

Crash of a transport plane on the Russian-Ukrainian border

Questions are being raised about the crash of an Ilyushin Il-76 transport plane on Russian territory on 24.01.24 in view of the lack of evidence to support either side's claims. According to media reports, the crash occurred to the northeast of the city of Belgorod; Belgorod Oblast borders the Ukrainian oblast of Kharkiv, among others. The exact cause of the crash remains unclear, but it is assumed that the plane was shot down.

According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, there were a total of nine crew and accompanying personnel on board, as well as 65 Ukrainian soldiers who were to have been brought to Ukraine as part of a prisoner exchange. The Russian side said Ukraine was responsible for the crash. The latter in turn stated that there had been no prior communication between the two sides, which was essential given the proximity to a combat zone. The Russian side then stated that Ukraine had been warned 15 minutes before the flight. The list of people on board that was provided by the Russian Federation raised doubts. It reportedly contained the names of prisoners of war who had been able to return to Ukraine in an earlier exchange. Ukraine stated that an exchange of prisoners had been planned for 24.01.24, but it had not taken place. The Il-76 was presumably transporting S-300 missiles for later attacks on Kharkiv.

President Zelensky, who accused the Russian Federation of playing with the lives of Ukrainian prisoners, called for an international investigation into the crash. The UN Security Council dealt with this on 25.01.24 at Russia's request. The aircraft's flight recorders have reportedly since been found and taken to a testing laboratory in Moscow.⁴⁷

Venezuela

Supreme Court confirms ban on Machado running for political office

On 26.01.24, the Supreme Court (TSJ) confirmed the ban on María Corina Machado from the Vente Venezuela party running for political office. This means that it will not be possible for Machado, who clearly won the opposition primaries in October 2023, to run in this year's presidential elections. According to the opposition, this violates the Barbados Agreement of October 2023, which, among other things, provides guarantees for free and fair elections. The US has announced a review of its sanctions policy in connection with the judgement and the recent numerous arrests in connection with conspiracy allegations.⁴⁸

Conspiracy charges and new arrests, launch of the "Furia Bolivariana" campaign

On 22.01.24, Attorney General Tarek William Saab issued arrest warrants for 14 people who were critical of the government or were opposition members as part of Operation Brazalete Blanco, including journalist Sebastiana Barráez, human rights defender Tamara Suju, YouTuber Norbey Marín and a number of retired military officers. The previously named defendants all live in exile abroad. According to Saab, the arrests of three members (Guillermo Lopez, Luis Camacaro and Juan Freites) of the Vente Venezuela party on 23.01.24 are also related to this. The persons in question are being investigated for, among other things, the attempted intentional killing of President Maduro and the governor of the state of Táchira, Freddy Bernal, as well as treason and terrorism. However, Saab has not yet provided any evidence for these accusations, and the accused have denied the allegations. President Maduro repeatedly addresses alleged conspiracies against his person or government in public, most recently in his annual address to the nation on 15.01.24. According to Attorney General Saab, a total of 32 people, including civilians and military personnel, have been arrested in connection with five different conspiracy allegations between May 2023 and January 2024.

Numerous NGOs, media and members of the political opposition have rejected the accusations as criminalisation of opposition and human rights activism and see them as politically motivated. One analyst describes this mechanism as a tactic that has repeatedly been used in the past by Chavismo in critical phases to take action against people critical of the government under the pretext of a coup d'état. Following the announcement of the arrest warrants, Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino López also declared his loyalty to President Maduro, and several similar video messages from military officers were published. On 23.01.24, the armed forces also published a list of 33 military personnel who had been dismissed from the military on alleged conspiracy charges.

On 22.01.24, the vice president of the ruling PSUV party, Diosdado Cabello, also ordered the activation of the civil military "Furia Bolivariana" (Bolivarian Rage) campaign previously announced by Maduro, which aims to "neutralise terrorist attempts to oust him from power". As part of this campaign, numerous buildings belonging to opposition

parties, NGOs and trade unions were graffitied on Democracy Day, 23.01.24, and there were also reports of individual attacks during demonstrations that day as well as an attempted kidnapping.⁴⁹

Yemen

Human rights situation

In its World Report 2024, HRW reports on numerous human rights violations in Yemen, including the restricted freedom of movement for women in Houthi areas, but also in the south, which is under the control of the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC).

Yemeni women face restrictions on movement in areas under Houthi control, where the Houthis have created a legal basis requiring them to be accompanied by a mahram (male relative) in order to cross governorate borders. There is no such legal basis in areas under STC control, but women without a mahram are reportedly denied passage through checkpoints. HRW also accuses the Yemeni government and the Houthis of hampering the work of aid organisations by imposing access restrictions, thereby exacerbating the precarious humanitarian situation in the country.

On 19.01.24, HRW also reported that the Houthis had, since 2015, deliberately blocked water from entering the public water network in the city of Taizz, most of which is controlled by the Yemeni government. As a result, the water shortage that prevails throughout Yemen is particularly pronounced in Taizz, and the supply of other goods has been severely restricted.⁵⁰

Situation in the Red Sea

The situation in the Red Sea remains, by and large, unchanged. Between 22.01.24 and 27.01.24, the Houthis fired several missiles at cargo vessels and at least one US warship. Meanwhile, the US-led coalition has continued to carry out attacks on Houthi military targets in Yemen, including Houthi military targets near the capital Sanaa.⁵¹

Zambia

Zambian government passes new refugee law

According to press reports, the Zambian parliament passed a new refugee law on 19.01.24. The UNHCR welcomed the adoption of the new law. It aligns Zambia's refugee policy with the key objective of the UNHCR Global Compact on Refugees Programme. The aim is to provide greater support to countries that include refugees in their national systems and plans and integrate them into their societies and countries. The new refugee law is intended to improve the legal status of refugees and find regional solutions for forcibly displaced persons. According to the UNHCR, Zambia currently offers protection to 95,518 refugees and other displaced persons in the refugee settlements of Meheba, Mayukwayukwa and Mantapala as well as in urban areas such as Lusaka.⁵²