



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

24 April 2023

Afghanistan

Security situation

A Washington Times report on 22.04.23, based on leaked papers from the US Pentagon, says that IS and the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) are preparing attacks in the USA, Asia and Europe from Afghanistan. ISKP's standing within IS has reportedly risen. This is partly due to the ongoing campaign to eradicate IS cells elsewhere. Since the withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan, ISKP has reportedly been able to regroup despite persecution by the Taliban.

On 11.04.23, a child was killed by an unknown individual with a scythe in Logar province. Reports link the crime to rising violence and numerous other unsolved murders across the country.

Government leadership

On 18.04.23 on the occasion of the Eid-al-Fitr holiday marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, Emir Hibatullah Akhundzada stated, among other things, that the main goal of the Taliban government was the implementation of Islamic law (Sharia) and the religious and moral reform of society. The Taliban have carried out significant reform measures in culture, education, the economy, the media and other areas, and the negative intellectual and moral effects of 20 years of foreign occupation were coming to an end, he said. The law on vice and virtue as the highest duty is currently being implemented, he added, and every Afghan citizen should cooperate with the Ministry of Virtue. Akhundzada said this despite a nationwide ban on education for women and girls, a massive economic crisis and widespread media censorship. Speaking in Kandahar province on a different event, Akhundzada said he would allow 'no infidel law in Afghanistan, and no interference from outside in the internal affairs of the country'.

Persecution situation

On 17.04.23, four ethnic Turkmen were injured in Faryab province over a land dispute with the Taliban. On the same day, a former prison guard in Ghazni city was reportedly arrested. On 18.04.23, three people were killed by the Taliban in Badakhshan province. Reports differ as to whether all three or two of them were former soldiers. In Herat province, a shepherd was kidnapped with his flock of around 100 sheep. Reports say that close associates of the Taliban-appointed provincial governor were responsible for the assault. Apparently, the shepherd was in conflict with the Taliban. On 19.04.23, a former member of the Panjshir provincial council was reportedly arrested. Throughout the country, there have been increasing reports of suicides by juveniles, with some as young as 12-14 years old. Often, the reasons are family and economic problems. Those who have died come from the provinces of Nangarhar, Ghor, Balkh, Bamiyan and Badakhshan.

Humanitarian situation

After the Taliban banned Afghan women from working for UN agencies (cf. BN of 17.04.23), it remains unclear whether the UN agencies will withdraw from Afghanistan. UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed announced on 18.04.23 that in early May, talks with the Taliban would be held, also including the issue of granting diplomatic recognition to the Taliban. A final decision was announced for 05.05.23. In the meantime, the UN agencies are operating on a very limited basis. Weekly cash transfers of USD 40 million have been suspended. The possible recognition of the Taliban by the UN, as announced by the UN Deputy Secretary General, has been met with massive protest, including from the US government, the EU, the armed resistance in Afghanistan and many other representatives of the international community. According to the WHO, an average of 167 new-born babies die every day due to lack of health care. The WFP reported on 20.04.23 that it would no longer be able to distribute humanitarian aid in Afghanistan in June if donations continued to fail.

Benin

Journalist faces imprisonment

In the criminal case against journalist Virgile Ahouanssê, the public prosecutor on 20.04.23 demanded a 12-month prison sentence and a fine of 500,000 million CFA francs (approx. 760 EUR), according to media reports. Nine months of the sentence would be suspended. The prominent journalist is accused of broadcasting false news which disturb public order on his web radio in December 2022. The broadcast had accused the police, on the basis of witness testimony, of committing extrajudicial executions in the capital Porto-Novo (cf. BN of 02.01.23).

Colombia

Darien Gap: migration movements; campaign announced

According to United Nations estimates published on 14.04.23, more than 400,000 people might take the dangerous migration route through the so-called Darien Gap from Colombia to Panama in 2023. This would be a significant increase compared to the 250,000 people who crossed the jungle in 2022. According to the Panama authorities, almost 88,000 people have already crossed the Darien Gap between January and March 2023, almost six times as many as last year. Most of the migrants come from Venezuela, Haiti, and Ecuador. Following talks, government representatives from the US, Panama and Colombia announced in mid-April that they would launch a two-month campaign with various measures aimed at curbing illegal migration along the route. These include a plan to reduce poverty in border areas.

FARC dissident group La Segunda Marquetalia: Announcement of 53rd Front re-foundation

The FARC dissident group La Segunda Marquetalia has posted flyers on social media announcing the re-foundation of the 53rd Front, which used to be particularly active in the central and eastern departments of Cundinamarca, Meta and Vichada. According to the authorities, this digital announcement has not yet translated into a presence in the regions, but the relevant authorities have been alerted and are closely monitoring developments.

Cuba

ISHR: More than 1,000 people imprisoned for political beliefs

On 20.04.22 the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR) informed that more than 1,050 people are currently imprisoned for their political beliefs, of whom about 250 were detained last year and eight in March 2023. Among the prisoners are believed to be more than 30 minors and an increasing number of people detained for 'illegal departure'. According to the ISHR, this criminalises leaving the country through the threat of imprisonment by the government. In addition, detainees or their relatives who publicly criticise prison conditions or torture are also subject to surveillance or punitive measures.

President Díaz-Canel confirmed for another term

According to the party newspaper Granma, President Miguel Díaz-Canel was confirmed in office for another five years by nearly 98 percent of the votes. In Cuba, members of the National Assembly elect both the president and vice-president. In the parliamentary elections held on 26.03.23, a total of 470 candidates, proposed and vetted in advance by commissions, were elected with the required majority for the same number of list positions. Cuba is a socialist single-party state.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

North Kivu: ceasefire; displacements

The UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region informed the UN Security Council on 19.04.23 that a fragile ceasefire was being observed between the rebel group M23 and the Congolese army (FARDC). However, the M23 fighters have not fully withdrawn from the occupied areas. The Congolese government and others say that M23 is supported by Rwanda (cf. BN of 02.01.23), which the Rwandan government denies. A statement by Rwandan President Paul Kagame on 15.04.23 triggered a new diplomatic row between the two countries. Reportedly, Kagame blamed colonial border demarcation for the problems in the region when a part of Rwanda had gone to (the Democratic Republic of the) Congo and Uganda.

Referring to statements made by a UNHCR delegation on 21.04.23, it is reported that 1.2 million people have been newly displaced in North Kivu since the strong resurgence of the M23 in March 2022. The total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country is now more than 6.2 million. So far, only 20 percent of UNHCR's funding needs have been met. There are also reports that a measles epidemic is currently spreading among children in the region, and particularly in the IDP camps. One of the reasons for this is that many children have not received the usual vaccinations due to the displacement.

Ituri and northern North Kivu: attacks on civilians

Media report that in Ituri province many civilians have been victims of attacks and abuses by armed groups. Various sources report that between 30 and 43 children, women and men were killed on 14.04.23 in the villages of Kilo Etat, Matete and Itendy near the border with Uganda. The militia Coopérative de développement du Congo (CODECO) is believed to be behind the killings, which were accompanied by looting and pillaging. On 18.04.23, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that since the beginning of April 2023, around 150 civilians have been killed in Ituri, mainly in the Djugu, Irumu and Mambasa areas. According to the UN, a total of 485 people were killed in the first quarter of 2023, with the responsibility shared between CODECO, its opponent the Zaire militia representing the Hema ethnic group (cf. BN of 21.02.22), and the Islamist rebel group Forces démocratiques alliées (ADF).

On 18.04.23, ADF attacks on several villages around Beni and Kisikivi (North Kivu, near the border with Ituri) resulted in several deaths and the abductions of others, mainly farmers. Exact figures were not given in the report by the UN radio Okapi. The FARDC managed to free two of the abductees during fighting with the ADF. The ADF has bastions in several towns in the region, radio Okapi said.

Detention conditions: Numerous deaths reported

Media report that the NGO Bill Clinton Foundation for Peace (BCFP), which monitors the situation of prisoners nationwide, has counted a total of 120 inmates of detention centres who died between January and March 2023. Last March, 48 people died in the country's largest prison, Makala in Kinshasa, due to massive overcrowding, malnutrition and ill-treatment. In the past, there have been repeated reports of the poor prison conditions in Makala and elsewhere (cf. BN of 11.04.22, 02.05.22, 29.08.22 and 10.10.22).

Ethiopia

Disarmament of regional militias causes unrest in Amhara

The Ethiopian federal government's decision on 06.04.23 to integrate all regional special forces (Liyu Hail in Amharic) into the state police and army and to disarm the militias has led to days of violent protests in the Amhara regional state. There have been reports of confrontations between Amharic militias and the Ethiopian National

Defence Forces (ENDF), including one death in an attack on an army camp in the town of Kombolcha. Following the declaration of a temporary state of emergency in Gondar, Dessie and Debre Birhan, the situation calmed down again. In the other regional states, however, the federal government's measure was supported.

Ethiopia's constitution, which divides the country into regional states based on language and ethnicity, stipulates that the regions have the right to establish a 'state police force to maintain public order and peace'. Many regions have additionally introduced regional armed forces, which have often been involved in armed confrontations leading to the intensification of conflicts. In the Tigray conflict, for example, Amharic regional forces and Fano militias had fought together with the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies against the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF).

The Amhara people therefore claim that there is a continuing threat from Tigray forces and that regional security forces are needed to ensure their safety. Unconfirmed reports indicate that Fano has refused to disarm and has retreated to Eritrea. However, on 18.04.23 there were reports of heavy fighting between the ENDF and Fano in the North Gondar Zone (Amhara) and of a 'special operation' launched against Fano by the ENDF.

On 16.04.23, Chief of General Staff Birhanu Jula stated that all militias had been successfully disarmed and that, among others, the Amhara Special Forces (ASF) had also been placed under the ENDF command. The integration and demobilisation had been part of the Cessation of Hostilities (CoH) agreement concluded between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in Pretoria in November 2022. The agreement also stipulated the disarmament of the TDF (cf. BN of 08.11.22 and 15.11.22). Expert observers assume that the decree is motivated by the Ethiopian government's decision not to allow any other regional state to maintain its own security forces.

Territorial affiliation of Tigray's Western Zone remains unclear

It remains unclear who will administer the Western Zone, which belongs to Tigray but is currently occupied by Amhara. Amhara claims historical reasons, saying that the area had been forcibly annexed in 1992 when, following the overthrow of the then government of Mengistu Haile Mariam by TPLF troops, Ethiopia was divided into ethnic regional states and the woredas (districts) of Wolkait, Tegede, Kafta Humera, Tselemti and Raya were assigned to Tigray. Expert observers believe that the ENDF will take control of the region for the time being. Recently, there have been reports that Amharic forces have driven tens of thousands of Tigrayans out of the Western Zone.

The Gambia

Calls for disbanding of Anti-Crime Unit, security sector reform

The president of the Gambia Bar Association, Salieu Taal, has called for the disbandment of the dreaded Anti-Crime Unit (ACU), which has a history of police repression. He said that the ACU police unit, being aggressive towards civilians, was a remnant of the Jammeh era, continuing the police state methods of the previous government. Maintaining law and order was not 'a licence to abuse the law', and the ACU police force had no place in a democratic constitutional system and should therefore be replaced, Taal said. He also called for readdressing the stalled security sector reform, including in the police. Taal addressed the public after witnessing an incident involving intimidated underage schoolgirls and heavily armed ACU officers. He said he was subjected to intimidation himself when he intervened to help the girls.

In mid-2022, former ACU commander Gorgi Mboob was suspended. He is accused of crimes committed during the Jammeh era and is therefore facing prosecution (cf. BN of 20.06.22).

Inadequate legislation on freedom of association and assembly

In its 2022 Annual Report, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) calls for an amendment to Article 5 of the current Public Order Act 1961 (POA), which restricts the fundamental rights to freedom of association and assembly. Under this provision, the freedom to demonstrate is subject to the legal requirement of an official permit which, according to the NHRC, is continually denied to opposition and civil society groups. In addition, police forces continue to respond with excessive force against demonstrators (cf. BN of 14.03.23). The NHRC reminded the government of its commitment to review the relevant national legislation to bring it into line with international standards. The NHRC also called for measures to be taken to promote freedom of assembly and association, and to improve the capacity, training on methods and education of security forces in the area of crowd control.

Deteriorating socio-economic and humanitarian situation

In its 2022 Annual Report, the NHRC called on the government to address the continuing rise in living costs and to provide social safety nets for the most vulnerable, especially for those living below the poverty line. In the post COVID-19 pandemic period, the cost of living is still high, and the prices of basic necessities, fuel and transport have steadily been on the increase. The consequences of the pandemic also include an increase in poverty and unemployment rates (cf. BN of 27.09.22 and 15.11.22). Recently, there have been reports of growing food insecurity and of the worst famines in the country for a decade, for which there are several causes (cf. BN of 12.09.22 and 21.11.22).

Ghana / Nigeria

Malaria vaccine approved

According to press reports on 13.04.23, Ghana has become the first country in the world to approve a malaria vaccine for use in the country. Trial data indicate that the vaccine, which is to be given to children between five and 36 months, is up to 80 percent effective.

Media report that Nigeria also approved the above vaccine on 17.04.23.

India

Kashmir: Five soldiers killed

On 20.04.23, five soldiers were killed while on patrol in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, allegedly by separatist rebels. Unidentified assailants fired at the vehicle and probably also used grenades.

Iran

Commutation of death sentences to prison terms and pardons

Media report that several death sentences handed down in the case of the alleged murder of a member of the Basij volunteer militia have been commuted to prison terms. The Supreme Court commuted three death sentences to prison terms of between 10 and 15 years, including that of a doctor accused in the case. His wife, who was also a defendant, was sentenced to five years in prison. Eleven other defendants were sentenced to several years in prison. Three defendants were pardoned. In the course of the trial, two defendants had been reportedly executed in early 2023 (cf. BN of 12.12.22 and 09.01.23). At the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, Supreme Leader Khamenei also announced the pardon of more than 1,700 prisoners, as is customary on major ceremonial occasions.

Government short messages on the observance of the Islamic dress code

According to an Iranian press agency, text messages were sent nationwide on 18.04.23 to all people with an active mobile phone contract to remind them to observe the veiling requirement. Apparently, the text messages were not sent in connection with specific violations and regardless of the gender of the recipient. Further reports say that more than 2,000 text messages have already been sent to women in West Azerbaijan province who have violated the dress code in road traffic. In addition, the closure of some 80 shops has been ordered where violations occurred. The reports cannot be independently confirmed. The Iranian authorities recently announced increased measures to monitor compliance with the veiling requirement (cf. BN of 17.04.23).

Freedom of the press: Journalist arrested again

According to media reports on 20.04.23, a prominent journalist has been arrested again. He was last released from prison in January 2023. Press reports say that the editor, who is critical of the government, has been arrested several times in the past. He was due to take part in a virtual debate on the future of the country hosted by an online media outlet critical of the regime. The media worker recently served a multi-year prison sentence on charges of conspiring against the country's security for his support of union protests. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), around 100 media workers have been arrested or temporarily detained since the start of the nationwide protests in 2022.

Economic development

With the start of the new year in the Iranian calendar year, key economic data were published for 2022/23 (year 1401 of the Iranian calendar). According to the Central Bank of Iran, the average inflation rate for all commodity groups was 46.5 percent, the fourth consecutive year above 40 percent. As always, the different sectors are affected to different degrees. Food prices rose disproportionately last year, by around 90 percent. Similar figures apply to building materials, further adding to the general crisis in the housing market which is regional by nature. Reliable figures are only available for the Tehran area, where the price per square metre for new buildings has increased tenfold in five years. The rial (IRR) is now trading at around 1:600,000 to the dollar and experts are forecasting a further decline of 30-60 percent this year, which will further increase the cost of imports, while exports can only benefit to a very limited extent from the weakness due to the lack of access to key markets.

The participation rate of the working-age population was 36.6 percent, with a very large gender gap (62 percent of men against 11.2 percent of women). 35.6 percent of the working population worked more than 49 hours per week; the official unemployment rate in the last quarter was 9.7 percent and disproportionately high among academics, women and in rural areas.

Assault on former national athlete

Foreign media reported on 21.04.23 that a former member of the Iranian national wushu team (martial arts) was allegedly physically assaulted and injured by Ministry of Intelligence security forces during a car check. The assault took place in early April 2023. The athlete had resigned from the national team in solidarity with the demonstrators at the start of the nationwide protests in October 2022. Subsequently, pressure was put on him to return to the team and express regret. Since the wave of protests began in 2022, media reports suggest that high-profile athletes have come under increasing pressure from the government for their support of the demonstrations.

Iraq

IDP camp closed

The Jeddah 5 camp for IDPs and refugees in Qayyarah, some 30 km south of Mosul, was closed by the Iraqi authorities on 18.04.23. Residents and aid workers were reportedly informed of the closure only the day before. Jeddah 5 was home to 342 families (1,566 people in total, around two-thirds of them children) with alleged or suspected links to IS. The measure has been criticised by aid agencies and the UN; and many people from Jeddah 5 fear acts of revenge and reprisals by tribes and militias if they return to their home regions.

Outside the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan (KR-I), there is now only one camp, Jeddah 1, which is reserved for returnees from the Syrian al-Hol camp and is located in close proximity to Jeddah 5.

Peshmerga forces in Kirkuk

On 22.04.23, Peshmerga troops were deployed to the Sargaran sub-district in north-west Kirkuk after Arab residents reportedly attacked Kurdish villagers. According to a Peshmerga commander, the Iraqi army did not intervene. There were no other violent clashes.

Following the IS invasion of Kirkuk in 2014, the Iraqi army collapsed and withdrew from Kirkuk. Peshmerga fighters then moved into Kirkuk and took control of large parts of the province; in October 2017, the Iraqi central government finally recaptured Kirkuk from Kurdish forces. Kirkuk remains one of the disputed territories and is claimed equally by Baghdad and Erbil.

Kurdistan: Attacks on journalists

On 17.04.23, two journalists from a private media outlet in Dohuk were arrested by Asayish forces (the Kurdish secret service with police powers) without giving any reason. The journalists were detained for about two hours and then released. Their equipment is still confiscated, and their offices are sealed off. One of the journalists had been released from prison in February 2022 after serving a sentence of more than a year for taking part in unauthorised protests. Also on 17.04.22, two journalists from KNN TV, which is close to the opposition party Gorran, were attacked by unknown assailants in Erbil. The lack of freedom of the press in Kurdistan has been repeatedly criticised; recently, the speaker of the parliament of the Kurdistan Region (KR-I) admitted to problems in this area (cf. BN of 13.02.23).

Kosovo

Boycott of local elections in northern Kosovo

The vast majority of Kosovo Serbs eligible to vote boycotted the elections in the municipalities of Leposavić, North Mitrovica, Zubin Potok and Zvečan on 23.04.23. Srpska Lista, the leading party of the Serb ethnic group, had called for a boycott of the elections, arguing that the Kosovo government had still not created the conditions for the establishment of a Serb municipal association with executive powers. According to official figures, the voter turnout was 3.47 percent. Despite this low turnout, the results are considered legally valid as there is no minimum voter requirement. Due to the boycott, the Kosovo Albanian candidates won the elections. However, they are not accepted as legitimate political representatives by the Kosovo Serb population. There were no incidents on election day. The early local elections had originally been scheduled to take place on 18.12.22. They had become necessary because Kosovo Albanian candidates were not accepted as legitimate political representatives. They had become necessary because Kosovo Serb officials and local politicians had resigned from their posts in the dispute over the validity of Serbian number plates in Kosovo. Due to rising tensions in the region, the elections were eventually postponed until April 2023 (cf. BN of 12.12.22).

Lebanon

Deportations

Media report that around 50 Syrians were deported back to their country of origin in calendar weeks 15 and 16. Among them is at least one deserter with his family who had been living in Lebanon since 2014. The reports have not yet been fully confirmed. For years, politicians of almost all colours have been pushing for the return of Syrian refugees, especially as the difficult economic situation in the country leads to debates based on envy and discrimination. Lebanon is estimated to host between one and one and a half million Syrian refugees.

Economic situation

The overall situation is dominated by demonstrations over political and economic issues. On 18.04.23 violent clashes broke out between security forces and retired members of the security forces who were demonstrating over effective pension cuts and attempted to break through into the Grand Seraglio.

Also on 18.04.23, a number of cabinet decisions were taken to defuse the situation to some extent. For example, local elections were postponed for a year and the minimum wage in the private sector was raised from 2.6 million liras to 9 million liras, or about 90 dollars at current exchange rates.

Liberia

Political parties sign peace agreement ahead of elections

In the run-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled to be held in October 2023, a total of 26 political parties signed an agreement on 04.04.23 to prevent election-related violence, according to media reports. The pact commits to work for peaceful elections and to use only constitutional means in case of disagreements over the election process and results. Observers expect the elections to be fiercely contested. Liberia's President George Weah, who has been in office since 2018, is likely to face strong competition.

Libya

NGOs under increasing pressure

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on 18.04.23 that the Western-recognised government and several armed groups have launched a massive crackdown on local and foreign NGOs. For years, civil society groups have been increasingly restricted, with local staff hindered in their work and sometimes persecuted and detained.

In March 2023, the prime minister of the unity government, Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, had declared that, on the basis of a law dating back to the time of Muammar al Gaddafi, only organisations with legal status were allowed to work in the field of social, cultural, sports or humanitarian concerns. Political activities or the promotion of human rights

are not included. Furthermore, the authorities can intervene in the management of organisations at any time and dissolve NGOs without a court order. Although all While organisations have been given corresponding instructions to submit their documents, no deadline has been set to do so. Furthermore, it is not known how organisations not covered by the Gaddafi-era law will be able to operate, HRW criticised.

Madagascar

Imminent hunger crisis

In the south-east of the country, several cyclones have destroyed 60 to 90 percent of the agricultural land and a large proportion of stocks. Some 870,000 people are at risk of starvation. Food shortages have reportedly already led families to sell children to avoid having to feed them and to be able to buy food.

Nigeria

Benue State: Dozens of villagers killed by gunmen

A group of unknown gunmen has killed at least 51 people in Benue State, according to official reports. Media report that dozens of attackers invaded the village of Umuogidi (also: Umogidi) on 03.04 and 04.04.23. Local authorities suspect links to simmering conflicts over land, pasture and water rights between arable farming communities and non-settlers who live mainly on cattle herding. Ethnic and religious rivalries, particularly in the central region where the violence occurred, add to the complexity of the situation (cf. BN of 30.01.23 and 13.03.23).

Kaduna State: Schoolgirls escape kidnappers

Eight abducted schoolgirls have regained their freedom, according to media reports of 18.04. and 19.04.23. They were abducted by unknown gunmen on 03.04.23 while on their way home from a government secondary school in Awon, southern Kaduna State (cf. BN of 17.04.23). A security spokesman said that they were taken to a densely forested area near the border with the neighbouring state of Niger. From there they able to escape. They were taken to a military facility for medical treatment. The purpose of such kidnappings is often to extort ransom money.

Military frees 468 kidnapped in northern Nigeria

Nigerian forces have rescued 468 kidnap victims and killed 54 people suspected to be terrorist in the north of the country in two weeks of April 2023. This was reported by the media on 20.04.23, citing information from the Nigerian Defence Headquarters (DHQ) of the same day. According to the DHQ, various military operations in the North-East, North-Central and North-West had led to these successes. A significant amount of weapons and ammunition was also recovered. The troops arrested 122 people who the military classified as terrorists, bandits, collaborators and other criminals. Military operations have also been successful, particularly in the north-east of the country, resulting in the killing or arrest of many Islamists. The DHQ has reported similar successes several times recently (cf. BN of 05.09.22, 30.01.23, 06.02.23, 20.03.23 and 03.04.23).

Pakistan

Ongoing political tensions

Following the impeachment of ex-premier Imran Khan and the dissolution of two provincial assemblies, political tensions are continuing amid Pakistan's tense economic situation. Also, the political stability is threatened by a conflict between the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) party alliance and the Supreme Court. Fazlur Rehman, president of the PDM and an Islamic fundamentalist, takes the view that Umar Ata Bandial, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, has taken over the powers of the election commission, the parliament and the government after he recently announced the new date for elections to the dissolved provincial assembly in Punjab (cf. BN of 17.04.23). This has effectively imposed a 'judicial martial law', Rehman said. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party of ex-premier Khan, on the other hand, has praised the work of the Supreme Court and supports the timely election date.

Economic situation

In March 2023, inflation in Pakistan was 35 percent. To secure a \$1.1 billion rescue package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Pakistani government has cut subsidies and imposed higher tariffs. Food prices have risen by around 50 percent. In April 2023, the Central Bank of Pakistan raised the key interest rate to an all-time high of 21 percent and the World Bank lowered its economic growth forecast from 2 to 0.4 percent. People are also still suffering from the effects of the 2022 floods, particularly in rural areas of Sindh province.

Chinese worker accused of blasphemy

On 17.04.23, an Abbotabad court remanded a Chinese man for two weeks in connection with blasphemy allegations made against him on 15.04.23. At the Chinese Dasu Dam construction project in Kohistan district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the Chinese foreman was accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad by asking his Pakistani workers to speed up their work during a break for prayers. On 16.04.23, the accusations sparked a huge protest from local residents. They blocked the Karakoram highway, which connects Pakistan with China. Also, hundreds of workers entered the local police station, where they suspected the accused to be. The accused had been taken away by an army helicopter to protect him from attack. Under Pakistan's penal code, a conviction for blasphemy can carry the death penalty. Although this verdict has never been carried out in Pakistan for blasphemy, many people have been lynched by angry individuals and mobs after being accused of the offence.

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

Gaza: Six people convicted of collaborating with Israel

Media report that on 03.04.23 six people were sentenced by a military court in Gaza for 'collaboration' with Israel. Two of the convicts are facing the death penalty, with one sentence to be carried out by firing squad and the other by hanging. The other four convicts were sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour. The last time that death sentences were carried out in Gaza was in September 2022 with five people executed, two of them for the offence of collaborating with Israel. No details have been released on the cases of the most recent sentences.

West Bank: Knife attack; several wounded in military operation

On 17.04.23, a Palestinian woman attacked and wounded an Israeli with a knife near an Israeli settlement in the West Bank. She was then shot by Israeli forces and later treated in a Jerusalem hospital. No further information was provided on her condition.

In a violent escalation involving armed Palestinians during an Israeli military operation in the northern West Bank town of Jenin on 18.04.23, eight people were wounded, among them an elderly woman and a member of the paramedic rescue team.

East Jerusalem: Two wounded by assailants

On 18.04.23, two Jewish worshippers were wounded by a Palestinian assailant with a makeshift firearm as they were travelling in their car to a pilgrimage site in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah. Israeli security forces then carried out a large-scale search operation in the area. The following day, an underage Palestinian from Nablus suspected of the crime was arrested by the military.

Israel: Smuggled weapons confiscated; Jordanian lawmaker arrested

On the night of 19.04.23, Israeli security forces arrested a Bedouin suspected of smuggling weapons from Jordan into Israel. A total of 63 handguns were confiscated. On 23.04.23, the Jordanian Foreign Ministry reported that Israeli border authorities had detained a member of the Jordanian parliament at the West Bank border crossing for attempting to smuggle more than 200 handguns and gold into the Palestinian territories in his car. Israeli media were muzzled by the authorities, largely prohibiting them from reporting on the case.

Russian Federation

Kara-Mursa sentenced to 25 years in prison

On 17.04.23, a Moscow court sentenced prominent opposition figure Vladimir Kara-Mursa to 25 years' imprisonment in a penal camp. He was found guilty of high treason and other offences including slandering the Russian military and illegally working for an undesirable organisation, the court ruled. State media, citing investigators, had claimed that the former journalist had helped organisations from NATO countries undermine Russia's national security in return for a payment of around EUR 30,000 a month. It is the longest prison sentence ever handed down to a government critic. According to his lawyer, Eismont, Kara-Mursa's health is in serious condition. The 41-year-old former journalist, who holds both Russian and British passports, is one of Putin's most vocal critics. He had been arrested in April 2022 after criticising Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In an interview broadcast on the US news channel CNN shortly before his arrest, he said Russia was ruled by 'a regime of murderers'. He refused to plead to the court to acquit him. He said he subscribed to everything he had said and was proud of it.

Laws tightened against Kremlin critics and opposition members

In the Russian Federation, political critics and opponents will now face imprisonment. The lower house (Duma) of the Russian parliament passed a law on 18.04.23 increasing the penalty for high treason from 20 years to life imprisonment. Sentences for a range of terrorism and sabotage offences are also to be increased. The amendments have yet to be approved by Russia's upper house of parliament before they can be signed by President Putin. Human rights activists have criticised the offence of treason in Russia, saying it is mainly used to convict Kremlin opponents. The Duma also voted in favour of the new offence of 'providing assistance in the execution of decisions made by international organisations that do not have Russia as a member or foreign state institutions'. The new offence, which carries a sentence of up to five years in prison, follows the arrest warrant issued against President Putin by the International Criminal Court last month. According to the organisation OVD-Info, the wording of the law is very generous and could also criminalise 'investigating war crimes'. Since Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine over a year ago, the Russian authorities have been cracking down on opposition figures. Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, who is serving a lengthy prison sentence in a penal camp, was added to the government's list of 'terrorists and extremists' last year.

Senegal

New opposition movement mobilises around rejection Sall's candidacy

According to media reports, a new opposition movement has formed in Senegal, the "Mouvement des forces vives du Sénégal (F24)", founded on 16.04.23. F24 brings together more than 100 political parties, civil society organisations and others. It was founded in the presence of several opposition leaders and presidential contenders, among them Ousmane Sonko, Khalifa Sall and former Prime Minister Aminata Touré. The heterogeneous movement is opposed to the possible candidacy of incumbent Macky Sall for a third term as president. F24 considers this to be illegal and unconstitutional, citing the current constitution which limits the presidential office to two consecutive terms.

F24 has also demanded the release of all 'political prisoners', an end to the ban on demonstrations and the creation of the framework for peaceful, inclusive and transparent presidential elections on 24.02.24. Furthermore, it has called for the repeal of provisions in the current electoral law and an end to the political instrumentalization of the criminal justice system, aiming at the exclusion of potential candidates.

F24 has announced a series of demonstrations across the country and in the diaspora. The first nationwide demonstration is planned for 12.05.23.

Somalia

Attack on military base thwarted

On 19.04.23, the Somali National Army (SNA) reportedly repelled an attack by al-Shabaab on a military base in Budbud village (Galguduud region), which was recently captured by government forces (cf. BN of 17.04.23). Al-Shabaab fighters were reportedly killed in the process. Al-Shabaab, in turn, has claimed to have killed more than 50 SNA members and seized vehicles. No independent sources are available.

Amnesty International (AI) calls for independent investigation in Las Anod (Somaliland)

AI has researched that more than 100 people have been killed and over 600 injured, among them dozens of civilians, in the ongoing fighting in Las Anod (see BN of 13.02.23, 27.02.23 and 06.03.23). Between 154,000 and 203,000 people have apparently been displaced, including more than 60,000 to Ethiopia, according to the UN. The rules of international humanitarian law have apparently not been respected and hospitals, schools and mosques have been shelled indiscriminately. AI is therefore calling for an independent investigation into all human and international rights violations and for a cessation of hostilities. On 17.04.23, a group of 15 international partners, including the EU, also expressed serious concern about the ongoing violence and called for an immediate ceasefire in a joint conference call with Somaliland's President Muse Bihi Abdi.

Extension of the mandate of the African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)

The Somali government intends to extend the ATMIS mandate, which will expire in December 2024, as the mission's presence has been instrumental in promoting peace and stability in the country. Apparently, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has held talks with the international community on a possible extension of the mandate. The UN Peace and Security Council will discuss the future of ATMIS at a forthcoming meeting.

Sri Lanka

Rally to commemorate the 2019 Easter bombings

On 21.04.23, a rally was held in Colombo to commemorate the 2019 Easter attacks that had left around 270 people dead and around 500 injured. Thousands of participants, among them Catholic clergy, gathered for a silent protest calling on the government to bring justice to the victims and to identify those responsible for the attacks on two Catholic and one Protestant church four years ago when simultaneously three hotels had been attacked, killing 42 people from 14 countries. Two suspected IS-affiliated radical Islamic groups are believed to have carried out six suicide bombings at almost the same time. The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka has since criticised the investigations as inadequate.

Sudan

Ongoing fighting

Fighting between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has intensified, particularly around Khartoum and the Darfur region, but also in other parts of the country (cf. BN of 17.04.23). Heavy shelling and air strikes are reported. Since 21.04.23, the army has also been fighting the RSF with ground troops in Khartoum. Both sides to the conflict claim to be in control of strategic locations in Khartoum such as the airport. There is no independent information available. According to the WHO and UNICEF, at least 413 people, most of them civilians, have been killed and more than 3,500 injured as of 21.04.23 since the fighting began on 15.04.23. The number of unreported cases is believed to be much higher.

International pressure is mounting on the parties to the conflict to agree to a ceasefire, particularly for humanitarian purposes. Several ceasefires agreed by both sides were broken, including a three-day pause to mark the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr which began on 21.04.23. On 20.04.23, the army ruled out negotiations with the RSF, stating that it would only accept their surrender. Previous mediation attempts by the presidents of Kenya, Djibouti and South Sudan have failed.

Deteriorating humanitarian situation

Fierce fighting between the army and the RSF, including the bombing of RSF bases, have hit civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, leading to a dramatic deterioration of the humanitarian situation. Across the country, two-thirds of all hospitals have ceased operations, including at least nine hospitals due to bombing and at least another 16 due to forced evacuations, as the Sudan Doctors' Union stated on 19.04.23. Other hospitals are at risk of closure. RSF has reportedly seized five hospitals in Khartoum to treat wounded members. Those hospitals that are still open are running out of supplies for treatment. The health system appears to be on the verge of collapse. UNICEF warns that life-saving supplies for an estimated 50,000 acutely malnourished children have been cut off.

The supply situation is extremely bad, particularly in Khartoum. Food supplies have collapsed; shops, pharmacies and petrol stations have been closed; the banking system has shut down; the electricity and water supplies have failed in some areas, and the internet is down across most of the country. There are reports of looting, including of aid warehouses and offices of the UN and other aid agencies, and of attacks and sexual assaults by soldiers on aid workers. As a result of this and in view of the general security situation, aid organisations have had to suspend almost all operations in the country.

The civil resistance committees, which previously organised protests against the military government, are coordinating medical care, food distribution and other support services through WhatsApp groups and social media.

Apparently, RSF has set up a telephone hotline to help people in the parts of Khartoum under its control.

Thousands fleeing violence

Both UNHCR and WFP report that up to 20,000 people, mainly women and children, have fled to Chad from the Darfur region since the fighting began. More than 320 soldiers are also believed to have escaped to Chad, where they were disarmed. According to the UNHCR, another 2,172 people have fled to South Sudan. Thousands more are attempting to flee Khartoum and other fighting zones for safer areas, including Al Gezira state in the south and River Nile state in the north. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), nearly 3,000 people have arrived by bus and truck in the town of Wad Madani (Al Gezira), some 200 km south-east of Khartoum, in two days. Those with financial means move on towards Port Sudan (al-Bahr al-Ahmar).

Involvement of Wagner mercenaries controversial

The Russian mercenary force Wagner is accused of having commercial and military links with Sudan. According to US officials, the Wagner Group has offered to the RSF weapons, including surface-to-air missiles, and intends to fuel fighting between the two military factions. The Wagner Group denies involvement in the current conflict.

Syria

Diplomatic rapprochement with Arab countries

On 18.04.23, for the first time in over ten years, an official representative of Saudi Arabia arrived in Syria for a visit. As the state news agency SANA reported, Foreign Minister Prince Faisal Bin Farhan was received by President Assad in Damascus. Already last week, the Syrian foreign minister had travelled to Riyadh for discussions of the resumption of consular services and direct flights between the two countries.

In a statement, the Gulf monarchy committed itself to a political solution to the Syrian conflict that would preserve Syria's unity, security, stability and Arab identity.

In recent years, several Arab states have moved closer to Syria after the Assad government, with the help of Russia and Iran, was able to retake most of the country and to largely defeat the armed opposition. Assad's political reintegration into the Arab world has gained further momentum with the earthquake of 06.02.23 and the resumption of Saudi-Iranian relations under Chinese mediation.

Also on 18.04.23, Tunisia's President received the Syrian Foreign Minister for a three-day visit in Tunis.

Saudi Arabia will host the next Arab League summit next month, which will also discuss Syria's readmission to the international organisation.

Togo

Six civilians killed in Savanes region

According to media reports, six civilians were killed in an attack in the village of Waldjouague in the Savanes region near the border with Burkina Faso on 20.04.23. The media classified the attack as a terrorist act.

In the north of the country, there has been an increase in deadly attacks since November 2021 and especially since May 2022 (cf. BN of 15.11.21, 16.05.22, 23.05.22, 30.05.22, 20.06.22, 18.07.22, 06.12.22 and 20.02.23).

A state of emergency has been in effect in the Savanes region since 13.06.22 (cf. BN of 20.06.22, 12.09.22 and 17.04.23).

Türkiye

Arrest for spreading false information

On 19.04.23, journalist Serdar Akinan was arrested in the western province of Çanakkale on charges of spreading false information. A few hours before his arrest, Akinan had published a post claiming that on the night of the 2016 coup attempt, three helicopters carrying IS members from Libya and Syria landed near a hotel in Muğla where President Erdoğan was staying at the time. According to Akinan, they arrived before the soldiers who were allegedly planning to assassinate Erdoğan. Akinan had previously shared and commented on social media posts accusing AKP members of corruption and other offences.

Tunisia

Opposition politician arrested and detained

According to media reports, leading opposition politician Rahed Ghannouchi, who heads the Islamic party Ennahdha, was arrested on 17.04.23 and detained after interrogation. The arrest warrant was issued on charges of incitement to civil war and planning to attack the internal security of the state, following a statement of Ghannouchi that such a civil war would take place if all left-wing and Islamic parties were banned. Several Ennahdha party members had already been arrested earlier in the week. Furthermore, the authorities closed several of the party's offices. Since early February, the Tunisian authorities have detained more than 20 prominent opponents of President Saïed's leadership (cf. BN of 13.02.23 and 20.02.23). Furthermore, the parties were severely restricted by the new constitution of July 2022 (cf. BN of 01.08.22, 19.09.22 and 07.11.22).

Uganda

President initiates review of Anti-Homosexuality Bill 2023

The bill, which includes massive restrictions on the rights of LGBTIQ people (cf. BN of 13.03.23 and 27.03.23) and was passed by parliament, was not signed by President Yoweri Museveni and will therefore not become law. However, Museveni supports the bill in principle and has sent it back to parliament with proposed amendments. Sources say that his amendments concern the issue of 'rehabilitation' for those who renounce homosexuality. On 25.04.23, the amendments are to be drafted by a legal and parliamentary committee.

Ukraine

Ukraine conflict: course of hostilities

In the Ukraine conflict, the heaviest fighting is currently developing towards Bakhmut in Donetsk oblast. Heavy fighting is taking place around the town of Bakhmut itself and the nearby localities of Khromovo, Hryhorivka and Ivanivske. Russian forces have meanwhile continued to advance. The Ukrainian Defence Ministry has confirmed that a number of Ukrainian positions in Bakhmut were abandoned. In the direction of Lyman, fighting took place on the southern outskirts of Kremenna and in the Serebriansky forest area. To the west of the city of Donetsk, the

Russian side has attempted to advance towards the area of Avdeevka, Vodyane, Pervomayskoye, Marinka and Pobeda. In the past week, fighting has also intensified around Vuhledar.

Venezuela

Update on corruption investigation, suspected suicide of a detainee

According to the Attorney General's Office, a total of 61 people have been arrested as of 19.04.23 in connection with the ongoing corruption investigations in several state-owned companies (cf. BN of 27.03.23 and 03.04.23). In this context, the president of the company Cartones de Venezuela, Leoner Azuaje Urrea, was arrested on 14.04.23. After an initial hearing, he died in custody on 20.04.23. According to the Attorney General's Office, he took his own life in the El Helicoide prison of the SEBIN secret service.

Yemen

At least 78 dead in mass panic

On 19.04.23, at least 78 people were killed and dozens injured in a mass panic during a distribution of charity in the capital Sanaa. The event was initiated by private businessmen as part of Ramadan, with donations of around USD 10 per person. It is still unclear how the panic occurred; some media report that the entrance door was too small and not designed to handle the crowd, while others report that Houthi security forces fired into the air for unknown reasons, striking an electric wire and sparking an explosion which ultimately led to the mass panic.

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