug abuse, four for Mohareb (war against god) by armed robbery and another person for an offence of espionage. Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen are the only countries in the world where minor offenders can receive capital punishment.

Kazakhstan

Participants at unauthorized protests arrested

Kazakhstan's interior ministry informed that about 100 people have been arrested, including by use of force, by Kazakh security forces at protests in Nursultan and Almaty and some smaller cities on 06 July 2019. Most of them were released shortly afterwards. The interior ministry said that 19 people were given prison sentences of up to fifteen days, 23 were sentenced to fines. Some of these unauthorized protests had been organized by the party "Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan" which is banned in the country. They were directed against the takeover of power by the new president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Tokayev had been appointed interim president after the resignation of long-standing president Nursultan Nazarbayev in March 2019. He went on to win the early presidential elections on 09 June 2019 with a majority of 70.8%. Many protests broke out across the country after the announcement of the election results, the OSCE had criticised the elections as being unfair and not free.

Lebanon

Housing of Syrian refugees torn down in Aarsal

On 01 July 2019 Lebanese security forces tore down 20 housings of Syrian refugees in Aarsal. There are reports that the inhabitants of other refugee settlements in Aarsal tore down their shelters themselves to anticipate the army's actions. The demolition was the result of a decree that wants to enforce the rules on construction materials admitted for refugee settlements (see BN of 17 June 2019).

Moldova

New government takes action against corrupt civil servants

Moldova's new coalition government formed by the pro-Russian Socialist Party (PSRM) and the pro-European election alliance ACUM under the leadership of Prime Minister Maia Sandu (see BN of 01 July 2019) is taking decisive action against corrupt civil servants. On 09 July 2019 the Moldovan parliament started the impeachment process of the former attorney general who seems to have been the most influential defender of the old oligarchy. He supervised 660 prosecutors most of whom are reported to have worked for the oligarch and PDM chairman Vlad Plahotniuc. Yielding to pressure exerted by the new government, the entire constitutional court had already resigned at the end of June. Several corrupt civil servants also had to resign at the customs agency and the interior ministry.

Without the joint intervention of the West and Russia the surprising change of power in Moldova, dubbed as "silent revolution" by some commentators, would not have been possible.

Nigeria

Violent confrontations between IMN and the security forces

On 09 July 2019 hundreds of members of the Shia Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) demanded the immediate release of their leader and founder Ibrahim El-Zakzaky who has been under arrest without trial since December 2015, in front of the main entrance of the National Assembly (parliament) in Abuja. This resulted in clashes with the police. IMN announced that the police shot two IMN members and injured several, the police, however, said that two (others say five) policemen had suffered gunshot wounds. 38 arrested Shia were indicted for rioting by three courts in Abuja on 11 July 2019. 28 of them were released by the court against bail. Another IMN protest in front of the buildings of the Federal Secretariat in Abuja was dispersed by the police using firearms. Several Shia were arrested. The protest march of IMN in Lagos state from the Maryland area to the office of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in Ikeja on 11 July 2019 remained peaceful.

A march of IMN in Zaria (Kaduna state) on 12 December 2015 had clashed with a motor convoy of the chief of the armed forces. Within three days about 350 civilians, mostly Shia, were killed by the security forces, many were arrested, including Sheikh Zakzaky and his wife. According to Amnesty International the most recent incident was on 27 October 2018 during a procession for the Shia Arbain festival and two days later during a protest for Zakzaky's release, when at least 39 IMN members died because the police and the military used excessive force (see BN of 05 November 2018). There are about four million Shia in Nigeria.

Pakistan

Kashmir: Al-Qaeda leader calls for attacks

On 09 July 2019 Aiman az-Zawahiri, the leader of the al-Qaeda terrorist network, called upon militant Islamists in Kashmir to attack the Indian army via video message. In this context he also criticized the Pakistani secret service.

Judge responsible for the Sharif case suspended

Judge Arshad Malik who had sentenced the former prime minister Nawaz Sharif to seven years imprisonment for corruption in December 2018, was dismissed on 12 July 2019. He is accused of having sentenced Sharif under pressure, which his daughter Maryam Nawaz can allegedly prove with relevant evidence.

Pakistan/Afghanistan

Opening of Torkham border crossing

A spokesman of the Afghan foreign ministry said that Pakistan and Afghanistan intend to keep the border crossing near Torkham (between the Pakistani tribal areas and Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan) open around the clock to facilitate travel and promote trade between the two countries. The border crossings between the two countries have been closed repeatedly in the past.

Somalia

Somalia executes death sentences

There are reports that the Somali military executed three members of al-Shabaab who had been sentenced for an attack on the Nasa-Hablood hotel in the capital Mogadishu in October 2017. 18 people were killed and 47 wounded by the assault.

Attacks

On 12 June 2019 al-Shabaab fighters attacked a hotel in the port city of Kismayo, it is said that 26 people were killed and 50 injured. The casualties included politicians, tribal leaders and journalists from Somalia and other countries who had assembled in the hotel to discuss the upcoming elections in Kismayo.

One person died on 11 July 2019 when a bomb exploded near a police station in the Waberi district of Mogadishu.

On 08 and 09 July 2019 several civilians were killed or injured when land mines planted by al-Shabaab fighters exploded near the town of Dhobley (Lower Juba region) and near the city of Fafadun (Gedo region).

Also on 08 July 2019 al-Shabaab fighters detonated a bomb in the Hodan district of Mogadishu. There is no information on the number of victims. On the same day the police and al-Shabaab members clashed at a security check point in Mogadishu. Reportedly two rebels and one policeman were killed.

Sudan

More large-scale protests

Tens of thousands took to the streets in Khartoum and other cities on 13 July 2019 to protest against the military leadership and commemorate the many protesters who lost their lives since the beginning of the uprising in December 2018. They demanded justice for the protesters killed by the security forces on 03 June 2019.

Internet shut-down lifted

The internet had been shut-down in wide parts of the country after the violent suppression of the protests on 03 June 2019, but it is said that since 09 July 2019 it is operational again in wide parts of the country. A court in Khartoum had ordered the service providers Zain, MTN and Sudani to open access for their customers again.

Syria

Heavy fighting near Hama and numerous air raids on Idlib

The pro-opposition Syrian Human Rights Observatory reported that only in week 28 more than 100 fighters, but also civilians and children had been killed in air strikes on the Idlib region and by heavy fighting in Hama. It said that over 440 raids had been flown which for the first time also targeted the city centre of Idlib. Idlib and Hama provinces are the only regions in Syria that are still under the control of rebel groups. Syrian government troops have been advancing against them more intensively since April, reinforced by Russian air support. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres denounced the air strikes on medical installations in the region.

Series of attacks in northern Syria

Reportedly at least 13 people were killed and more than 40 wounded in a series of attacks in northern Syria. A total of five bombs exploded in several places, one of them hit a Christian church in the city of Qamishli near the border to Turkey. Qamishli is mostly controlled by Kurdish militias, but some parts of the inner city are under the control of pro-government militias. Three more bombs exploded in the city of Al-Hasaka about 80 kilometres south of Qamishli. One of the explosions occurred at a check point for Kurdish units. The most serious attack happened in Afrin which is controlled by rebels supported by Turkey.

Ukraine

Grenades launched against Kiev TV station

In the night of 13 July 2019, the building of the TV station 112 Ukraine was targeted by a grenade launcher. The police said that no-one was wounded and only the facade was damaged. The station, which is owned by the pro-Russian deputy Taras Kozak, planned to broadcast a documentary of the US director Oliver Stone about the events in the former Soviet republic after the pro-European protests on Maidan in Kiev five years ago. The prosecution had issued a warning to the TV station a few days before after it had announced its intention to air the film. The attorney general called it a Russian propaganda film. One day before the attack the station published an appeal to the police to protect journalists against the arbitrariness of radicals and said that it had been explicitly threatened with a physical attack by ultra-nationalist Ukrainian groups. After the attack the station cancelled the airing of the film that had been scheduled for 16 July 2019.

Yemen

Houthi rebels pronounce 30 death sentences

There are reports that Houthi rebels sentenced 30 people to death on charges of espionage for the Saudi-Arabian-led coalition. Some of these cases already date back several years. It is said that the convicted are close to the Islah political party which is often called an ally of the Muslim Brotherhood. An appeal is possible against these sentences. The UN report that some of the convicts had been illegally detained and tortured.

Cholera

According to the UN over 460,000 cases of Cholera have been registered this year already. It is said that at least 705 people have died from the disease. This marks a clear increase against 2018 when there were 380,000 cases. The war has taken its toll on the health care system and has left many of the health care facilities dysfunctional. The spreading of cholera is accelerated by the recent flash floods, poor waste management and lack of access to clean water.

UAE cuts military strength

The UAE, one of the main provider countries of troops for Yemen, are said to have decided on cutting their troop strength in Yemen. An anonymous official said that the UAE had already trained 90,000 Yemeni soldiers. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has already taken control of the formerly UAE-operated bases in Mokha port (Gouvernement Taiz) and in al-Khawkhah (Gouvernement Hodeida) and has sent armed forces to Aden.

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