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Briefing Notes

Group 62 - Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

COVID-19 Pandemic

The number of confirmed COVID-19 infections continues to rise. All 34 provinces are reporting positive cases. The number is highest in Kabul, followed by Herat, Balkh, Nangarhar, and Kandahar. Considering the public health system's limited resources and test capacities as well as the lack of a national register of deaths, it is highly probable that the number of confirmed cases and deaths nationwide far exceeds the reported numbers. The wave of infections is expected to peak at the end of July or early August. Among 190 countries investigated the European Commission's INFORM COVID-19 Risk Index determines the fifth largest risk for Afghanistan (Afghanistan comes in after the Central African Republic, Somalia, South Sudan and Chad). The index assesses how countries are impacted by humanitarian crises and disasters and their resources to cope with them.

The situation at the border crossings currently continues mostly unchanged (see BN of 15 June 2020). Despite announcements to the contrary, Pakistan closed its borders for non-commercial traffic. IOM points to the significant increase of deportations of Afghan nationals from Iran in recent weeks.

The restrictions to fight the pandemic (see BN of 15 June 2020) are still in force, but it is reported that they are not consistently enforced. All government offices have reopened, civil servants are working in two shifts. Domestic flights have not yet resumed. Turkish Airlines and Emirates Airlines as well as the Afghan companies Ariana Airlines and Kam Air are offering a limited number of international connections.

Assaults, fighting, civilian victims

According to the findings of The New York Times 322 pro-government forces and 159 civilians died in security-related incidents in June 2020.

Preliminary findings of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) quote a number of 800 civilians killed or injured in the first six months of 2020. The final half-year report on civilian victims is expected to be published in July. In a press release UNAMA points to an increase in the number of attacks on members of Afghan civil society. Assaults were directed against religious leaders, health workers, agents of the judiciary, civil society activists, NGO staff and journalists, it says.

In a report of June 2020 the US Department of Defence quotes a figure of 2,801 victims between 01 November 2019 to 30 April 2020.

Algeria

Hirak activists released

On 02 July 2020 four Hirak activists were preliminarily released from prison. The Hirak protest movement started in February 2019 when then president Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced his intention to stand for election again. Since then the people have been taking to the streets to protest against the political regime. President Abdelmadjid Tebboune who was elected on 12 December 2019, is a close associate of the former president. This is why people continue to protest in the streets. The street protests were shortly interrupted due to the COVID pandemic and were limited to social networks. According to the non-governmental organization "National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees" almost 70 people are currently detained because they criticized the regime.

China

Hong Kong: Security law entered into force

On 30 June 2020 the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress adopted the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. It entered into force on the same day, some sources say on 01 July 2020. It vests the People's Republic's government bodies with extensive powers in Hong Kong. The law bans subverting state power (a crime often used against activists and government critics in the People's Republic), terrorism, separatism and collusion with foreign elements. The maximum sentence is life imprisonment. Observers expect the law to de facto restrict the freedoms of opinion and the press that have mostly prevailed hitherto. It may also be applied to actions taken by non-nationals outside of the territory of Hong Kong.

Security agencies in mainland China may initiate investigations against suspects in Hong Kong without involving Hong Kong's judiciary. China's Supreme Court may assign complex cases to prosecutors and courts in mainland China, including also the extradition of suspects to the mainland. Something similar had been intended by the extradition law Hong Kong's government had attempted to pass. The massive popular protests after April 2019 ultimately caused Hong Kong's government to withdraw the bill. China intends to set up a supervisory authority in Hong Kong to ensure compliance with the Security Law, its staff will be independent of Hong Kong's police and judiciary. The agency is headed by Zheng Yanxiong, a known hard-liner.

Hong Kong: The pro-democracy movement's response to the Security Law

Leading figures of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement feel threatened by the Security Law. After adoption of the law the Demosisto party founded in 2016 and championing democracy, disbanded. In addition to activist Joshua Wong a number of other well-known members of the pro-democracy movement had belonged to it. Several activists, including Nathan Law, went into exile.

Defying a ban on protests thousands rallied against the Security Law on 01 July 2020. The police used violence against the protesters and arrested about 370, ten of them for alleged violations of the Security Law.

Xinjiang: Coercive birth control measures against Uyghurs.

There are reports that as part of its family planning policies the Chinese government is using extensive coercive measures in a more systematic way than hitherto known in Xinjiang to enforce birth control for Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. The reports are based on public documents and statistics, interviews with former female inmates of internment camps and other sources. Violations of the respective rules are sanctioned with fines or internment in re-education camps where women were sterilized without their knowledge or consent. Between 2015 and 2018 the birth rate dropped dramatically, in some areas by up to 84%. According to 2019 government documents a programme is administered in the rural areas of southern Xinjiang (main concentration of Uyghur settlements) which seems to be aimed at sterilizing all married ethnic minority women of childbearing age who have three or more children. It is also said that the Xinjiang authorities planned to fit at least 80 % of the women of childbearing age with intrauterine devices for birth control or to sterilize them by 2019 in four prefectures in the region's south.

Family planning policy exceptions for Uyghurs have been abolished in Xinjiang since 2017. Just like Han Chinese they are allowed to have two children in the cities and three children in rural areas.

Cameroon

Anglophone crisis: Ceasefire talks between government and separatists

On 03 July 2020 Ayuk Tabe, the most prominent representative of the anglophone separatists, announced that talks had been held between government representatives and the most important representatives of the separatists for the first time since the armed anglophone conflict broke out in 2017. According to Tabe another nine separatist leaders attended the talks on 02 July 2020 discussing the options for a ceasefire. Official government representatives have not yet commented on these talks, which the United Nations had urged the parties to the conflict to hold. Tabe and nine other separatist leaders had been sentenced to life imprisonment for terrorism, rebellion and separatist ambitions by a Cameroon court martial in August 2019. In October 2017 Tabe had proclaimed the republic of Ambazonia consisting of the two anglophone Cameroonian regions North West and South West, installing himself as president.

Colombia

Protests after rape of a minor

On 22 June 2020 protests were held in several major cities after the rape of a girl under the age of 14 belonging to the indigenous group of the Emberá became known. The protests focused on the cities of Bogotá, Cali and Pereira and some of them were led by members of the Colombian women's rights movement. According to media reports seven soldiers, aged 18 to 21, admitted the kidnapping and sexual abuse of the child. They are members of a battalion whose duties include the protection of the Emberá community to which the victim belonged. They have to expect long prison sentences, if convicted. A spokesman of the Emberá community said that the crime was not an isolated incident, but that sexual abuse of indigenous women and girls by members of the security forces is quite frequent, media report.

Ethiopia

Violent unrest after murder of Oromo singer and activist

In the aftermath of the murder of musician and activist Hachalu Hundessa on 29 June 2020 violent unrest erupted in several Ethiopian cities. According to reports, 145 civilians and eleven members of the security forces were killed in these riots, twelve more people died in the capital Addis Ababa and about 2,300 people were arrested. The police says that the situation has calmed down meanwhile. The police also said that three suspects are held in pre-trial detention, but still the background to the attack remains unclear. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed blamed "internal and external forces" for the riots referring to the continuing tensions with Egypt because of the river Nile dam construction (see BN of 18 May 2020).

Rioting was worst in Hachalu's hometown of Ambo. There were reports of several explosions in Addis Ababa, shops were set on fire. The Ethiopian government responded by blocking all internet traffic and telephone connections throughout the country. The German embassy warned of security problems. The arrest of media entrepreneur Jawar Mohammed triggered further escalation. Security forces arrested him at a protest against a funeral in Ambo, about 100 km west of the capital, and intentionally not in Addis Ababa. The media entrepreneur had been deemed a supporter of Abiy for long, but now he accuses the prime minister of not doing enough for the Oromo and advocates the separation of the Oromo regional state. Political observers think that Jawar would probably have been Abiy's most serious competitor in this year's parliamentary elections that were postponed due to COVID-19.

Inter-ethnic tensions

Many see Hachalu as the champion of the rights of the Oromo. His songs reflected the fighting and frustration of the Oromo during the 2014–2018 protest movement and appealed mainly to young people. Only a few days ago Hachalu had strongly criticized Abiy's policies in an interview, accusing him of not representing the interests of the Oromo and of "not being a real Oromo". At the same time Hachalu reported that he had received death threats.

Although they represent the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, the Oromo have felt discriminated against by the government for many years. In April 2018 Abiy was the first Oromo to assume the office of prime minister. He initiated comprehensive reforms, is considered as one of the region's new hopes and received the Nobel Peace Prize last year including for his efforts to pacify the Horn of Africa. However, tensions within the society have increased during his term in office.

India

Murder charges against police officers

After two men died as a consequence of suspected torture in police detention five police officers were charged with murder on the basis of a autopsy report following pressure by the public in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. On 18 June 2020 the men got into an argument with the police about the closing hours of their shop, when the situation escalated they were taken into custody and held in the police station overnight. The next day the victims were brought before a judge with serious injuries and given a prison sentence for resistance. They were taken to hospital only two days later, where they died of their injuries.

Indian crime statistics list 1,721 deaths in police custody between 2001 and 2018, at the same time only 26 perpetrators were sentenced in such cases. According to the annual report of the NGO National Campaign Against Torture (NCAT), that was published on 26 June 2020, 125 people died in Indian police custody in 2019. Top of the list is Uttar Pradesh state with 14 deaths, followed by the states Tamil Nadu und Punjab with 11 documented cases each. The report says that three of four deaths in custody are caused by torture. The caste system encourages police violence in Tamil Nadu. Most victims come from poor and marginalized social groups.

Kashmir: Civilian victims

Following the extension of military operations in the Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir at least 229 people, including 32 civilians, have been killed in the first six months of 2020, according to a local civil society organization. One such incident which involved the shooting of an old man in front of his grandson, triggered mass protests. On 01 July 2020 one civilian and one soldier were killed in Sopore.

Iran

Twelve death sentences within a short period of time

In the last ten days a total of 12 death sentences were pronounced against participants in last November's protests. Already on 24 June 2020 the "Human Rights News Agency in Iran" (HRNA) had reported the Supreme Court's confirmation of the death sentences against three protesters.

On 27 June 2020 the head of the Justice Department of Isfahan Province announced that the court had convicted eight defendants of "corruption on earth". „Corruption on earth" carries the death sentence according to Iran's Islamic Penal Code. On 30 June 2020 it became known that Iranian journalist and activist Ruhollah Zam had been sentenced to death for „corruption on earth", incitement to vandalism and actions endangering national security after a trial that lasted only six days.

These politically motivated death sentences are widely interpreted as a clear message to the people of Iran not to express their discontent with the economic situation and the handling of the Corona crisis in public.

Series of explosions in Iran

On 05 July 2020 a spokesman of the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency informed that on 01 July 2020 a fire had caused substantial damage at Iran's uranium enrichment plant in Natanz. He added that this might slow down the production of advanced centrifuges for uranium enrichment. According to official information from Iran no radioactive material escaped during the incident and no-one was injured. Reuters reports that Iranian officials believe that it was a cyber sabotage masterminded by Israel. BBC Persia received a letter claiming responsibility for the attack on the Natanz facility sent by an as yet unknown Iranian group calling itself "Homeland Panthers". According to AP, specialists are inclined not to take this claim very seriously at this time, because it includes linguistic contradictions. Another cyber attack which shut down Bandar Abbas port for a few days in mid-June, was also blamed on Israel. Allegedly a number of other explosions are related to this incident which the government describes as accidents, though.

On 01 July 2020 an explosion happened in a Tehran hospital that killed 19 people, another explosion occurred in the Parchin military facility near Tehran. In both cases it was said that they were caused by gas leaks. Around 26 June 2020 there was no explosion, but a leak for chlorine gas in the port of Bandar Imam Khomeini.

Iraq

Security situation

IS fighters continue to stage security relevant attacks that claim victims both among civilians and the security forces. Iraqi security forces initiate operations against IS fighters. The most affected provinces are Diyala, Salahaddin, Kirkuk, Ninive and Baghdad.

COVID-19 Pandemic

On 05 July 2020 WHO said that there were 58,354 COVID-19 cases. 2,368 deaths were reported. Most new infections were reported from Baghdad province, next were the provinces Salahaddin and Suleimaniyah.

Kazakhstan

Arrests during vigils in front of the Chinese embassy

On 26 June 2020 police arrested two men holding a vigil in front of the premises of the Chinese embassy in the capital Nur-Sultan; the men said that they were holding the vigil for the release of relatives who were detained in re-education camps in China's Xinjiang province. In similar protests in recent months protesters had called upon the Kazakh government to intervene in support of ethnic Kazakhs in that province. There are reports that in addition to Uyghurs and other Muslim groups also ethnic Kazakhs are interned for re-education in camps there.

Lebanon

Possible attack on former prime minister

Only after a long delay it became known that an attempt on the life of ex-prime minister Hariri was apparently made on 17 June 2020. A projectile (no details known) exploded about 500m away from Hariri's convoy when he was returning from a meeting with an important Sunni cleric. The incident was first treated confidentially to avoid fuelling the tensions that are already running high. Several political and religious leaders are currently attempting to reduce the tensions between the different groups in Lebanon.

Economic crisis

The crisis in Lebanon is worsening. Panic buying of kerosene, oil lamps and candles was triggered by further power blackouts and an imminent shortage of diesel oil to operate private power generators. Several protest suicides led to more nationwide protests. On 03 June 2020 up to 9000 Lebanese pounds were paid for one US Dollar on the

black market for the first time. The Central Bank's official exchange rate is 1:1500. Savings in US Dollars cannot be withdrawn from bank accounts anymore, only exchanged to Lebanese pounds at a rate of 1:3800. At one point one kilogram of candles was sold for 24,000 pounds.

Libya

Air raids on Al-Watiyya military base

In the night of 05 July 2020 Al-Watiyya air force base south-west of Tripoli was attacked from the air. A military commander allied to the Libyan-National Army (LNA) of General Haftar said that the air raid was flown by an unknown fighter jet. As a result of the attack military equipment was damaged that had been brought to the air force base by Turkey in recent weeks.

At the end of May 2020 government troops of the Government of National Accord (GNA) had reconquered the base from General Haftar's units who had used Al-Watiyya as base for his offensive against the Libyan capital (see BN of 25 May 2020).

Mali

Casualties in attacks on several villages in central Mali

Allegedly four villages in Mopti region near the border to Burkina Faso were attacked on 01 July 2020. Reportedly at least 32 civilians were killed. Unknown armed motorcyclists reportedly attacked the villages inhabited by members of the ethnic group of the Dogon. So far no-one claimed responsibility for the assault.

On 02 July 2020 seven soldiers were killed and two injured in another attack in the same region, reports say.

The UN informed that there have been 580 civilian casualties in central Mali in 2020 so far. The UN peace mission MINUSMA had documented 83 incidents, the UN said. There has been a particularly strong increase in violent clashes between members of the ethnic groups of the Peuhl/Fulani and the Dogon.

Montenegro

National Coordination Body for the Fight against Infectious Diseases bans open air gatherings

Current media reports say that after infections went up again the National Coordination Body for the Fight against Infectious Diseases prohibited religious open air gatherings, unless they take place on a church's premises, on 25 June 2020. The protests against the new religion law led by the Serbian Orthodox Church (see BN of 16 March 2020) continue nationwide. The same body also banned political open air gatherings. Prime Minister Dusko Markovic accused the Serbian Orthodox clerics of intentionally violating government measures thereby "endangering public health". The Serbian Orthodox church in turn accuses Montenegro's government of abusing the pandemic to quench public protests against this decision.

Nepal/ India

Nepal claims strategically important area in the Himalayas - dispute with India

Disputes arose between Nepal and India over land in the Himalayas which is claimed by both countries. Nepal's President Bidhya Devi Bhandari approved a map in which a strategically important part of the country, i.e. Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh and Kalapani in the north-west, is assigned to Nepal, although Indian troops have been stationed there for decades. The map was released shortly after India started building a road to China through the contro-

versial area. The 80 km long road would significantly shorten the trade routes between India and China and therefore is of particular importance. There is a border treaty for the disputed area, which Nepal concluded with the then British colonial empire of India in 1816 and which is interpreted differently by the two countries.

Nigeria

COVID-19 Pandemic: Relaxation of travel restrictions

On 29 June 2020, the Chairman of the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 announced that passenger travel between individual states would be permitted again from 1 July 2020, however, the nationwide curfew at night (10 p.m. to 4 a.m.) must be observed. Domestic air traffic is to resume with the start of operations at the airports in Lagos and Abuja on 8 July 2020. On 11 July 2020 the airports of Kano, Port Harcourt, Owerri and Maiduguri are to follow and on 15 July all remaining Nigerian airports. All international airports in Nigeria, which have been closed since 23 March 2020, will remain closed for regular flights. As of 6 July 2020 there were 28,711 confirmed COVID-19 cases in Nigeria. 645 people have died from the epidemic so far.

North Macedonia

"Buy At Home" credit cards to contain the Corona virus

According to current media reports, the government has taken further measures to better control the renewed rise in the number of infections in recent weeks and to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on society shortly before the upcoming parliamentary elections. With the introduction of a voucher payment card distributed by the state called "Buy At Home", low-income citizens are to be encouraged to do more shopping from home. According to the government's action programme, only citizens with monthly income of less than Denar 15,000 (USD 273) would be entitled to one of the voucher payment cards worth Denar 9,000 each. Since government funds are only allowed to be spent on locally produced products and services within 30 days, this measure will also benefit the weakened domestic economy. According to current information from Finance Minister Nina Angelovska, more than 100,000 cards representing EUR 11 million in credit are already circulating for "Buy At Home".

Russian Federation

Constitutional reform confirmed by referendum

A clear majority voted for the constitutional reform proposed by President Vladimir Putin in Russia. The central election commission informed that according to the preliminary final result, 77.9% voted for the extensive changes with a turnout of 68%. Among other things, these changes provide for extended powers for the president and enable Putin to stand again in the next presidential election. So far, the head of state has only been allowed two consecutive terms, thus Putin would have to step down from office in 2024 according to the previous regulations. When the new constitution enters into force Putin's previous terms will no longer count. Since each term of office spans six years, he could theoretically remain in office until 2036. The Kremlin saw the result as a triumph for Putin. The strong support for the new constitution testifies to the great trust that the population has in the President, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. Kremlin critics, however, expressed doubts about the official figures. The independent election monitoring group Golos and opposition politicians reported hundreds of complaints of violations of freedom of choice and called the published results "generally suspicious".

The one-week vote was not legally required. The reform had already been passed by parliament, confirmed by the constitutional court and signed by Putin. The nationwide referendum is based on Putin's promise that these over 170 changes would only come into force with the consent of the Russian people. Extensive social reforms are also part of the constitutional changes, including guarantees of better minimum wages and pensions. In addition, a

number of conservative values are to be anchored, including marriage exclusively as a covenant between a man and a woman.

The citizens will not immediately feel the changes, but they will shape the country's future politics. The reform further strengthens Putin's office. Russian law now supersedes international law. And the indivisibility of the Russian territory is also enshrined in the constitution, which - from the Kremlin's perspective - also includes the annexed Crimean peninsula.

Somalia

Six dead in an al-Shabaab bomb attack

Six people were killed in a bomb explosion in a restaurant in the southern Somali city of Baidoa. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack and stated that two soldiers were among the dead. Officially, however, it was said that all victims were civilians. The group also claimed responsibility for a suicide attack near the port of the capital Mogadishu, in which at least seven people were injured. According to police information, officials opened fire on a vehicle after the driver did not stop at a checkpoint.

Sudan

Demonstrations for political reforms

On 30 June 2020 peaceful demonstrations with tens of thousands of participants took place in several cities. One person is said to have been killed and several injured. Allegedly these were the largest protests since the change of government last year. The protesters are demanding, among other things, faster political reforms and a reform of the security forces.

Syria

Fighting in Homs province

According to reports from the Syrian Human Rights Observatory, which is close to the opposition, there were numerous casualties in fighting in the province of Homs on 05 July 2020. Allegedly 18 pro-government fighters and 26 supporters of the terrorist militia IS lost their lives after IS attacked positions of government troops in the Badia desert in central Syria which triggered a counter-offensive by the army that was supported by Russian fighter planes.

Donor conference

At the fourth international donor conference for Syria and the neighbouring countries, EUR 6.9 billion in aid were committed on 30 June 2020. Germany alone committed EUR 1.58 billion in financial assistance. EU Commissioner Janez Lenarcic welcomed the donor countries' willingness to make substantial donations despite the economic consequences of the Corona crisis. However, the United Nations had previously applied for commitments of more than EUR 9 billion.

Tanzania

COVID- 19 - Schools in Tanzania reopened

Tanzania is the first country in East Africa to also reopen all schools after it already opened its universities. The Ministry of Health decreed that all World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines must be implemented in order to prevent COVID-19 from spreading further. For example, security personnel will check that face masks are worn

and hands are washed regularly. In addition, students and staff should be informed about precautions and sensitized.

Togo

COVID-19 Pandemic

On 01 July 2020 the Constitutional Court prolonged the health emergency originally proclaimed by President Faure Gnassingbé on 01 April 2020 for three months, for another 45 days. Togo's land borders remain closed to passenger traffic. International air traffic is severely restricted. Public events are prohibited, face masks must be worn. Togo has recorded 680 infections and 15 deaths.

Turkey

Trial against Amnesty International employees

In the trial against the former head of the Turkish section of Amnesty International (AI), Taner Kilic, and other defendants, the judgements were handed down on 03 July 2020. Kilic was sentenced to six years in prison for membership in a terrorist organization. He is accused of membership in the Gülen movement and participation in the 2016 coup. Three of his employees were sentenced to one year and one month in jail for aiding and abetting. Seven other employees were acquitted, including the German national Peter Steudtner and the Swedish national Ali Gharavi. The trial and the judgements were largely perceived as politically motivated.

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