

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	769
Land:	Somalia
Kilde:	Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge. Group 62 - Information Centre for Asylum and Migration
Titel:	Briefing Notes
Udgivet:	23. marts 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	3. september 2020

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

23 March 2020

Afghanistan

Hostilities, attacks and civilian casualties

Since the agreement on the withdrawal of troops between the Taliban and the U.S. was signed on 29.02.20, fighting and attacks have resumed in numerous provinces following a phase of reduced violence. Since there continues to be a lack of agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban over the exchange of prisoners planned as a precondition for peace talks, the Taliban have intensified their activities. Observers assume that the Taliban are thereby trying to increase pressure on the government to make it give in to the prisoner exchange.

At least 22 soldiers were killed in a Taliban attack on a base in the southern province of Zabul. A major Taliban offensive in Balkh province was fended off, according to government sources. Further fighting was reported from Kunduz, Nangarhar, Ghazni, Herat, Helmand, Zabul, Kandahar, Samangan, Balkh, Sar-e-Pul, Jawzjan, Faryab, Baghlan, Badghis and Ghor provinces.

A number of bomb attacks have also been carried out. For example, two civilians were injured in a bomb attack in Kabul on 22.03.20. The attack took place near a military facility.

Prisoners released

The government plans to release all prisoners on remand within the next 48 hours. This measure is intended to help contain the coronavirus.

Algeria

No demonstrations because of coronavirus

The government has banned all cultural, economic, political and sporting gatherings in a bid to contain the coronavirus. The leaders of the demonstrations, including detained activist Karim Tabbou, human rights lawyer Mustafa Bouchachi and former minister Abdelaziz Rahabi, have also urged people to stay at home this Friday. The appeals have had an impact as the streets of Algeria are now empty. Mosques and restaurants have been closed. Half of government workers are to stay at home to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Bolivia

Elections postponed indefinitely

The presidential and parliamentary elections planned for 03.05.20 have been postponed indefinitely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal announced on 21.03.20 that a “broad and pluralistic dialogue is to be conducted with all political organisations” in order to set a new election date. The President, the Vice-President, 36 Senators and 120 Deputies are to be elected at the polls. The country has been in a transitional phase since the unrest following the presidential elections held on 20.10.19 (cf. BN of 11./18.11.19).

Colombia

COVID-19 pandemic

According to media reports, the government is not willing to cooperate directly with the government of neighbouring Venezuela, even in view of the pandemic. Instead, Colombia's President Ivan Duque proposed that the Pan-American Health Organization based in Washington coordinate the transnational fight against the spread of the coronavirus.

Colombia had closed its borders with Venezuela with effect from 16.03.20 (cf. BN of 16.03.20). According to President Duque, the borders with neighbouring countries are to remain closed until 30.05.20. On 20.03.20, President Duque announced an extensive quarantine which is to apply throughout the country from 25.03.20 until 13.04.20. People over the age of 70 have not been allowed to leave their homes since 21.03.20.

Prison riots

According to media reports, several riots erupted in Colombian prisons on 21.03.20. According to the reports, the most serious riot took place in La Modelo prison in the capital Bogotá, where 23 prisoners were killed and 90 other inmates were injured. Denying claims of unsanitary conditions amid fears of a coronavirus breakout, the Justice Minister Margarita Cabello Blanco said there was no sanitary problem that would have caused this plan and these riots. The Minister said that what had happened at La Modelo prison had been a mass breakout attempt. None of the prisoners managed to escape during the riots. According to the minister, there is not one infection nor any prisoner or custodial or administrative staffer who has coronavirus. A clarification of the events has been rendered difficult, among other things, by the fact that the prison administration is not issuing any official information.

Iran

Criminal consequences for journalists reporting on coronavirus

According to a press release issued by the human rights organisation Reporters without Borders (RSF) on 17.03.20, the government is penalising journalists who are trying to report on the actual facts and figures of the spread of coronavirus in the country. They are reportedly being interrogated by the secret service (Etteala'at) and by the Pasdaran. Some are accused of spreading lies. Those who have corrected the official figures for deaths from coronavirus have been hit the hardest. In nearly all parts of the country, journalists are being affected by the reprisals. RSF cites case studies of interrogations and arrests in Qom, Rasht and Tehran, among others. According to official sources, 1,135 people have died of coronavirus in Iran. The total number of people infected is thus 17,361. However, the WHO estimates that the number of infections in Iran may actually be five times higher. The regime has tried to minimize the extent of the coronavirus crisis from the beginning, critics say.

Iraq

New Prime Minister candidate

On 16.03.20, the High Federal Court instructed President Braham Saleh to nominate a new candidate for Prime Minister. Saleh then instructed the former governor of Najaf, Adnan al-Zurfi, to form a new government. The appointment of al-Zurfi has met with opposition in many political parties. Anti-government protesters also rejected al-Zurfi's nomination. The protests which have been ongoing since October 2019 have currently been suspended due to the coronavirus crisis. Activists urged people to stay at home via social media. The government imposed curfews, restricted mobility (e.g. suspending domestic flights) between the provinces and closed schools and universities.

Floods in Nineveh und Diyala

On 18.03.20, torrential rain caused floods in the provinces of Nineveh and Diyala. The floods occurred during curfew periods aimed at preventing the spread of coronavirus. Many families were in their homes and had to be evacuated. The central Iraqi government and Kurdish Regional Government imposed a lockdown and are restricting movement between provinces in a bid to prevent the spread of coronavirus. This makes access to the affected population more difficult. In addition, houses rebuilt after ISIS have once again been damaged or

destroyed.

Kazakhstan

Kazakh former subdistrict governor sentenced to seven years in prison for ordering attack on activist

On 17.03.20, the Talghar District Court sentenced the former governor of the Panfilov sub-district, Nurghali Appazov, to seven years in prison and ordered him to pay the civil rights activist Galina Arzamasova the equivalent of EUR 2,850 in compensation. Ms. Arzamasova suffered a gunshot wound when she was shot at from a distance while on her way to a meeting with the politician in August 2019. The court found Appazov guilty of ordering the shooting and barred him from serving in public office for life.

Lebanon

Release and departure of a former SLA member

The Lebanese-American former militia member Amer al-Fakhoury who has been detained was unexpectedly released from prison on 01.03.20. However, he was banned from leaving the country. On 19.3.20, he was flown out of Lebanon by a U.S. military helicopter and is now back in the U.S. This caused considerable outrage: he had fled the country as a member of a pro-Israeli militia after the end of the civil war and has been accused of torturing prisoners at a jail, among other things. The U.S. had lobbied strongly for his release, rejecting accusations that they had persuaded the Lebanese government to release al-Fakhoury. In addition to serious accusations, levelled especially by Hezbollah, there appears to be a link between the murder of another former member of the same militia, Antoine al-Hayek, on 22.03.20, shortly after al-Fakhoury's release. Politicians of all parties sharply condemned the murder, especially since al-Hayek had faced trial voluntarily. The head of the Lebanese military tribunal, Hussein Abdallah, resigned following protests against al-Fakhoury's release.

Libya

Sporadic fighting

Despite the UN's call for a humanitarian ceasefire to allow the authorities to deal with the coronavirus in the best possible way, it is reported that random clashes have been erupting between troops of the Libyan National Army (LNA) and the Government of National Accord (GNA) since 18.03.20. According to the GNA's Ministry of Health, five people were killed and five others were injured in a missile attack in Ain Zara, a district of the Libyan capital.

Last week, the GNA decided to impose public health restrictions throughout the country to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Mali

29 soldiers killed in attack

29 soldiers were reportedly killed and at least five injured in an attack carried out by suspected jihadists on a military base on 19.03.20. The attack took place near the city of Tarkint (Gao region) in the north-east of the country, about 125 km north of Gao city. In northern Mali, fighting between the Malian army and jihadist groups has raged on for years. So far no group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Niger

Repression in the name of coronavirus

Thousands of protesters gathered on the streets of the capital Niamey on 22.03.20. A fire broke out after tear gas bullets fired by the police ignited bales of fabric. The Ministry of the Interior confirmed three deaths due

to a fire of unknown origin and said it would launch an investigation. Opposition parties, lawyers' associations, human rights groups and the Widows' Association had called for the demonstration. The reason for this was that Niger's Minister of Defence, Issoufou Katambe, had opened an internal investigation after receiving reports of corruption and after the government's refusal to publish the relevant report. The army officials are said to have accounted for arms purchases in China, Russia, Israel and Ukraine, but have neither ordered nor paid for the arms. The authorities banned the demonstration citing coronavirus, although no case of coronavirus has yet been recorded in Niger and all other public events are permitted. The government had already used the pandemic to take action against critics. For example, the journalist Mamane Touda, who works for the anti-government radio station Alternative FM, has been in custody since 05.03.20 for "disseminating data tending to disturb public order". Alternative FM is run by the civil society group Alternative Espaces Citoyens (AEC), which is one of the co-organisers of the demonstration. During the demonstration, according to AEC, the police arrested its managing director Moussa Tchangari, the trade unionist Mounkaila Halidou and the dissident Nouhou Arzika. The Traders' Union called for all shops to be kept closed in protest on 23.03.20 and 24.03.20.

North Macedonia

Election postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Media reports indicate that the early parliamentary elections scheduled for 12.04.20 will be postponed, though no new date has been set yet.

On 17.03.20, representatives of the main parties agreed to postpone the elections in view of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The measures taken so far by North Macedonia to stem the spread of the coronavirus include border closures and an appeal to citizens living abroad not to travel home except in cases of extreme hardship.

Somalia

Government troops conquer the town of Janaale

On 16.03.20, troops from the Somali National Army (SNA) and AMISOM recaptured the city of Janaale in the Lower Shabelle region from al-Shabaab. AFRICOM carried out air strikes to support the operation. Al-Shabaab had controlled Janaale since 2015.

Syria

Two Turkish soldiers killed in Idlib despite ceasefire

The Turkish Ministry of Defence has confirmed that an attack by radical groups killed two Turkish soldiers and injured a third on 19.03.20. A statement issued by the Ministry said it was an enemy rocket attack, but the perpetrators were not identified. In Idlib, the Turkish military's most recent operations have been against the Syrian army and its allies, mostly militias supported by Iran.

The Ministry also stated that Turkish artillery units had carried out retaliatory strikes in response to the attack, without providing further details.

First COVID-19 case confirmed

On 22.03.20, the Ministry of Health confirmed the first case of the novel coronavirus in Syria. The patient is reported to be a 20-year-old woman from abroad.

As early as 20.03.20, additional measures had been taken to contain the pandemic, with the Syrian government imposing an entry ban on foreigners from regions affected by the coronavirus. After the first official case of COVID-19 was announced, public transport operations were also suspended.

In the SDF-administered areas of Syria's northeast, the Kurdish-dominated local government has closed the border crossings to the rest of the country. In addition, initial restrictions have been imposed on the movement of people between settlements under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and a curfew is to take effect from 23.03.20.

According to media reports, the government in Damascus is hindering the distribution of test kits flown in by WHO for distribution in Idlib, the last rebel-held area.

General amnesty granted again

On 22.03.20, President Bashar al-Assad issued a further amnesty decree, which is intended to provide shorter prison sentences for crimes and exemption from punishment for deserters. Presidential decrees of this kind have been issued repeatedly in recent years, most recently in September 2019.

Observers also suspect an attempt to ease the burden on Syrian prisons in order to counteract the rapid spread of the coronavirus. The most recent decree included in its wording further offences that had not been included in previous decrees of this kind.

Togo

Agbéyomé Kodjo's immunity lifted

Agbéyomé Kodjo, who lost the presidential elections of 22.02.20 to the incumbent Faure Gnassingbé (cf. BN of 24.02.20), is accused of seriously disturbing public order, endangering the security of the state, spreading false information and defamation. After the elections, he declared himself Togo's democratically elected president, accused the government camp of election fraud and called on the population to protest. On 16.03.20, the National Assembly lifted his parliamentary immunity, allowing the Public Prosecutor's Office to investigate him.

Turkey

Incidents and border closures

On the northern Greek border, fresh incidents occurred in the night of 18.03.20, when around 500 mainly young refugees tried to tear down the border fence on the Greek side. According to media reports, tear gas, grenades and stones were thrown at officers of the Greek police and the European border protection agency Frontex. Greek border guards, in turn, used high-pressure fans to push back the gas.

According to media reports, the Turkish Ministry of the Interior ordered the closure of the borders with Greece and Bulgaria at midnight on 18.03.20 to prevent further spread of the coronavirus. The order came after a Turkish pandemic crisis meeting led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The borders with Iran had been closed earlier owing to the pandemic.

On 21.03.20, Turkey suspended nearly all direct flights to and from Germany because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As early as 14.03.20, Turkey had banned people from nine European countries from entering the country in order to stem the spread of the coronavirus. The Ministry of the Interior says the border is closed to travellers from Germany, France, Austria, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Sweden. For the time being, the measures will apply until 17.04.20. Persons from third countries who have stayed in these nine countries in the past 14 days are also no longer allowed to enter Turkey. In addition, Turkish citizens are temporarily barred from traveling to the above-mentioned countries.

Venezuela

Consequences of the measures against coronavirus

A prison break in the Zulía region following the introduction of new restrictions has resulted in the death of at least ten inmates, according to the prison authorities. The curfew that has now been imposed throughout the country is also disrupting various forms of opposition activity and greatly exacerbating the country's economic problems. Doctors and journalists who cover the desolate state of the healthcare system and question the official figures on coronavirus-infected people are reportedly being arrested. So far, these figures have been very low.

Vietnam

Prison sentences for separatist activities

On 18.03.20, a court in Dien Bien province sentenced two members of the Hmong ethnic minority to life imprisonment on charges of having attempted to establish an independent state in the Muong Nhe district of Dien Bien province in north-eastern Vietnam in 2018 and 2019. Twelve co-defendants received sentences ranging from two to 20 years in prison.

Yemen

Fighting in Marib governorate

On 16.03.20 and 17.03.20, fighting erupted between the Houthi rebels and government troops in the Sorouh district of Marib governorate. According to reports, at least 38 fighters on both sides were killed. Saudi Arabia carried out air strikes in support of government troops.

Development aid workers from UAE killed

Two workers of the Red Crescent of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were kidnapped and killed by unknown armed men in Aden on 21.03.20.

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