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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

Governance and persecution

On 18.02.24 and 19.02.24, a UN conference on the situation in Afghanistan was held in Doha (Qatar) under the chairmanship of UN Secretary-General António Guterres. Despite receiving an invitation to attend the conference, the Taliban refused to attend after their demands to be recognised as the "sole official representatives of Afghanistan" and to hold talks with the UN Secretary-General were rejected. The Taliban's Foreign Ministry took issue in particular with the fact that representatives of Afghan civil society and women had also been invited to attend the conference.

UN experts have called for the recognition of "gender apartheid" as a crime against humanity, which is currently being examined by the UN General Assembly's Sixth Committee, highlighting in particular the plight of women and girls in Afghanistan.

According to media reports issued on 22.02.24, the Taliban Supreme Court carried out the death sentence of two men accused of murder in Ghazni province under the Qisas law. Following the approval from Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, the sentence was carried out by firing squad in Ghazni province the same day. On 26.02.2024, the Taliban announced another public execution of a man convicted of murder in Jawzjan province. On 25.02.24, a young couple in Jawzjan province and two other people in Laghman province were flogged by the Taliban for having "extramarital relations".

The acting governor of Kandahar province issued a directive on 18.02.24 banning photography and filming of meetings with local Taliban officials in the province. According to reports issued on 22.02.24, the Taliban have instructed school headmasters in Kandahar province to ban girls over the age of 10 from attending classes beyond the sixth grade. In Khost province, the Taliban have prohibited women and girls from making contact with local radio and television channels. On 24.02.24, the Taliban's Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice once again called on anyone running beauty salons for women to close within one month.¹

Burkina Faso

Renewed kidnappings of members of the opposition

On 20.02.24 and 21.02.24, unknown actors picked up and abducted activist Bassirou Badjo and another member of the political movement Balai Citoyen in the capital Ouagadougou. Balai Citoyen is demanding the unconditional release of its members. According to media reports, the two have been in hiding since their names were included on a list of people to be recruited to participate in the fight against jihadist groups in November 2023. According to HRW, at least a dozen activist civilians and members of opposition parties have been conscripted to participate in government security operations in the fight against jihadism (cf. BN of 13.11.23). On 30.12.23, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) expressed its concern in a letter addressing the arrest and imprisonment of political and civil society representatives who are critical of the military government led by Captain

Ibrahim Traoré. At least 20 journalists, opposition activists and civilian activists have been reported missing. On 01.12.23, the Secretary General of the Coalition against Impunity and the Stigmatisation of Certain Populations (CISC), Daouda Diallo, was abducted. On 24.12.23, unknown individuals picked up and abducted the former Foreign Minister Ablassé Ouédraogo in Ouagadougou and on 24.01.24, unknown actors took and abducted the coordinator of the political movement Servir et non se servir (SENS), Guy-Hervé Kam, in Ouagadougou (cf. BN of 08.01.24 and 29.01.24).²

Sahel region: several worshippers killed

On 25.02.24, armed gunmen attacked a Catholic church in the village of Essakanne in the Sahel region of northern Burkina Faso, near the borders with Mali and Niger, during Sunday mass, killing at least 15 worshippers. According to media reports, several other people were injured. The gunmen were reportedly suspected Islamist militants. Fatal attacks have been carried out on churches and Catholics in northern Burkina Faso in the past.³

Colombia

Attacks on local politicians and locally elected representatives in January 2024

Attacks have been carried out repeatedly by non-state armed groups on locally elected representatives in Colombia in a bid to assert their own interests or to intimidate politicians in the event of resistance. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded at least 10 such attacks in January 2024 alone, including the kidnapping of a registrar in Chocó, an armed attack on the newly elected mayor of Tumaco in Nariño and several threats against mayors and local councillors in Valle del Cauca. Security incidents and incidents of violence against political actors had already increased significantly in the run-up to the 2023 regional elections. On 31.12.23, a re-elected member of parliament was shot dead in Tuluá. The Pacific region has been particularly hard hit by the violence against politicians and public administration officials.⁴

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Civil society laments setback for human rights

On 21.02.24, the Panel of Experts of Congolese civil society reported a setback for human rights in the country. They say a "climate of terror" has developed, with activists being arbitrarily arrested, adding that it is incomprehensible that the government led by President Félix Tshisekedi, which is committed to the fight for human rights and respect for freedom of expression and assembly, is resorting to repression. According to a member of the Panel of Experts, two activists were temporarily detained on 03.02.24 for commemorating the 600-day siege of the strategically important trading and border town of Bunagana in the eastern conflict-ridden province of North Kivu. He also mentioned the ongoing detention of the popular journalist and correspondent of several international media outlets, Stanis Bujakera (cf. BN of 18.09.23).⁵

Egypt

Activist released after serving prison sentence

Egyptian authorities reportedly released the publisher and political activist Hisham Kassem on 20.02.24. Kassem was arrested on 20.08.23 and sentenced to six months in prison. He was fined EGP 20,000 (approx. EUR 597, as of 26.02.24) in mid-September 2023 for libel and slander against government officials (cf. BN of 28.08.23). As a co-founder of the political group al-Tayar al-Hurr or Free Current, which was formed in June 2023, Kassem had been discussed as a potential presidential candidate in the December 2023 elections.⁶

The Gambia

Survey: high ethnic, religious and political tolerance; zero tolerance of homosexuality

According to a media report, a tolerance survey conducted among 1,200 Gambian adults by the pan-African research network Afrobarometer between 30.08.23 and 19.09.23 showed that a total of 43 percent of respondents said that their ethnic group was experiencing discrimination by the government. Around 18 percent reported that their ethnic group is treated unfairly often or always. The proportion of respondents who say their ethnic group never suffers discrimination has fallen from 71 percent to 53 percent since 2018. The media report does not contain any information about the types of discrimination involved or the ethnic groups affected.

Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of respondents expressed very tolerant attitudes towards people of different nationalities (83 percent) and different religions (77 percent) as well as people of different political affiliations (90 percent).

The survey once again demonstrated the lack of tolerance of homosexuality in the country. Ninety-three percent of respondents said they are opposed to same-sex relationships and homosexuality. According to an Afrobarometer report published in 2020, 97 percent of respondents said they were categorically opposed to homosexuality. Participants were asked whether they would mind living beside someone who is homosexual. In 2020, this value represented the lowest acceptance rate in the ranking of 34 African countries (national average value: 20 percent).⁷

Tear gas used to disperse crowds at event due to alleged breaches of regulations

According to media reports, security forces used tear gas to disperse crowds at an event organised by the splinter group "No to Alliance" of the former ruling party Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) in a locality in the city of Serekunda on 18.02.24. The event, which had initially been authorised by the authorities, was later dispersed due to alleged breaches of regulations. According to the leader of the movement, Yaya Tamba, a number of people were temporarily arrested. Several people required medical treatment after inhaling tear gas. "No to Alliance" rejects the coalition between the APRC and President Adama Barrow, which has been in place since 2021. It supports the exiled former president Yahya Jammeh, who continues to claim the APRC party chairmanship for himself and denies the legitimacy of the current APRC party executive committee.⁸

Guinea

Military junta dissolves interim government

On 19.02.24, the ruling military junta National Council of the Rally for Development (Comité National de Rassemblement pour le Développement (CNRD)) led by interim President Mamadi Doumbouya, who has been promoted to General in the meantime, dissolved the interim government of Prime Minister Bernard Goumou by decree with immediate effect. All ministers have been dismissed. The secretaries-general of the respective ministries, in particular, will be in charge for the time being. Citing statements by military representatives, it is also reported that the members of the dissolved cabinet had to return their vehicles and passports and had their bank accounts frozen. The borders are said to have been closed for a short time; security has been tightened in Conakry. According to further reports, riots erupted in response to the announcement of the dissolution of the government. Two teenagers, both young men, were allegedly shot dead by security forces.

No reasons were given for the dissolution of the government. It is suspected that it was linked to tensions between Prime Minister Goumou and Justice Minister Alphonse Charles Wright. According to media reports, the military will be demanding greater involvement in the formation of a new government.⁹

Prison sentence for media trade unionist

The secretary general of the Union of the Press Professionals of Guinea (Syndicat des professionnels de la presse de Guinée (SPPG)), Sékou Jamal Pendessa, was sentenced to six months' imprisonment on 23.02.24, three months of which were suspended, as further reported. He also received a fine of GNF 500,000 (approx. EUR 54, as of 26.02.24). Pendessa was arrested on 19.01.24 (cf. BN of 05.02.24). He has reportedly been found guilty of provoking an unarmed assembly, of disturbing and threatening to disturb public order and safety and of violating the integrity and dignity of individuals. His lawyer has announced that he will be lodging an appeal. Reporters Without Borders

(RSF) have condemned the court ruling. Thirteen trade unions, including SPPG, have announced that they will call a general strike for 26.02.24 in the event of a guilty verdict.¹⁰

Blockade of social networks lifted

According to a news agency, the restrictions on access to certain websites, in particular various social media sites (cf. BN of 08.01.24), were lifted during the early hours of 23.02.24, three months after they were imposed. The measure is interpreted as an attempt by the ruling military junta to distance itself from the corresponding measures taken by the overthrown civilian transitional government.¹¹

ECOWAS lifts sanctions

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is lifting sanctions against Guinea that were imposed following the military coup (cf. BN of 10.10.22). This was reported by news agencies referring to the closing communique at the ECOWAS meeting issued by the heads of state and government on 24.02.24. ECOWAS said it was lifting financial and economic sanctions. It did not say when the political sanctions will end.¹²

India

Report on demolition of Muslim homes, businesses and mosques

Amnesty International (AI) described in a recent report how bulldozers have become synonymous with targeted oppression of Muslims in India. Using the latest technology, it verified the authenticity of the use of bulldozers for the partial or complete demolition of Muslim homes, businesses and mosques in the states of Assam, Delhi, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh between April and June 2022. Out of a total of 78 photos and videos which AI received both from social media platforms and from people affected by the demolitions, 69 videos and photos were verified. Of these, six were from Gujarat, five from Assam, 14 each from Delhi and Uttar Pradesh and 25 from Madhya Pradesh. There are also five videos showing forced evictions in Uttarakhand.¹³

Iran

Multi-year prison sentences for two imprisoned activists

According to media reports issued on 19.02.24, two women detained in Tehran's Evin prison have been sentenced to 15 years in prison. The sentences were handed down by the Tehran Revolutionary Court on charges including membership of anti-government groups and armed rebellion. Referring to information provided by a human rights organisation, it was reported that the individual charges were unclear. The two women were arrested in Tehran in August 2023. Both women have a history of previous detentions and imprisonments for their activism.¹⁴

Religious minorities: report on the situation of Christians in Iran

According to a press release issued on 19.02.24, the Christian-based human rights organisation Article 18 published a report on the situation of Christians in Iran in cooperation with three other Christian-based human rights organisations. According to the report, the number of Christians who have been detained rose in the second half of 2023. Whereas 134 Christians were arrested in 2022, 166 Christians were arrested in 2023. The report showed that in 2023 at least 17 Christians who were arrested in 2023 had been sentenced to prison terms of three to five years or to non-custodial sentences such as fines, whipping, and community service.

It was not reported whether the victims were Christians by birth or converts to Christianity. According to Article 18, only a few of those affected were willing to make their cases public. However, the results of the report cannot be independently verified.¹⁵

Hacktivist group publishes presumably leaked content of judicial files

According to media reports, an Iranian hacktivist group has published confidential content of judicial files. According to the group, they infiltrated the court's case management system in order to access documents and files. Some of the documents allegedly provide evidence, inter alia, of targeted action taken by the Iranian judiciary against journalists living abroad, in particular against journalists from Persian-language foreign media. The hacktivist group released more than three million court files. The information and authenticity of the published

content cannot be independently verified. The official news portal of the judiciary stated that the content was fake.¹⁶

Iraq

Kurdistan Region: reports of civilian deaths after airstrikes

On 20.02.24, two civilians were killed and two others were injured in a suspected Turkish airstrike on the abandoned village of Kafia (Dohuk province). According to reports, the victims were farmers who were tending to their farms. On 22.02.24, Iraqi soldiers manned a new checkpoint in Dohuk in the immediate vicinity of the border in order to stabilise the security situation in northern Iraq.

Türkiye frequently bombards strongholds of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in northern Iraq. Türkiye has stepped up its attacks since the PKK launched a major attack against a Turkish base in December 2023. According to an NGO based in the region, the Turkish military carried out a total of 1,548 attacks on northern Iraqi territory in 2023, including over 1,100 airstrikes alone. The majority of the attacks hit Dohuk province (517), followed by Erbil (475) and Sulaymaniyah (420). Thirty-six attacks were recorded in Nineva. Many villages along the border between Iraq and Türkiye have been evacuated over time because of the airstrikes and are currently considered to be abandoned. However, the nearby farmland continues to provide a livelihood for many former residents.¹⁷

Iraq's Supreme Court: quota seats for minorities in the Kurdish parliament unconstitutional

On 21.02.24, Iraq's Supreme Court ruled that the 11 seats reserved for minorities in the Kurdish regional parliament were unconstitutional. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and a Christian party from Sulaymaniyah had filed a lawsuit against the Kurdish electoral law. They said they were concerned about the consolidation of votes from all Kurdish provinces, which they see as discriminating, inter alia, against Turkmen people from Erbil and Christians from Sulaymaniyah. Numerous Christian parties said they were shocked at the court ruling, and at least one party has already announced that it will not stand in the upcoming elections.

According to Kurdish electoral law, 11 of the 111 seats in the regional parliament are reserved for ethnic or religious minorities, five for Turkmen and Christians respectively and one for the Armenian minority.

The seat quotas for minorities in the federal parliament remain unaffected by this ruling, with nine of the 329 seats still reserved for minorities (five for Christians and one each for members of the Yazidi, Mandaean, Shabak and Fayli-Kurdish minorities).¹⁸

Lebanon

Situation along the border between Lebanon and Israel

Hezbollah and allied Islamist militia on the one side continue to trade nearly-daily fire with Israeli armed forces on the other. Due to the large number of incidents taking place, only events that report on civilian fatalities will be summarised.

On 21.02.24, an Israeli airstrike killed a Hezbollah fighter in the Lebanese village of Majdal Zoun. A civilian woman and a six-year-old girl were reportedly killed in an another airstrike.

On 23.02.24, two paramedics and a Hezbollah fighter were killed in an airstrike on the border town of Blida. The medics belonged to the "Islamic Health Committee", which is run by Hezbollah.

Since the fighting began on 08.10.23, a total of 276 people have been killed in Lebanon, 44 of them civilians. In Israel, 16 people have been killed so far, six of them civilians.¹⁹

Libya

Ten individuals shot dead in Tripoli

According to media reports, at least 10 people were shot dead by unidentified gunmen in the Abu Salim district of Tripoli on 17.02.2014.

Among those killed were two members of the militia known as the Stability Support Apparatus, which is said to control the Abu Salim neighbourhood and is considered to be one of the largest armed groups in Tripoli.

According to an agreement, armed groups are to leave Tripoli by mid-April 2024

During a press conference held on 21.02.24, Imad Trabelsi, Interior Minister of the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU), announced that an agreement had been reached following months of negotiations with the ruling armed groups in Tripoli. According to the deal, armed militia will leave the capital by the end of this year's Islamic fasting month of Ramadan, will return to their headquarters and be replaced by regular police forces.

The militias with whom the government struck a deal are the Stability Support Apparatus, Special Deterrence Force, General Security Force and the 444th and 111th Brigades. However, media reports are already expressing doubts about whether the agreement will be fully implemented, as the latter can only go hand in hand with a comprehensive agreement on Libya's political future.²⁰

Niger

Sanctions lifted

Following a meeting held in the Nigerian capital Abuja on 24.02.24, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) announced that the trade, travel and economic sanctions imposed on 30.07.23 (cf. BN of 31.07.23) would be lifted with immediate effect. This move is reportedly being made purely on humanitarian grounds. However, nothing has changed in the attitude towards the military government and ECOWAS continues to stand by its "zero tolerance towards unconstitutional changes of government".²¹

Nigeria

Katsina State: deadly attack and kidnappings

On 19.02.24, violent actors described as bandits attacked a village in the Faskari Local Government Area (LGA) of Katsina State, killing at least six people and abducting around 40. According to media reports, a traditional ruler was among those killed. At least 10 people were reportedly injured. The armed actors are also said to be responsible for setting several houses and vehicles ablaze and for stealing animals.

Kidnappings and deadly attacks on communities by armed groups have occurred in Katsina State in the past (cf. BN of 13.11.23, 15.01.24 and 19.02.24).²²

Kaduna State: deadly attacks

Kidnappings and attacks by gunmen on villages have already taken place in northwest Nigeria in the past (cf. BN of 28.08.23, 09.10.23 and 04.12.23). Media reports recently made the headlines, according to which unknown actors described as bandits killed at least 12 people and set fire to around 15 houses in an attack carried out on a community in Kajuru LGA in Kaduna State on 18.02.24. Several people were injured. A day earlier, on 17.02.2014, gunmen allegedly abducted around 15 people in a community in Kachia Local Government Area and two days earlier, on 16.02.24, gunmen described as bandits attacked two communities in Kauru and Igabi Local Government Areas, killing at least nine people, abducting 35 people and injuring others.²³

Military admits accidental airstrike

The Nigerian Air Force has officially accepted responsibility for a deadly airstrike carried out in Nasarawa State in January 2023, according to media reports. A senior air force representative travelled to the affected area at the end of January 2024 to express his regret and explain that it was an accidental bombing. The cause of the incident, in which dozens of civilians belonging to the Fulani ethnic group were killed on 24.01.23, was initially unclear (cf. BN of 30.01.23). According to a media report, this is the first ever apology of this kind. In recent years, there have been several cases of mistaken airstrikes on civilians. For example, the accidental bombardment of a village in Kaduna State by a military drone on 03.12.23, in which at least 85 civilians were killed, sparked particular outrage. Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu ordered a thorough investigation shortly after the incident became known (cf. BN of 11.12.23).²⁴

Southeast: security forces destroy camps of armed insurgents

Nigerian security forces destroyed a camp used by armed insurgents in a village in Awka North Local Government Area in the southeastern state of Anambra on 19.02.24. According to media reports, the police chief gave the order

to storm the camp after the insurgents disrupted the business activities of local traders on 12.02.24 while trying to enforce a so-called sit-at-home order. During the storming of the camp, several people were reportedly injured and vehicles, ammunition and firearms were also confiscated. Nigerian government agencies and other authorities regularly hold members of the groups that support the secession of southeastern Nigeria, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), responsible for acts of violence in the southeast of the country. However, the latter just as regularly deny any such accusations. Observers of the security situation in the region point out that violent groups with no direct connection to independence efforts are also active there. Sit-at-home orders are a type of voluntary curfew (lockdown) imposed on the population in certain regions of southeast Nigeria. IPOB has already used such measures in the past to try and exert pressure on the Nigerian government. One of the specific aims of such orders is to secure the release of IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu, who has been imprisoned since summer 2021 (cf. BN of 07.11.22). Anyone who disregards sit-at-home orders risks reprisals. There were several reports of separatist camps being destroyed in the region in 2023 (cf. BN of 31.07.23, 09.10.23 and 18.12.23).²⁵

Pakistan

Military operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

On 20.02.24, the Pakistani military announced that an armed militant had been killed in firefights during an operation in Dera Ismail Khan. A week earlier, nine militants and one soldier were killed in two military operations in Tank district and South Waziristan.²⁶

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

Gaza Strip: current developments; humanitarian situation

On 24.02.24, the Hamas-led Ministry of Health in the Gaza Strip stated that more than 29,606 Palestinians had been killed since the beginning of the war. Almost 70,000 others are reported to have been wounded. The Ministry does not officially distinguish between militants and civilians. According to official Israeli figures, more than 12,000 Hamas fighters have been killed by the military, while 239 Israeli military personnel have been killed in the fighting. According to a report released by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) on 24.02.24, ground fighting is continuing, particularly in the north and in Deir al-Balah and Khan Younis. In addition, airstrikes on Rafah are said to have increased. The number of aid deliveries via the two border crossings of Rafah and Kerem Shalom reportedly fell by 50 percent in February 2024 (up to and including 24.02.24) compared to the previous month of January 2024, with an average of 98 truck loads per day delivering supplies.

The WFP announced on 20.02.24 that the delivery of food aid to the north of the Gaza Strip had been paused. It stated that the number of aid deliveries had already halved over the course of the previous two weeks due to the increasingly turbulent situation in the north. It added that during the ongoing bombardments and ground operations by the Israeli military as well as numerous attacks and looting by the remaining starving population, the safety and security of aid workers could not be guaranteed.²⁷

West Bank: one Israeli killed; ongoing movement restrictions; new settlement plans

On 22.02.24, three Palestinian gunmen killed one Israeli and wounded five others when they opened fire with automatic weapons on cars that were stuck in a traffic jam on a highway heading towards Jerusalem. Two of the attackers were killed on the spot, while the third was captured shortly afterwards.

A Palestinian from the village of al-Dawha was wounded in raids and armed clashes between West Bank militias and the Israeli military.

According to reports, roadblocks and blockades that have restricted the movement of the Palestinian population since mid-October 2023 are still in place. Some villages and towns are said to be barely accessible by car, while major roads in the occupied West Bank are used almost exclusively by Israeli settlers.

On 22.02.24, the Israeli Minister of Finance announced new plans for the construction of further settlements with a total of 3,300 houses in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The plans were announced in response to the killing of an Israeli on the same day (see above).²⁸

Russian Federation

Jail sentences imposed after participation in memorial events for Navalny

Following the death of imprisoned regime critic Alexei Navalny on 16.02.24, protests and memorial events took place in 36 Russian cities. People laid flowers and lit candles at memorials to the victims of political violence. More than 400 people were arrested (cf. BN of 19.02.24). In summary proceedings, more than 200 penalties have so far been imposed on the mourners who took part in the spontaneous commemoration. In St. Petersburg alone, the courts ordered 199 people to be detained or fined, and several such administrative penalties were also handed down in Moscow. In St. Petersburg, 154 people were sentenced to jail terms ranging from several days to up to two weeks. According to the judicial authorities, the sentences handed down by the courts in St. Petersburg were for disturbing public order following unauthorised gatherings in a public square. According to the law, the offence carries a fine of up to RUB 20,000 or up to 15 days' imprisonment.²⁹

Senegal

PASTEY youth leader arrested on return; further releases and investigation into protests

The youth leader of the banned African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity (Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité (PASTEY)) party, Ngagne Demba Touré, was arrested at his home a few days after returning from six months in exile, according to media reports. He is accused of several offences, including criminal association with terrorist intent, endangering the security of the state, acts endangering public security, and insulting the judiciary and the head of state. On 22.02.24, he was transferred to a prison on a judicial pre-trial detention/committal order ("mandat de depot"). Touré, who was wanted by the Senegalese authorities on an international arrest warrant, fled into exile in Mali in August 2023 to avoid a police summons and possible arrest. He returned after the recent release from prison of several hundred people following weeks of political crisis (cf. BN of 19.02.24). On 20.02.24, the Minister of Justice, Aïssata Tall Sall, declared that 344 people had recently been provisionally released in Dakar and that 272 further temporary releases were currently being examined. Tall Sall rejected the claim made by both human rights NGOs and civil society that these were political prisoners or prisoners of conscience who have now been released for political reasons. The arrests and detentions were all made in connection with demonstrations and the disturbance of public order, Tall Sall continued. The people who have been provisionally released are still under investigation. Tall Sall also announced that investigations into the violent protests, in which many people have been killed since 2021 and most recently also following the delay of the presidential election (cf. BN of 12.02.24), are still ongoing.³⁰

Rallies of presidential candidates violently dispersed

According to a media report, police forces used tear gas in a district of Dakar on 20.02.24 to again break up a rally of the opposition presidential candidate Khalifa Sall (cf. BN of 30.10.23 and 11.12.23). Khalifa Sall is a former main rival of President Macky Sall and was mayor of Dakar.

The report stated that on 23.02.24, security forces in Dakar also used tear gas to disperse a march by presidential candidate Anta Babacar Ngom, who was recently temporarily arrested for taking part in a demonstration (cf. BN of 05.02.24 and 12.02.24). One activist was reportedly also arrested.³¹

President Sall intends to leave office in April as scheduled; political crisis continues

On 22.02.24, President Macky Sall announced that he would leave office on 02.04.24 as scheduled at the end of his second and constitutionally last term of office. He did not name a new election date. The recently announced "national dialogue" planned for 26.02.24 to resolve the political crisis with civil society, religious and political leaders and including the presidential candidates admitted to the cancelled election and those who had been disqualified from standing is to discuss issues relating to the election date and process. Furthermore, President Sall declared that he had no objections to the release of PASTEY Chairman Ousmane Sonko and PASTEY Secretary General Bassirou Diomaye Faye, the substitute candidate for Sonko.

On 23.02.24, however, 16 of the 19 presidential candidates jointly declined the invitation to attend the talks, as did Aar Sunu Élection (ASE), a new association of around 40 civil, religious and professional groups. On 24.02.24 and

25.02.24, members of civil society and the opposition held rallies calling for the presidential election to be held as soon as possible and for political prisoners to be released.³²

Sudan

Ongoing fighting

According to media reports, airstrikes carried out by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) on the capital of East Darfur, El-Daein, have claimed the lives of at least 10 people. The city was captured by the paramilitary militia Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in November 2023 and has since been bombed three times by the SAF air force. With reference to eyewitness accounts and statements made by the RSF, it is reported that an industrial area, a market and two residential neighbourhoods were bombed. The SAF, on the other hand, claims to have hit a weapons depot and several RSF fighters. Due to the internet and telecommunications network outages in the city, there is hardly any way of verifying this information.

Fighting is also continuing unabated in several places in Khartoum and Omdurman, which is reported to have resulted in more than 12 civilian deaths over the past week.³³

Humanitarian situation

During a press conference, the WFP Sudan Director said that less than five percent of the country's population could currently afford a "square meal" a day. According to other reports, the operation of communal kitchens in the capital has been suspended due to the lack of food supplies and the difficult security situation. In addition, fruit and vegetable prices have reportedly skyrocketed due to the disruption of web-based payment services and online banking and the hike in fuel prices. It is further reported that many merchants are therefore no longer able to pay suppliers and farmers for produce.

The UN and the US have also criticised the actions of the SAF, particularly in Darfur, whereby aid organisations have been prevented from providing cross-border humanitarian aid from Chad to Darfur. The US also criticised the fact that the SAF was generally preventing aid deliveries to areas under RSF control and that RSF units were still looting markets, homes and camps of humanitarian aid organisations. The Sudanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has rejected the blockade allegations as false.³⁴

Syria

Damascus: two people killed by Israeli airstrikes

According to state media, two people were killed in suspected Israeli airstrikes on targets in Syria's capital on 21.02.24. According to the report, those killed were civilians. Independent reports on the identity of the individuals have not been released. There was no comment from the Israeli authorities.³⁵

Northwest: increased drone attacks

A media outlet with close links to the opposition has published figures released by the Syrian Civil Defence, also known as the White Helmets, according to which around 13 drone attacks were carried out by the Syrian military and its allied Iranian militias and Russian troops on areas in the northwest between the beginning of 2024 and 22.02.24.

Seven civilians are said to have been wounded in the attacks. The White Helmets have accused the government of using targeted attacks on agricultural areas to prevent the Syrian population from using these areas, thereby further contributing to the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the northwest.

According to their own sources, the White Helmets have been called out on a total of more than 138 missions this year up to 18.02.24 following attacks carried out by government troops and militias affiliated with the government. Ten people have been killed and 60 others wounded in these attacks.³⁶

Türkiye

Arrested for online comment about Sharia

Istanbul lawyer and women's rights activist Feyza Altun was arrested on 19.02.24 for making a derogatory comment on the social media platform X about Sharia, the set of Islamic legal principles.

The General Prosecution Office in Beykoz district had initiated the relevant investigation on the basis of Article 216 of the Turkish Criminal Code. Under this article, anyone who openly incites sections of society to hostility or hatred against another group on the basis of social class, race, religion or denominational or regional differences in a way that may pose a clear and immediate danger to public safety is liable to a prison sentence of one to three years.

Altun was conditionally released from custody on 20.02.24. She has to report to a police station twice a week and is banned from leaving the country. On the same day, the Turkish Department of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) also filed a criminal complaint against the lawyer with the Ankara Public Prosecutor's Office for insulting religious values and inciting hatred and enmity among the population. According to Diyanet, Altun's statements about Sharia violate the Turkish constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights and should therefore have consequences under criminal law.³⁷

Tunisia

Sentenced for criticising the government

As reported by various media outlets, a well-known government critic was sentenced to six months in prison on 25.02.24.

He had criticised way in which the parliamentary elections held in December 2022 were conducted (cf. BN of 02.01.23). The case was filed by the Independent High Authority for Elections (L'Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections (ISIE)). The convicted man had already been arrested last year on charges of conspiracy against state security.³⁸

Ukraine

Military casualties reported for the first time

Two years after the start of the Russian invasion, President Volodymyr Zelensky made the first official statement on the number of Ukrainian military casualties. He said that so far, 31,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed. Zelensky said he would not say how many Ukrainians have been wounded. He rejected other circulating figures and estimates of casualties on the Ukrainian military side in the six-figure range (100,000 to 300,000).³⁹

Development of the war

President Zelensky says that Ukraine expects a Russian offensive at the end of May 2024 or later. He had previously described the situation on sections of the front with large concentrations of Russian troops as "very difficult" and again referred to the lack of weapons and ammunition. The capture of Avdiivka by Russian troops has prompted many of those still in the immediate vicinity to flee to safer areas. The two sides give different accounts of the Ukrainian position in Krynky (Kherson Oblast) on the left bank of the Dnipro. While the Russians announce the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops there, the Ukrainian military denies this. Particularly heavy Russian attacks were reported in the Zaporizhzhia region on 20.02.24.⁴⁰

Civilian war casualties; return of abducted children; hacker attack

According to local reports, a total of six people died in Russian drone attacks carried out on the port of Odessa on 22.02.24 and 23.02.24. Twelve others were injured. Two bodies were recovered during clean-up operations being conducted on 23.02.24 after a Russian drone hit a residential building in Dnipro (capital of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast). According to Ukrainian reports, one person also died in Myrnohrad (Ukrainian-controlled part of Donetsk Oblast) when numerous residential buildings and a school were hit in an attack carried out on 23.02.24.

On 20.02.24, eleven children who had been abducted to the Russian Federation were received by their families at a humanitarian border crossing with Belarus. There are also reports of a massive hacker attack on Ukrainian media aimed at unsettling the Ukrainian public.⁴¹

Venezuela

Fatalities in mine accident

At least 16 people, including three indigenous people, were killed when a mud wall collapsed at the illegal Bulla Loca mine in La Paragua in the state of Bolívar on 20.02.24. Almost 400 people have been evacuated. Illegal mining in the region, combined with the presence of illegal armed groups, child and forced labour and the displacement of the indigenous population from their settlement areas, is constantly criticised by various NGOs and academic staff in the region.⁴²

Yemen

Security in the Red Sea

The security situation remains, by and large, unchanged. The Houthis have continued their attacks on cargo vessels in the Red Sea, while the US-led coalition has carried out further airstrikes against Houthi targets. On 24.02.24, the coalition attacked 18 targets in eight locations, killing seven civilians in Taizz governorate, according to Houthi media.⁴³

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