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Briefing Notes

Group 62 - Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

24 August 2020

Afghanistan

COVID-19 pandemic

There are no significant changes compared to last week. Most infections are still reported from Kabul, followed by Herat, Balkh, Kandahar and Nangarhar (as of 23 August 2020). Despite international assistance, hospitals are reporting difficulties in maintaining or expanding their capacity to treat patients with COVID-19 and in maintaining essential health services. According to recent assessments by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), COVID-19 is seriously hampering Afghanistan's economic development. GDP is expected to decline by 6.25% (pre-pandemic expectations were for growth of 3%). Furthermore, the poverty rate is expected to rise from 55% to 68%. UNHCR, in cooperation with the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, plans to resume support for voluntary returnees from Pakistan.

Badakhshan province: Taliban ban young women from attending university

In the north-eastern province of Badakhshan, the Taliban are reported to have banned young women from taking entrance tests to universities.

Attacks, hostilities, civilian victims

According to the New York Times, at least 170 pro-government forces and 107 civilians were killed in August 2020 (as of 20 August 2020).

On Afghan Independence Day, 18 August 2020, at least 14 missiles struck down-town Kabul, killing or injuring at least 19 people.

On 22 August 2020, Kabul was targeted by three bomb attacks, in which at least one civilian was killed and four others were injured. In addition, an Afghan army colonel and his driver were shot dead by unknown persons.

Belarus

Protests against President Lukashenko

After the official announcement of his election victory in the presidential election, which ended on 09 August 2020, the protests against incumbent Alexander Lukashenko continue. On 23 August 2020 more than 100,000 people gathered in Minsk at an officially unauthorised protest rally, which remained peaceful. Lukashenko had previously threatened to deploy the military against protesters. According to him, the protests are being directed from abroad. In the meantime, he ordered immediate readiness for the military.

Ethiopia

Deaths at protests in Oromia

At least nine people have lost their lives in clashes between Ethiopian security forces and protesters in the Oromia region. Most of the victims died in the town of Awaday, some 350 km east of the capital Addis Ababa. The protests began on 11 August 2020 following a social media campaign to release prominent Oromo opposition leader Bekele Gerba and the media mogul Jawar Mohammed, both of whom were arrested shortly after the murder of the singer and Oromo activist Hachalu Hundessa (see BN of 6 July 2020). The death of the singer triggered protests in Addis Ababa which spread to the surrounding Oromia region, killing at least 178 people. Both Bekele and Jawar are held partially responsible for the violence. Political observers see the conflict as a confirmation of the growing division within Ethiopia's largest ethnic group (about 37%), the Oromo. Jawar initially supported the policies of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, both Oromo, but soon distanced himself and is currently considered Ahmed's biggest domestic opponent. One point of contention is the question of autonomy for the regional state of Oromia.

Iran

Prison sentences and acquittals for signatories of a protest letter

14 signatories of a declaration published in December 2019 by 77 activists denouncing the use of violence by the Iranian security forces during the protests in November 2019, were indicted in the Tehran Revolutionary Court. Six of the accused were sentenced to one year's imprisonment each on 19 August 2020, eight others were acquitted. The protests in November 2019 were triggered by the government's announcement of a massive fuel price increase and, according to the Ministry of the Interior, quickly spread to more than 100 cities and almost all provinces. A large number of people were killed, injured and imprisoned when the protests were suppressed. Some of them are said to have been severely mistreated while in custody.

Iraq

Security operation against IS fighters

According to Iraqi military sources on 18 August 20, 10 IS fighters were killed during a security operation in the Qarachogh Mountains, near the town of Makhmour about 60 km south-east of Mosul (Nineveh Province).

USA hands over military base

More than two years after victory over the IS had been announced, the USA handed over the Taji military base, north of Baghdad, to the Iraqi security forces on 23 August 2020. Taji has been specifically dedicated to the training of Iraqi soldiers since 2014. Currently, there are still around 5,000 US soldiers stationed in Iraq. According to the Iraqi government, the US wants to withdraw its troops within three years.

Parliament's regional office in Basra set on fire

On the evening of 21 August 2020, protesters in the southern Iraqi city of Basra tried to set fire to a regional office of the parliament. However, security forces were able to extinguish the fire in time. According to security sources, police response to the protesters was moderate, although some of them threw petrol bombs and stones at the security forces. The riots were triggered by the killing of two activists in Basra two weeks ago. The governor of Basra has announced tighter security measures as a result of the violent protests.

Assassinations of activists

On 19 August 2020, an Iraqi activist and his fiancée were shot dead by unknown persons in the southern Iraqi city of Basra. The victim had supported the anti-government protests in Iraq and demanded comprehensive reforms, e.g. to eradicate corruption, to improve public services and to create more employment opportunities. Just a few hours earlier, another activist had also been shot dead in Basra.

COVID-19 pandemic

On 15 August 2020, the Higher Committee for Health and National Safety in Iraq issued an order to extend the daily curfew from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. until further notice. The objective is to prevent mass gatherings. The new rules also prohibit travel between the provinces, except in emergencies.

Most new cases were reported from the province of Baghdad, followed by the provinces of Basra and Nineveh.

Ivory Coast

Governing party approves controversial candidacy of Ouattara

On 22 August 2020 the incumbent president, Alassane Ouattara, was officially nominated by his party to run for a third term in the October 2020 elections. The opposition considers a further term of office unconstitutional (see BN of 10 August 2020). The decision by the ruling party Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix (RHDP) to reinstate Ouattara came one day after the candidacies of former President Laurent Gbagbo and former rebel leader Guillaume Soro had been rejected by the country's electoral authorities in the appeals court, according to media reports. Observers expect that these news will further aggravate domestic political tensions. In mid-August 2020, at least five people died and over 100 were injured in riots associated with the announcement of another Ouattara candidacy. More than 3,000 people were killed in violent clashes in connection with the 2010 presidential elections.

Lebanon

Political and economic crisis after the explosion of 04 August 2020

As yet no political solution is in sight to end the power vacuum created by the resignation of the entire government. On 21 August 2020, President Aoun (85, a former warlord from the Lebanese civil war) urged to include competent members of the protest movement in the new government.

Meanwhile, Standard & Poors downgraded several current Lebanese government bonds to "D" (default) as Lebanon was yet again unable to meet interest payments. As a result, state financing via the private capital market is currently de facto impossible.

For the first time, the protests, which continue on all days without a curfew, are also clearly and distinctly directed against Hezbollah and its role in Lebanon. Previously this had been a taboo in public discourse throughout society. However, Hezbollah's intimate association with the state now makes it a target of public criticism, it is also blamed for the explosion and its consequences as well as the desolate condition of the state system. In addition, the International Court of Justice handed down its verdict in the Hariri murder case on 18 August 2020. Hariri was the former Prime Minister of Lebanon who was assassinated in 2005, he is the father of Saad Hariri who also held this office before. A defendant, a member of Hezbollah, was found guilty in absentia, which in Lebanon is widely seen as confirmation of Hezbollah's involvement in the former prime minister's death.

The number of confirmed deaths from the explosion has risen to over 180. In addition, the explosion has probably contributed considerably to the drastically worsening corona situation in Lebanon due to the damage to several hospitals and the overburdening of the health care system as well as the massive loss of housing: The number of confirmed cases in the country has doubled in the two weeks since the explosion. On 21 August 2020 a record number of 628 new infections was reported, which is why a renewed two-week lockdown with an evening curfew was announced. Meanwhile, two more arrest warrants were issued against persons suspected of being partly responsible for the explosion.

Libya

LNA rejects ceasefire

On 21 August 2020, both Fayez al-Sarraj, head of the government of national unity (GNA) in office in Tripoli, and Aguila Saleh, speaker of the rival eastern-based House of Representatives (HoR), declared a ceasefire. A demilitarised zone is to be created around Sirte. The town is currently controlled by General Haftar's troops. For several weeks, both warring parties have been concentrating their military forces in the region around Sirte.

According to a statement by the spokesman of the Libyan National Army (LNA), Ahmed Mismari, the LNA rejects the ceasefire announced on 21 August 2020, because GNA troops had been further strengthened in recent days and were planning an attack on the city of Sirte and on al-Djufra.

Mali

Military coup

In the morning of 18 August 2020 a mutiny occurred at the military base in the town of Kati, about 15 km from the capital Bamako, during which several leading officers were arrested. In the afternoon, the rebels drove in convoy to Bamako, where they arrested Head of State Keita, Prime Minister Boubou Cissé and other high-ranking members of the government. Although shots are said to have been fired occasionally during the military action, there were no violent clashes between different segments of the security forces. When the inhabitants of Bamako learned of the events, several thousand people gathered in the central Independence Square to celebrate the overthrow of the president. The opposition movement M5-RFP had been demanding the resignation of the president for months and had repeatedly organised mass protests.

Keita had been under pressure for quite some time, as he had not succeeded in controlling the attacks by Islamists, especially in the north of the country, which have been ongoing since 2012. Delayed political reforms, a weakening economy and accusations of corruption also worsened the situation. After his arrest and under pressure from the military, President Keita announced his immediate resignation and the dissolution of the government and parliament in the night of 19 August 2020, in order to prevent bloodshed, according to his own statements. Subsequently, Mali's air force chief Ismail Wague, on behalf of a "National Committee for the Rescue of the People", announced the military's plans to form a transitional government and organise new elections during a TV address. The leaders of the military coup aim for a transitional phase of at least three years until the return to a civilian government. During this phase, the military should provide the head of state as well as most of the members of the government, according to the West African community of states ECOWAS, whose representatives arrived in Mali on 22 August 2020 and are negotiating with the new rulers. According to the ECOWAS delegation, the junta wants to review "the foundations of the Malian state" in the three-year transitional phase it has envisaged. Shortly after the coup, the organization, which consists of a total of 15 West African states, had sided with Keita and demanded his return to office. The ECOWAS delegation as well as the junta stated on 23 August 2020 that Keita should be released. He was allowed to return to his private home in Bamako and also to travel abroad if he wanted to receive medical treatment there. Cissé was to be taken to a secure residence in Bamako. The negotiations between the ECOWAS delegation and the rebels are to be continued on 24 August 2020. The disempowerment of the state leadership by parts of the military has met with international criticism. The rebel's spokesman Wagué declared that all agreements with national and international partners would be respected. He also assured that the UN mission MINUSMA, the French mission Barkhane and the G5- Sahel group "remain our partners for stability and restoration of security".

Morocco

Youth Day pardons

On the occasion of Youth Day and his birthday on 21 August 2020, King Mohammed VI granted another 673 pardons.

Myanmar

Peace negotiations

The fourth session of the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference took place from 19 to 21 August 2020. As in previous sessions, the subject of the conference was the negotiation of a framework agreement between the government, the army and rebel groups of ethnic minorities for a lasting peace. It was agreed, among other things, to strive for the gradual establishment of a federal state after 2020. Representatives of the ten rebel groups that signed the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) participated in the talks. The government excluded the Arakan

Army, classified as a terrorist organization, which has been in armed conflict with the military in Rakhine State and Chin State since the end of 2018, from the negotiations. As a consequence, the rebel alliance Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), an alliance of seven other ethnic rebel groups, did not attend the conference. Like the Arakan Army, its members have not joined the NCA and some of them continue to engage in armed conflicts with the government, especially in Kachin State, Shan State and Kayin State. In August 2016, May 2017 and July 2018 the first three rounds of talks had taken place. The talks are to continue in 2021 under a new government appointed after the parliamentary elections due in November 2020.

Nigeria

Enugu: Casualties in clash between IPOB and security forces

On 23 August 2020 the police stormed the Community Secondary School (aka St Patrick Secondary School) in the city of Enugu (capital of the south-eastern state of the same name) in the Emene district. Members of the separatist organization Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) held a meeting there. The separatists allegedly resisted the attempt to arrest them and overpowered the police. More than a dozen patrol cars with officers of the police, the military, and the Department of State Services (DSS), the domestic intelligence service, had appeared to reinforce the security forces, reports said. Violent clashes then occurred on the school grounds and along the old Abakaliki Road between the school and the Catholic Church of St Joseph. The reports on the number of victims vary. On 23 August 2020, the IPOB spokesperson, Emma Powerful, announced that 21 IPOB members had been killed and 47 arrested in the course of the violent clashes. According to the police chief of the state of Enugu, the police arrested four IPOB members; four people were killed in the incident, he said. A DSS spokesperson informed that two DSS members had been killed.

ISWAP abducts hundreds of civilians from Kukawa

On 18 August 2020, members of the jihadist terrorist organization Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) attacked the village of Kukawa (Borno State), located on the shores of Lake Chad. According to local militia and residents, the terrorists are said to have abducted hundreds of civilians. Many of them had only been returned to their home town of Kukawa from refugee camps in Maiduguri on 02 August 20. An army spokesman reported on 20 August 2020 that Kukawa was under military control again. Three soldiers were killed and two wounded in the attack. Eight of the attackers were killed.

North Macedonia

Social Democrats and Albanian DUI renew governing coalition

According to recent media reports of 18 August 2020, the Social Democrats (SDSM), led by Zoran Zaev, and the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), led by Ali Ahmeti, agreed on the formation of a new cabinet after the parliamentary elections. According to the intended coalition agreement, Zaev will again head the North Macedonian government. President Stevo Pendarovski had previously given Zaev the mandate to form a government. Ali Ahmeti's DUI, the country's leading ethnic Albanian party, had given up its earlier election campaign demand for an ethnic Albanian prime minister, reports said. However, both coalition partners had agreed that the DUI would appoint an Albanian prime minister one hundred days before the next parliamentary elections. Under the agreement, the Albanian and DUI member, Talat Xhaferi, is to retain the office of speaker of parliament. At the press conference on 18 August 2020 Ahmeti had confirmed his conviction that he had reached a good agreement. Following these reports, both party leaders had assured that their partnership was based on the continuation of the country's Euro-Atlantic course and the internal reforms that had been initiated.

Somalia

Explosion in a football stadium

Several people were killed and wounded when a landmine exploded during a football match in Beletweyne, Hiiran region, on 18 August 20. No one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack.

Soldiers sentenced to death

Two army soldiers were executed in Baidoa, Bay region, on 18 August 2020, after being convicted of raping a boy who died of his injuries in July 2020. After several cases of rape in recent months, the people of Baidoa called for tougher action by the state. Normally, sentences in rape cases are pronounced by tribal elders.

Somali National Army takes control of city

On 14 August 20, the Somali National Army, together with troops from AMISOM, took control of the town of Kuntuwaarey, in south-western Somalia, previously held by al-Shabaab. According to reports, they liberated 33 children held by the militant group. On 20 August 2020, an al-Shabaab explosives expert was killed in a United States drone attack while attempting to lay landmines on a public road near the town. Al-Shabaab is reportedly trying to regain control of the city.

Attacks on government officials

Al-Shabaab is believed to be behind an attack on a government official in Mogadishu on 23 August 2020. The government official escaped, one civilian died and two others were seriously injured.

Al-Shabaab killed the newly appointed Minister of Agriculture of the regional state of Hirshabelle in Jowhar, Middle Shabelle region, when he was on his way home from a mosque on 17 August 2020.

Syria

Idlib: Air attacks on rebel areas

According to eyewitness reports, Russian fighter planes flew several air raids on Syrian cities under rebel control on 18 August 2020, including areas around Harbanosh where tens of thousands of refugees are said to be staying in temporary shelters. Rebel fighters also reported that the Syrian army and its allied militias are gathering troops on the front lines. In Jabal az-Zawiya (the region around Mount Zawiya), several villages are reported to have come under heavy artillery fire.

Deir ez-Zor: Attack on Russian military convoy

According to Russian media, on 18 August 2020 a major general of the Russian military was killed when an explosive bomb was detonated on the roadside near the provincial capital Deir ez-Zor. Three soldiers of the military convoy were injured.

Suspected attack on gas pipeline causes power failures

The Syrian energy minister announced on 23 August 2020 that there were indications of an attack on the state's energy supply. Syrian television previously showed footage of a large fire, which is said to have originated from a gas pipeline between Dumayr and Adra, north-west of Damascus. The subsequent power cuts are said to have mostly affected the south of the country.

Tajikistan

Prison sentences after raids against Muslim Brotherhood

Two weeks ago, a court in Sughd province found 20 people guilty of membership of the Muslim Brotherhood and sentenced them to prison terms of between five and seven years. The defendants had been arrested when the authorities started to raid alleged cells of the Muslim Brotherhood in January 2020. The Muslim Brotherhood has been banned as an extremist organisation in the country since 2006. Human rights organizations accuse the authorities of persecuting peaceful Muslims under the pretext of combating extremism.

Togo

COVID-19 pandemic

The health emergency declared on 01 April 2020 was extended until 15 September 2020. Togo's land borders will remain closed for passenger traffic. Public events are prohibited, face masks must be worn. Since the beginning of August 2020, Lomé airport has been reopened to international air traffic.

Yemen

Cut-down on humanitarian aid

The UN announced on 19 August 2020 that half of its aid programmes in Yemen are under-financed. Twelve of 38 major programmes have already been discontinued or downsized and 20 more programmes could follow by October 2020. Before the reduction, about half the population, 14 million people, received aid every month. In April 2020, the UN halved the food rations for eight million people in northern Yemen. Health services in more than 400 health facilities were suspended or reduced and payments to nearly 10,000 health workers were stopped. The UN fears that without further help in the coming weeks, water and sanitation services will be cut and almost 200 hospitals and 2,500 health clinics will no longer receive essential goods such as medicines. The UN continues to describe the situation in Yemen as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, with around 80% of the population in need of humanitarian aid.

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BN-Redaktion@bamf.bund.de