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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

8 January 2024

Afghanistan

Afghan refugees expelled from Pakistan and Iran; humanitarian situation

According to UNHCR/IOM, around 490,000 Afghan nationals had been expelled from Pakistan by 31.12.2023, many of whom have no accommodation in Afghanistan and are living in tents or in the open. At the same time, approximately 520,000 Afghan nationals have been expelled from Iran in the last nine months. In the districts of Herat province which were hit by the severe earthquakes in October 2023, many families are also living in tents and are reliant on humanitarian aid. Diseases are spreading among children in particular as the cold snap weather intensifies.¹

Security situation

On 06.01.2024, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) claimed responsibility for the explosion of a minibus in Kabul's Dashti Barchi district, which has a large Hazara community. According to the Taliban, two people were killed and 14 others were injured in the incident. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has reported that 25 people were killed or wounded.

According to their own sources, the Afghanistan Freedom Front and the National Resistance Front (NRF) killed a total of three Taliban insurgents in Baghlan and Parwan provinces on 25.12.23 and 31.12.23. The office of the Taliban governor of Badakhshan province was hit by a missile fired by unidentified persons on 02.01.24.²

Governance and persecution

Between 01.01.24 and 05.01.24, several dozen women and girls were reportedly arrested in Kabul, particularly in the Dashti Barchi district and in Ghazni province for allegedly failing to observe the dress code. At the time the report was issued, the whereabouts of the girls and women were unknown. According to the report issued on 07.01.24, families are increasingly restricting women's freedom of movement for fear of being arrested.

On 05.01.24, the women's rights activist Bibi Gul Mohammadi is said to have died by suicide in Kunduz province after being detained by the Taliban in September 2021 and facing intense social pressure. On 25.12.23, women's rights activist Parisa Azada, who had been arrested on 14.11.23, was released from prison.

In 2023, the Afghanistan Journalists Centre reported that 61 journalists had been arrested and that 168 incidents sometimes involving the violent obstruction of journalists' rights had occurred. On 05.01.24, the Taliban reportedly arrested the director of a radio station in Ghor province after the station had broadcast messages from UNAMA advocating an education system where boys and girls can learn.

On 31.12.23, a man from the province of Panjshir was reportedly arrested in Kabul. His whereabouts have been unknown since then. Two weeks earlier, a student from the same province had been arrested in Nimruz province on charges of supporting the NRF. On 31.12.23, a well-known lawyer was reportedly arrested in the province of Panjshir.

On 04.01.24, a former military officer was reportedly gunned down by a member of the Taliban in Urozgan province.³

Bangladesh

Outcome of the parliamentary elections

In the parliamentary elections held on 07.01.2014, the ruling Awami League won almost 75% of the seats, securing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina a fifth term in office. The Chief Election Commissioner put turnout at 28% when the polling stations closed; he later corrected the figure to 40%. The largest opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), boycotted the polls because thousands of its members had been arrested or had to defend themselves in court beforehand and were thus denied the opportunity to prepare for the election. Hasina described the BNP as a "terrorist organization" when casting her vote. Dozens of violent incidents took place between 05.01.24 and 07.01.24, resulting in the death of a total of six people and the wounding of several others, including candidates from various parties and journalists. Seven members of the BNP who were allegedly involved in a deadly attack on a passenger train, were arrested. Bangladeshi and international observers say the elections were a sham and are accusing Hasina of turning Bangladesh into a one-party state.⁴

Huge fire at refugee camp

A blaze that swept through the Rohingya refugee camp Kutupalong in the district of Cox's Bazaar on the night of 07.01.24 left almost 7,000 people homeless, according to UNHCR. The Bangladeshi refugee commissioner in Cox's Bazaar put the number of people rendered homeless at 4,000. According to various sources, the fire destroyed between 800 and 1,040 shelters and damaged around 120 public facilities, including health and education centres, sanitation facilities and mosques. The cause of the fire is still unknown, but authorities suspect arson. No fatalities have been reported so far.⁵

Burkina Faso

Former Foreign Minister abducted

On 24.12.23, unknown persons arrested and kidnapped the former Foreign Minister Alassé Ouédraogo in Ouagadougou. The members of his opposition party "Le Faso Autrement" demanded his immediate and unconditional release. According to media reports, the kidnappers claimed to be members of the Burkinabe police force. The chairman of "Le Faso Autrement" is said to have sharply criticized the military regime led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré. In a letter published in October 2023, he had criticized the restrictions on individual and collective freedom, freedom of the press and the retreat of democracy in Burkina Faso. In November 2023, his party had criticized the military government's decision to forcibly conscript Ouédraogo for the fight against terrorism. According to HRW, at least a dozen civilian activists and members of opposition parties have been conscripted to participate in government security operations in the fight against jihadism (cf. BN of 13.11.23). In a letter published on 30.12.23, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) voiced its concern about the arrest and detention of political and civil society figures who are critical of the military government led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré.⁶

Chad

Vote on new constitution

On 28.12.23, the Supreme Court confirmed the results of the vote on the introduction of a new constitution. With around eight million people eligible to vote, it was adopted with 85.90% of the vote. On 29.12.23, the interim president signed the new constitution, making the elections scheduled for the end of 2024 more realistic. The fact that there are no plans to change the country's form of government has been criticized in particular. According to the opposition, the centralized state apparatus is an obstacle to the country's further development. It is also argued that a majority of the population is actually calling for a federal system, but that this has not been taken into account in the current vote.

On 01.01.24, opposition leader Succes Masra, who had returned to the country, was appointed Prime Minister of the transitional government. His return was possible after he had agreed his safe return with the transitional government at the end of October 2023.⁷

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Presidential elections: logistics problems, protests and Tshisekedi declared election winner

The citizens of the Democratic Republic of the Congo elected a new president, inter alia, at the general elections held on 20.12.23. In the run-up to the elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) had given its assurance that every citizen of the country who was registered to vote would actually be able to vote. Nevertheless, the general elections were awaited by the national and international community with clear concerns regarding the security situation, logistics, transparency and free and equal opportunities for all presidential candidates (cf. BN of 13.11. 23 and 04.12.23).

According to media reports, polling stations in some parts of the country opened with significant delays on the morning of 20.12.23. Of the 44 million voters eligible to vote for 19 presidential candidates, including incumbent President Felix Tshisekedi, many people reported difficulties in casting their vote at one of the 75,000 polling stations because they were forced to queue for hours in some areas and technical and power failures occurred at the polling stations. As a result of the major logistical problems that arose on election day, the electoral commission extended voting in affected districts until 21.12.23.

To control the security situation, the security authorities ordered a 24-hour closure of the borders by land and sea as well as airspace for unauthorised flights. However, they decided not to restrict internet access.

Since 21.12.23, several opposition candidates have criticized the elections and have demanded a rerun. In the week following the elections, dissatisfied citizens also voiced their dissatisfaction.

On 27.12.23, protesting opposition supporters clashed violently with the police on the streets of Kinshasa. According to media reports, the protesters were calling for the election to be annulled, claiming it had been a sham. The government banned the protests. Several people were wounded as police fired tear gas and threw stones back at protesters. The two main opposition candidates, Martin Fayulu and Moise Katumbi, condemned what they considered to be overly harsh action by the security forces.

On 31.01.23, CENI announced that the incumbent President, Felix Tshisekedi, had won the election again with a clear lead of 73% of the votes. Moise Katumbi followed in second place with 18% and Martin Fayulu in third place, garnering 5% of the votes cast. None of the remaining 16 candidates received more than 1% of the vote. Tshisekedi is to be sworn in for a second term of office on 20.01.24.

The head of the electoral commission acknowledged that there had been some irregularities in the election process, but asserted that the result reflected the will of the people. According to him, voter turnout was 43% of the voting-eligible population. The government has officially rejected the opposition's demand for a rerun of the disputed elections. It says the Constitutional Court has seven days to rule on all complaints filed against the election result and to announce the final result. However, several presidential candidates have already announced that they will not challenge the election result in court. One of the reasons for this is the lack of trust in the judicial system.⁸

Ecuador

Security situation 2023: homicide and extortion rate soars

According to President Daniel Noboa, the construction of two high-security prisons based on the Salvadoran model is set to begin in January 2024. At the same time, Noboa announced his intention to hold a referendum on a stricter security policy. The rate of homicides rose to 40 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2023. Gang violence and drug trafficking skyrocketed in 2023, as did extortion offenses, with shootings and deadly prison riots being frequently reported in the media. According to a report published by InSight Crime based on official police data, the number of extortion crimes rose by more than 65% between 2022 and November 2023. As such, the report divides extortion into four categories. It says there has been a sharp rise in virtual extortion characterized by threatening phone calls and online messages and there has been a marked increase in regular demands for payment of protection money (so-called vacunas) in regions dominated by large drug trafficking gangs (Los Choneros, Los Lobos and Los Tiguerones). This has reportedly led to many business closures, although there have also been repeated reports of copycat groups in relation to extortion offences.⁹

Egypt

Sisi re-elected President

According to the national electoral authority, the incumbent President, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, was re-elected in the presidential elections held in mid-December 2023, taking 89.6% of the votes cast on a turnout of just under 67%. The three other candidates received less than five percent of the vote.

Sisi has thus been elected for a third term and, following a constitutional amendment in 2019, will be able to rule as president for a further six years instead of four. Local and international human rights organisations have criticized the outcome of the elections, claiming the opponents were dummy candidates and that the authorities had hindered any serious opposition.¹⁰

New church construction site and homes of Christians attacked in northern Egypt

According to Christian organisations, the construction site of a new church and Christian homes in a village near Samalut city, Al-Minya province, was attacked on 18.12.2023. The attackers, who reportedly come from the local Muslim community, threw stones and Molotov cocktails, setting fire to or damaging homes and properties belonging to Christians; they also clashed with local police.¹¹

Tawfik Ghanem's pre-trial detention extended

According to media reports, the Criminal Court in Cairo has extended the pre-trial detention of journalist Tawfik Ghanem, who has been held in custody since May 2021, by 45 days. Ghanem, who worked as head of the regional office of a Turkish news agency until his retirement in 2015, is accused of belonging to a terrorist organisation, spreading false information and misusing social media. The court had repeatedly rejected Ghanem's lawyer's request to release the journalist due to his poor state of health.¹²

El Salvador

Security situation 2023: number of homicides has dropped sharply according to government sources

According to a report issued by Reuters agency on 03.01.24 based on data provided by the Salvadoran security authorities, the number of homicides fell to 154 in 2023. Justice and Security Minister Gustavo Villatoro said the country has one of the lowest homicide rates in the Americas apart from Canada, implying a homicide rate of 2.4 per every 100,000 people. This is due to the ongoing state of emergency and the "heavy-handed policy" that has been implemented against gangs. The Human Rights Observatory of the Central American University (UCA), on the other hand, has doubts about the official figures and assumes that homicides in the country are severely underreported. In addition, various organisations continue to criticize numerous human rights violations in relation to the arrest of around 75,000 suspected gang members, including mass trials, deaths in custody and unlawful imprisonment. According to official figures, around 7,000 people have since been released from prison.¹³

Guinea

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk expresses concern about repression of media freedom

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk expressed concern about increased repression of media freedom in the Republic of Guinea in a press release issued on 9.12.23. He said the transitional authorities have cited national security imperatives as justification for imposing the restrictions on media and online communication platforms. In the view of the Human Rights Commissioner, however, the "largely excessive" measures lack any legal basis and are both unnecessary and disproportionate. The restrictions began in May 2023, coinciding with opposition-led protests against perceived authoritarianism on the part of the transitional authorities and slow progress made in the transition to a constitutional order (cf. BN of 22.05.23). Even before at least 13 journalists were briefly arrested on 16.10.23 (cf. BN of 23.10.23), critical reporters faced insults and threats from security authorities. Criminal investigations against the 13 journalists are still pending. Access to several social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok has been blocked since at least 24.11.23. Finally, on 06.12.23 and 09.12.23, the pay-TV provider Canal+ was ordered to suspend radio and TV content from the privately-owned broadcasters Evasion and Espace.

According to media reports issued on 06.01.24 and 07.01.24, an association of bloggers, Ablogui, together with bloggers, launched a campaign against the blocking of social media platforms. One representative pointed out that the lack of access was also having economic consequences. The private press union, SPPG (Union of Press Professionals of Guinea) is also planning to take action. The Minister of Posts, Telecommunications, and the Digital Economy, Ousmane Gaoual Diallo, who has been branded an "enemy of the press" by the SPPG, defended the restrictions by highlighting an alleged heightening of inter-ethnic tensions caused by the media concerned and the ensuing violence.¹⁴

Alleged coup attempt raises questions

On 02.01.24, a report about an alleged coup attempt was aired on the state broadcasting station RTG, with three people also making confessions. According to the report, they also thanked interim President Mamadi Doumbouya for pardoning them as a gesture to mark the New Year. It came as a great surprise to the public that the coup attempt, which allegedly took place several months ago, was never reported by the authorities and that the profiles of the alleged masterminds and perpetrators, involving the leader, a former member of the airborne forces, a cattle farmer, a merchant and a student, were never published. Opposition politicians said this reminded them of the fictitious coup plots under Guinea's first president, Sékou Touré. The Minister and government spokesperson Ousmane Gaoual Diallo confirmed on 04.01.23 that there had indeed been a coup attempt, but that it had been nipped in the bud.¹⁵

Guinea-Bissau

Political crisis: President appoints new Prime Minister

After President Umaro Sissoco Embaló initially left Prime Minister Geraldo Martins in office despite the renewed dissolution of parliament (cf. BN of 11.12.23) and reappointed him on 12.12.23, he fired him on 20.12.23 and appointed Rui Duarte de Barros his successor. It is reported that the presidential decree did not contain any reason for the dismissal. Duarte de Barros had already been Prime Minister of a transitional government between 2012 and 2014. Like Martins, he belonged to the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) party, but headed a "government of presidential initiative" made up of representatives of numerous parties.

On 21.12.23, UN Secretary-General António Guterres announced through his press spokesman that he had been following the events since 01.12.23 with concern. He called on all sides to respect the constitution and to engage in constructive dialogue to overcome the political differences.¹⁶

Crisis also in the judiciary

In other contexts, as recently as 14.12.23, the Special Rapporteur of the UN Human Rights Council expressed serious concern about the state of the rule of law and judicial independence, including a serious crisis in the Supreme Court. Among other things, she pointed to the detention of persons suspected of being involved in the alleged coup attempt of 01.02.22 without having access to legal counsel (cf. BN of 07.02.22 and 14.02.22).¹⁷

India

Kashmir: attack on military vehicle; torture in custody

On 22.12.23, four Indian soldiers were killed and three others were injured in a suspected rebel ambush on a military vehicle in Rajouri district in the Indian-administered part of Kashmir. According to relatives, the Indian army arrested three civilians in connection with the incident in the neighbouring district of Poonch on 24.12.23, who died while in military custody reportedly as a result of torture.¹⁸

Iran

Terrorist attack in Kerman at a memorial service held for Qassem Soleimani

On 03.01.24, at least 84 people were killed and several hundred were injured in two explosions during a memorial service held at Qassem Soleimani's grave in Kerman to mark the fourth anniversary of his killing by a US military

strike during a state visit to Baghdad. The act was unanimously condemned by the international community. It is the deadliest attack to be carried out in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attack. As a result, a large number of arrests were made and investigations into the course of events are ongoing. In recent months, Iranian security authorities have ramped up their operations against ISIS and its supporters, seizing weapons and bomb-making materials in the process.¹⁹

Iraq

Results of provincial elections

On 28.12.23, the final results of the provincial elections held on 18.12.23 were announced. These took place in 15 of Iraq's 18 provinces. The elections in the three provinces of the Kurdish autonomous region will be held separately.

Voter turnout was 41%, partly due to the call for a boycott by influential politician and cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and the widespread boycott by the so-called Tishreen movement, which had called for reforms through long-term protests in the autumn of 2019. Sadr is one of the most popular Shia political figures, who rejects Iran's influence in Iraq. According to Sadr, however, the election only supports the established (pro-Iranian) rulers. The Imtidad Party, which emerged from the Tishreen movement, failed to reach agreement on a new leadership at its convention.

Pro-Iranian parties were among the election winners, taking 101 of the 285 seats. The Sunni Taqaddum party was among the election winners in Baghdad and Anbar. In the ethnically and religiously mixed city of Kirkuk, which is also one of the so-called disputed territories, Kurdish parties won the majority of seats, followed by Arab and Turkmen parties.²⁰

Lebanon / Israel

Situation in southern Lebanon and northern Israel

There are also regular exchanges of fire between Hezbollah and the Israeli army. Due to the large number of incidents taking place, developments will be summarized.

The diplomatic rhetoric on both sides continues to point to the possibility of an agreement being reached on the border after the war between Israel and Hamas comes to an end. Within Lebanon, there are many calls for Hezbollah to refrain from targeting the civilian infrastructure when attacking Israel. So far, this request seems to have been met, for the most part. After Saleh al-Aroui, one of the most important leaders of Hamas, was killed in a drone attack in Beirut on 02.01.24 along with two other Hamas commanders and four Hamas members, the Israeli side said that this was not an attack on the Lebanese state. In the days that followed, Hezbollah stepped up its attacks on targets in Israel, but the accompanying statements issued by Hezbollah and above all the statements by Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah still did not indicate any intention to escalate the violence beyond the current level.

Attacks on both sides continue to occur on a daily basis. In the meantime, more than 175 people have been killed in Lebanon, including around 20 civilians; 14 people have been killed so far in Israel, including five civilians. Since the conflict began, around 36 strikes have been carried out on Lebanese army positions, resulting in the death of one Lebanese soldier so far. This has led to growing international criticism and is fuelling fears that the conflict could escalate.

According to aid organisations, around 76,000 people inside Lebanon and a similar number of people in Israel have been internally displaced as a result of the escalation in fighting along the border. Most of the internally displaced persons in Israel are being accommodated in hotels. Around 80% of displaced Lebanese are staying with relatives in more northern parts of the country, while only around 2% are able to be housed in publicly-owned shelters.²¹

Libya

UNSMIL urges comprehensive probe into the death of former Defence Minister

On 21.12.23, the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) expressed concern on social media about the death of Mahdhi al-Barghathi, a former Minister of Defence in the former Government of National Accord (GNA), and six other people held in custody. Al-Barghathi was forcibly arrested in early October 2023 by units of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) in his hometown of Benghazi along with numerous other people, including family members, and was taken to an unknown location (cf. BN of 16.10.23). UNSMIL has called on competent Libyan authorities to conduct an independent and transparent investigation into these deaths and to provide information on the fate of those still missing.²²

Protests in southern Libya are hindering crude oil production

According to media reports, oil production at the Sharara oil field in southwestern Libya was halted on 02.01.24 due to local protests. On 07.01.24, the National Oil Company NOC subsequently announced that it had been forced to suspend all of its contractual oil deliveries to the oil market. The protesters at one of Libya's largest oil fields criticized the disruption of fuel and gas supplies in numerous southern Libyan cities lasting several days as well as the lack of public services in the south of the country. According to the protesters' demands, their region is in need of more development, inter alia, in the area of public infrastructure, such as the expansion of healthcare, the maintenance and expansion of road networks and the creation of jobs for young people. In the past, the closure of oil production facilities and other infrastructure objects has been used regularly to assert political interests.²³

Mali

UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA ends

The United Nations mission in Mali officially ended a 10-year deployment in the country on 31.12.23. After the Malian military government called for the pullout of MINUSMA in mid-June 2023, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution on 30.06.23 to end the UN mission in Mali by the end of 2023 (cf. BN of 03.07.23). This also marks the end of the Bundeswehr mission in Mali. However, the security situation in the country remains extremely tense. The population in northern Mali in particular faces ongoing threat.²⁴

Nicaragua

Ongoing repression of the Catholic Church: several priests arrested towards the end of 2023

According to media reports, at least 13 priests were arrested between 20.12.23 and 30.12.23, including a bishop, after he had previously included the imprisoned Bishop Rolando Álvarez in his prayers. According to a study, attacks on the Catholic Church intensified significantly in 2023, and the Pope also referred to increased repression in his New Year's address. At the end of November 2023, a priest was denied entry to his homeland after returning from a pastoral trip and dozens of priests are currently living in exile. In addition, thousands of church processions have been banned since Easter 2023.²⁵

Large number of layoffs in the judiciary in 2023

In November 2023, the judicial sector underwent restructuring with a significant number of magistrates and administrative staff in all instances being dismissed. According to the online medium Confidencial, around 10% (900) of all employees were dismissed at the time, and loyal members of the ruling party are said to have been among those affected. There have also been reports of individual interviews being conducted and former employees being arrested. The media criticized this step as a further restriction on the separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary.²⁶

International Red Cross expelled from Nicaragua

The Nicaraguan government has expelled the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) from the country, as the organisation failed to adopt a neutral stance during the 2018 protests. It also closed down ICRC's office and confiscated its assets.²⁷

Niger

Tillabéri Region: civilians killed in attack

According to media reports, the villages of Amara and Loudji, which are located in the Tillabéri Region near the border with Burkina Faso, were ambushed by suspected jihadists on 29.12.2013; eleven civilians were killed. So far, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack.²⁸

Nigeria

Plateau State: over 100 people killed in attacks on villages

Armed groups killed almost 200 people and destroyed several houses in a spate of at least 20 attacks carried out on various villages in the Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Bokkos and Barkin Ladi in the central Nigerian state of Plateau between 23.12.23 and 25.12.23. According to media reports, more than 300 people were injured. Amnesty International (AI) has criticized the slow response of the security authorities and the failure of the Nigerian government to stop the attacks.

Plateau State is located between the north of Nigeria which has a large Muslim population and the south which has a mainly Christian population. Violent clashes occur frequently between mostly Muslim nomadic herdsman and mostly Christian sedentary farmers (cf. BN of 22.05.23, 26.06.23 and 24.07.23). It is possible the attacks are being fuelled, inter alia, by the ongoing conflict over access to land, grazing areas, water and natural resources, but they may also constitute revenge for former acts of violence or – simultaneously – simmering ethnic rivalry. According to media reports, they represent the worst outbreak of intercommunal violence in Plateau State since May 2023 (cf. BN of 22.05.23).²⁹

Borno State: persons killed in Boko Haram attack

On 01.01.24, members of the Islamist Boko Haram group attacked two communities in Chibok Local Government Area (LGA) in Borno State in the northeast of the country, killing around 15 persons and kidnapping one woman. According to media reports, they also set fire to houses and stole livestock, food and medicine. Several people were reportedly wounded in the attack. Those killed include people who were returning from a funeral. For years, the Islamist Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) groups have been carrying out attacks and committing other acts of violence against the military and the civilian population, above all in the northeast of Nigeria (cf. BN of 30.05.22 and 27.03.23). Boko Haram kidnapped more than 270 schoolgirls in Chibok in 2014. The incident sparked an international outcry and triggered the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. Around 100 of the schoolgirls remain in captivity. Several of them have been forced to marry members of the Islamist groups.³⁰

Latest figures on the number of inmates held in custodial facilities

As of 18.12.23, a total of 77,849 persons were detained in prisons in Nigeria, 76,081 men and 1,768 women, according to media reports citing official figures provided by a spokesperson for Nigerian custodial centres issued on 22.12.23. No less than 3,413 prisoners are currently on death row and 53,836 prisoners are awaiting trial. According to a media report issued on 19.12.23, around 4,000 inmates have been sentenced to death, 353 of whom are being detained at Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison in Lagos alone. Media reports cite information provided by AI that seven executions have been carried out in Nigeria since 2007, the most recent one in 2016 (cf. BN of 16.10.23). On 18.12.23, around 4,068 inmates sentenced to various terms of imprisonment were released in a bid to prevent overcrowding at custodial and correctional facilities (cf. BN of 20.11.23). The spokesperson of the Nigerian Correctional Services stressed that no riots had taken place at any of the custodial and correctional facilities since 2023. He thinks this is due to the deployment of enhanced surveillance systems and partly also to improved prison conditions.³¹

Pakistan

Ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan barred from National Assembly election

Pakistan's election commission has disqualified imprisoned ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan and most of the candidates of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party from the National Assembly elections. The politician has

been embroiled in a series of political and legal disputes since he was ousted as Prime Minister in April 2022. In August 2023, he was initially arrested for, among other things, unlawfully selling state gifts during his term of office from 2018 to 2022 and was subsequently sentenced to three years in prison for corruption (cf. BN of 07.08.23). According to media reports, this sentence was suspended, but Khan remained in prison in connection with charges of leaking state secrets. In addition, the interim government took action against leading PTI members following Khan's arrest, triggering demonstrations (cf. BN of 18.09.23). On 22.12.23, the Supreme Court granted Khan bail on charges of leaking state secrets. It is still unclear whether he has been released from prison. On 07.01.24, access to well-known social media platforms was blocked in order to prevent a fundraising telethon organised by the PTI. Meanwhile, on 05.01.24, the Senate approved a resolution to further delay national elections, which for the moment is not binding. Elections were originally due to be held in November 2023 but were recently postponed until 08.02.24 due to the fresh demarcation of constituencies as part of a census.³²

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: girls' school torched; attack on barbers; bomb blast

On 30.12.23, unknown perpetrators set a girls' school on fire in the Bannu district. A note was allegedly left, threatening "significant harm" if the school was not closed down. No one has claimed responsibility. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has targeted girls' and women's institutions in the past.

On 02.01.24, unidentified perpetrators shot and killed six barbers in Mir Ali in the tribal district of North Waziristan, a former stronghold of the TTP near the border with Afghanistan.

On 08.01.24, five people were killed and more than 20 others injured in the Bajaur tribal district when a roadside bomb exploded, hitting a police vehicle.³³

Activist for the rights of the Baluch ethnic group arrested

In mid-December 2023, a Baluch activist wrote on social media that she had been arrested during a protest march from the province of Balochistan to the capital, Islamabad. She said the protest had been violently dispersed by security forces, and other demonstrators had been injured and some had also been arrested. The demonstrators were predominantly women who were drawing attention to police violence and arbitrariness against the Baluch ethnic group in the province.³⁴

Data on the security situation in 2023; in particular in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

According to data provided by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), at least 645 militant attacks were carried out across the country in 2023 (2022: 380), in which 976 people were killed (2022: 539) and 1,354 injured (2022: 836). Conversely, the security forces also increased the number of operations against militant groups, in which 612 suspected militants were killed and at least 625 were arrested.

As in previous years, most security-related incidents in 2023 occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, although not predominantly in the tribal districts belonging to the province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Tribal Districts, but rather in the heartland of KP. PICSS counted 423 incidents in KP, in which 621 people were killed, including 307 members of the security forces, 222 civilians and 92 suspected militants. 980 people were injured, including 525 members of the security forces, 405 civilians and 50 suspected militants.³⁵

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

Deaths in airstrike in Rafah / latest developments

Israeli forces continue to attack targets in all parts of the Gaza Strip, including the southern city of Rafah, where hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons are currently living. In an airstrike carried out on 04.01.24, a home in Rafah was hit, killing at least six people.

According to the Israeli Ministry of Defence, several thousand Hamas fighters remain in the northern Gaza Strip, where entire districts have now been destroyed by airstrikes. Heavy fighting is also taking place in the centre of the Gaza Strip and in the southern city of Khan Younis, where, according to the Israeli military, Hamas' military structure is still largely intact, unlike in the north around Gaza City.

According to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory, the Israeli military's attacks on the Gaza Strip by air, land and sea have so far killed more than 22,400 people, two thirds of them women and children. The Hamas-run Ministry of Health does not differentiate between civilians and fighters when counting the number of casualties.

According to the Israeli military, at least 510 members of the Israeli military have been killed since the Hamas attack on 07.10.23.³⁶

Peru

Press freedom: attacks against journalists increased in 2023

According to an annual report by the National Association of Journalists of Peru (OFIP-ANP), the number of attacks on journalists rose again in 2023, reaching 352 cases, the highest number since 2000. A large percentage of the attacks on reporters, camera operators and photojournalists took place in connection with the documentation of the social and anti-government protests at the beginning of the year. More than a third of the cases (138) involved threats and harassment, while 127 physical and verbal attacks were also documented. There were also cases of obstruction of access to information and dismissals, among other things. In addition to civilians (136), members of the security forces (106) were also responsible for relevant offences in many cases. Investigative journalists or those working in the field were particularly affected; the majority of cases (208) occurred in the capital Lima.³⁷

Russian Federation

Navalny associate sentenced to nine years in prison

On 29.12.23, Ksenia Fadeyeva, an associate of imprisoned opposition politician Alexei Navalny, was sentenced to nine years in prison by a court in Tomsk on charges of founding an extremist organisation. Her lawyer has announced that she will appeal against the judgement, although experience has shown that this offers little chance of success due to the prevailing arbitrary justice system. Fadeyeva led Navalny's team in the Siberian city of Tomsk, where the Kremlin critic was poisoned during a visit in August 2020. Shortly afterwards, Fadeyeva was elected to the Tomsk City Council along with other activists, which was a rare success for the Russian opposition at the time. In 2021, Navalny's organisations were classified as extremist by the authorities and banned. Subsequently, many of Navalny's allies left the country to avoid criminal prosecution. Fadeyeva, however, remained in Russia and was arrested in December 2021 on charges of organising an extremist group. Her trial began in mid-August 2023 and has now ended with the imposition of a long prison sentence.³⁸

Senegal

Opposition leader probably definitively excluded from presidential election; ban on public assembly

On 05.12.23, the Constitutional Council rejected the candidacy of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko, who is currently in prison awaiting trial, for the 2024 presidential election, his lawyer said. He added that the reason for this was his incomplete application documents. It was still unclear exactly which documents were missing. Sonko's lawyer criticized the decision as an "electoral farce" and at the same time announced that he would lodge an appeal. The situation for Sonko already looked increasingly hopeless prior to this. Previously, Sonko's conviction for defaming and publicly insulting a minister (cf. BN of 15.05.23) had been confirmed by the highest court. According to the electoral law, a legally binding conviction to the extent mentioned is accompanied, as an incidental legal consequence, by the automatic loss of Sonko's civil status rights and hence, among other things, his eligibility for election. So far, there have been no reports of public protests in response to the judgement or the Constitutional Council's decision to Sonko's detriment.

The prefect of Dakar recently banned a meeting of the "coalition Sonko Président 2024" planned for 29.12.23 to announce Sonko's nomination as the joint presidential candidate. The reasons given were the threats of disturbance to public order, the risk of "infiltration by ill-intentioned people" and hindrance to the free movement of people and goods. According to a Senegalese media outlet, this was the first ban on a nomination event in the context of the 2024 presidential election, whereas the ruling Benno Bokk Yakaar (BBY) coalition's candidate for the presidential elections, Prime Minister Amadou Ba, and other allies from President Macky Sall's camp had recently been able to hold such meetings.³⁹

Serbia

Results of the early parliamentary and local elections

The electoral list "Aleksandar Vučić - Serbia must not stop", led by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), won the parliamentary elections on 17.12.23 with 46.75% of the vote, according to official figures. The opposition electoral alliance "Serbia against Violence" garnered 23.66% of the vote. The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), led by Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, which has governed in a coalition with the SNS since 2012, became the third strongest party with 6.55% of the vote. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić dissolved parliament on 01.11.23 and called early elections after months of protests against his government. The SNS also became the strongest party in the early local elections held at the same time in 65 cities and municipalities. An international election observation mission reported suspected irregularities during the casting and counting of votes. Following ongoing protests and, in some cases, also riots due to suspected electoral fraud, new votes were held in over 30 voting districts at both parliamentary and municipal level on 30.12.23 and 02.01.24, which did not significantly change the original election results, among other things, because the "Serbia against Violence" alliance boycotted the election rerun.⁴⁰

Sierra Leone

Former President Koroma and others charged with various high treason offences

According to agency and media reports, former President Ernest Bai Koroma and 12 others were charged with various high treason offences in the first week of January 2024. The indictments are related to the deadly outbreaks of violence on 26.11.23, which centred on the capital, Freetown, and were classified by the government as an attempted coup d'état (cf. BN of 04.12.23). The defendants were reportedly mainly former members of the police, judiciary and military. Those charged included a former bodyguard of Koroma and also a leading member of the main opposition party, All People's Congress (APC). The defendants are reportedly among the 85 people who have been arrested since 26.11.23 – the majority of them members of the military. Further charges are expected soon, according to the Ministry of Information. Koroma was recently placed under house arrest (cf. BN of 18.12.23). He had been president of the country from 2007 to 2018 and former APC chairman.⁴¹

Sudan

Fighting continues

Following several previous clashes between units of the Sudanese Army (SAF) and the paramilitary militia Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in the region around the capital of Gezira state, Wad Madani (cf. BN of 18.12.23), the SAF withdrew from the city on 18.12.23 without engaging in major fighting. The withdrawal without a fight came as a surprise to the civilian population in particular, as the city had become a refuge for more than 500,000 people from the capital region after the fighting there escalated. Its capture by the RSF has reportedly led to a wave of refugees fleeing the city.

After a ceasefire proposed by civilian groups met with positive feedback from the RSF at the beginning of 2024, General al-Burhan rejected the efforts made on 05.01.24 and justified the move by stating that they did not want to reach an agreement with a rebel group that was responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁴²

Humanitarian situation

Following the capture of Wad Madani by the RSF, there were attacks on the civilian population as well as looting and theft. According to the WFP, RSF forces looted a food warehouse in Wad Madani. The stock could have supplied almost 1.5 million people with food for a month. As a result, the WFP initially suspended all aid deliveries in Gezira.

According to figures published by UN OCHA at the start of January 2024, more than 7.3 million people have been displaced in or from Sudan since fighting broke out on 15.04.23. This makes Sudan the country with the highest number of displaced people and the highest number of displaced children in the world. According to UN OCHA, citing IOM figures, 5.9 million of these people have been internally displaced.⁴³

Syria

Northwest: Syrian and Russian airstrikes

Russian airstrikes on targets in the village of Armanaz, in Idlib governorate, killed five members of a family, including three children, on 25.12.23, according to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) and the private civil defence organisation known as the "White Helmets". On the same day, one civilian was reportedly also killed and five others were wounded in attacks on infrastructure targets in the village of Sarmin, in eastern Idlib.

On 31.12.23, according to the opposition-affiliated news platform Enab Baladi, four civilians were reportedly killed and eight others were wounded by Syrian Air Force attacks in Idlib city.

The following day, the news portal reported that six civilians had been killed in the villages of Daret 'Azzeh, Burj Haidar and Kabashin in western Aleppo. According to the report, 11 others were wounded in the attacks.⁴⁴

Northeast: Turkish airstrikes

The Turkish military has intensified its airstrikes on targets in northeast Syria since 23.12.23, killing at least 59 fighters in Syria and Iraq, according to its own sources. According to a spokesperson for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), at least eight civilians were killed in airstrikes on targets in Syria on 25.12.23 alone. The SOHR also reported that 12 people were injured. According to the authorities of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), further airstrikes hit oil industry sites, healthcare facilities and other infrastructure and led to a 50% reduction in electricity production on 23.12.23.⁴⁵

Damascus: Israeli airstrike

On 25.12.23, a high-ranking Iranian general was killed by an Israeli airstrike in a Damascus neighbourhood. The general is reported to have acted as an adviser to the Syrian-based Revolutionary Guard. Iranian officials and Iranian-backed militias in the region announced retaliatory measures. In the days that followed, further targets in Syria were hit by Israeli airstrikes.⁴⁶

East: airstrikes near the border with Iraq

On 30.12.23, buildings and military vehicles belonging to militias associated with Iran were attacked by unidentified warplanes. According to a local commander of an Iraqi militia group, at least four people were killed in the attacks which occurred near the town of Albukamal, close to a border crossing with Iraq.⁴⁷

South: Jordanian airstrikes on targets in Syria; drug smuggling

On 18.12.23, the Jordanian Armed Forces reported that they had once again cracked down on smuggling activities along the Syrian-Jordanian border. Several people who were allegedly trying to smuggle drugs, munitions and weapons from Syria to Jordan were killed by Jordanian border guards. Shortly afterwards, airstrikes were carried out on targets in the Syrian governorates of Suweida and Dar'a, presumably by the Jordanian Armed Forces. According to media reports, the targets were the locations of known drug traffickers supported by Iran.

On 05.01.24, further targets in southern Syria, which were reportedly important for cross-border drug trafficking, were destroyed by Jordanian airstrikes. These included the house of a known drug trafficker and warehouses. There were initially no reports of casualties.

In addition, the Jordanian Armed Forces announced on 06.01.24 that another five people had been killed and 15 suspects arrested in the fight against drug and weapons smuggling. The military spoke of an increasing number of smuggling operations along the border.⁴⁸

Uganda

Attacks and killings by the ADF

On 19.12.23, members of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) reportedly killed 10 people in the southwest of the country and on 25.12.23, three people, including two minors, in Kamwenge District (western Uganda). The group, which is affiliated to ISIS, has also destroyed homes and looted villages. The group has been carrying out attacks in the border area between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo for several years.⁴⁹

Attack on LGBTIQ activist

On 03.01.24, the activist Steven Kabuye, who works for the organisation Coloured Voices Media Foundation, was attacked and seriously injured by unknown persons in a suburb of Kampala. Kabuye had previously been attacked several times and had received death threats. Human rights activists assume that the attack was specifically directed against the LGBTIQ community. Since the introduction of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in May 2023, there has been an increase in hostility, arrests and attacks on LGBTIQ people and supporters (cf. BN of 05.06.23, 17.07.23 and 25.08.23).⁵⁰

Ukraine

Numerous civilian casualties around the turn of the year

At least 41 people were killed and at least 160 others were injured in large-scale Russian airstrikes across the country on 29.12.23. According to information dated 30.12.23, the capital Kyiv recorded the highest number of fatalities at 17, a figure which may even have risen to 32, according to later information. There were also fatalities in Zaporizhzhia (9), Dnipro (capital of the Dnipropetrovsk oblast, where fatalities numbered 6), Odesa (4), Kharkiv (3) and Lviv (1). Kharkiv was again the target of Russian shelling on 30.12.23, as a result of which 26 people were injured.

For its part, Ukraine shelled the Russian-occupied city of Donetsk on 31.12.23, killing at least four people and injuring 13, according to Russian reports. In addition, it was reported that three people died in Donetsk in Ukrainian attacks on 01.01.24.

Kyiv and Kharkiv were again the targets of Russian missile and drone attacks on 02.01.24, which killed a total of at least five people and injured numerous others. One person died on 04.01.24 in shelling of Kropyvnytskyi (capital of the Kirovohrad oblast), which also injured eight people and led to power and water supply outages. On 06.01.24, at least 11 people died in Russian missile attacks on the city of Pokrovsk (Donetsk oblast). Prolonged shelling of residential districts in Kherson also claimed two lives and injured several people on 07.01.23.

According to investigations carried out by the AP news agency, the Russian Federation set the number of victims due to flooding in the areas under its control following the severe damage to the Nova Kakhovka dam (cf. BN of 12.06.23) far too low, at 59. The agency reported that in one town alone, at least 200 people died.⁵¹

Other developments in the war

The media are reporting changes in the use of weapons systems by the Russian Federation. In attacks carried out on 02.01.24 alone, it reportedly also deployed 10 Kinzhal hypersonic air-launched missiles. Media reports said that a total of 63 of these weapons systems, which were previously considered unstoppable, had been deployed since 24.02.22, however it had been possible to intercept 25 of them. Recently, the Russian Federation has also begun using North Korean ballistic missiles with a range of around 900 km against Ukraine.

According to a report issued by British military intelligence which was picked up by the press on 06.01.24, ground combat in the previous week was characterized by an overall static front. Locally, the Russian side had been able to achieve very small territorial gains.⁵²

Military wants significant additional mobilisation

President Volodymyr Zelensky announced at a press conference on 19.12.23 that the military had proposed mobilising 450,000 to 500,000 more Ukrainians for the army. He said the government and military would discuss the proposal in order to decide on its submission to parliament.⁵³

First prisoner exchange in months

According to media reports issued on 03.01.24, 230 prisoners of war were able to return to Ukraine and 248 prisoners of war to the Russian Federation in the first prisoner exchange to take place since the end of August 2023. According to those involved, the negotiations leading to the largest exchange to date, which were mediated by the United Arab Emirates, were difficult.⁵⁴

End of the blockade at a Polish-Ukrainian border crossing

On 06.01.24, the Polish government announced an agreement with farmers who had blocked the Shehyni-Medyka border crossing. They had considered their livelihoods to be at risk due to Ukrainian competition and had followed the example of Polish truck drivers, who had already blocked three other crossings and were continuing to block them.⁵⁵

Venezuela

Prisoner swap deal between the US and Venezuela for the release of detainees

Following a prisoner swap deal between the US and Venezuelan governments, the White House announced on 20.12.23 that at least 10 US citizens and 20 Venezuelans who had been imprisoned for political reasons would be released in exchange for the release of Colombian businessman and Maduro confidant Alex Saab in the US. Among the first Venezuelan nationals to be released that day were six trade union leaders arrested in 2022 and the president of the NGO Súmate, Roberto Abdul, who was only arrested at the beginning of December 2023 in connection with the opposition primaries and the Essequibo referendum.⁵⁶

Yemen

Progress made in ceasefire negotiations

On 23.12.23, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, announced that the internationally recognized government of Yemen and the Houthis have agreed to take concrete steps towards a ceasefire agreement. These steps include the resumption of oil exports, the end of the blockade of the city of Taizz, the payment of all public sector salaries and the further opening of Sanaa International Airport and the port of Hudaydah.⁵⁷

Situation in the Red Sea

The US announced on 19.12.23 that an international mission was to be launched to protect shipping in the Red Sea in the wake of several attacks carried out by the Houthis on cargo ships in the Red Sea (cf. BN of 18.12.23 and 11.12.23). Numerous countries including the United Kingdom, France, Bahrain, Norway and Spain are involved in the mission. Several Houthi attacks have been repelled as a result. In the interim, numerous shipping companies had diverted all shipping traffic between Europe and Asia around the African continent in order to avoid having to pass through the Red Sea. This has repercussions for global trade, delivery times and prices in particular.

The Houthis had initially attacked cargo ships they claim have links to Israel using drones or missiles, but in the most recent attacks no such links exist, so targets appear to be selected at random. On 31.12.23, US combat helicopters killed 10 Houthi fighters in fast boats as they approached a cargo ship from Singapore and opened fire on the helicopters. On 03.01.24, the UN Security Council called upon the Houthis to cease the attacks immediately and to release the crew of the cargo ship hijacked in November 2023. The most recent attack took place on 06.01.24 when a drone was launched from Houthi-controlled areas in the direction of the Red Sea. This was shot down by a US Navy ship.⁵⁸

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