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## Group 62 - Information Centre Asylum and Migration

# Briefing Notes

2 September 2019

### Afghanistan

#### Insurgents mount targeted attacks

A university professor was killed and three others were injured by a bomb attack on their vehicle in Nangarhar (East) on 27 August 2019. On 28 August 2019 the Taliban killed the head of the Population Registration Department (PRD) and a tribal elder in Ahmadabad district of Paktia province (south-east). In the southern provincial capital of Kandahar the Taliban shot two policewomen dead on their way to work. On 30 August 2019 Taliban fighters killed at least 14 members of the Afghan armed forces in Herat (west).

#### Taliban offensives in the north

On 31 August 2019 the Taliban launched a large-scale offensive involving several hundred fighters. They succeeded in taking control of the city's provincial hospital, the headquarters of the electricity utility and the third police district. The attackers barricaded themselves in the houses and engaged in a fire-fight with the Afghan military.

A Taliban suicide bomber blew himself up in-midst of security forces and journalists in the provincial capital Kunduz (north) on 01 September 2019. At least ten people died. It is said that the attack was aimed at the head of the provincial police, who survived with injuries.

On the same day the Taliban staged a second and larger attack in Baghlan province (north).

Presumably these attacks are related to the peace talks between the Taliban and the US that are currently underway in Qatar. The two offensives are meant to reinforce the Taliban's demand for a complete withdrawal of international troops.

#### Attacks on non-governmental organisations/human rights activists

According to an Amnesty International report staff of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and human rights activists are regularly targeted by attacks of armed groups like the Taliban, IS or even of forces close to the government. The assassins usually enjoy impunity. In 2018 the International NGO Safety Organization documented more than 240 attacks on NGOs. Intimidation, harassment, threats and violent attacks can happen anywhere and are not limited to certain regions.

### Algeria

#### More demonstrations

On 30 August 2019 the 28th consecutive protests were held against Algeria's ruling elite, usually referred to as „Le pouvoir“. Protesters shouted slogans against the military government and demanded elections free of any controls by the military. The protests remained peaceful.

### Cameroon

#### Life prison sentences for opposition members

A military court in the capital Yaoundé sentenced ten members of the opposition to life imprisonment on 20 August 2019. Among them was the leader of the separatist group SCNC, Sisiku Ayuk Tabe. According to media reports the court found them guilty of rebellion, terrorism and separatist pursuits. The charges were motivated by opposition-organized protests against the controversial re-election of President Paul Biya in October 2018.

The sentence may be indicative of the trial of arrested opposition leader Maurice Kamto which will probably take place on 06 September 2019.

## **China**

### **Hong Kong: Protests**

The police banned a large rally planned for 31 August 2019 to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the failure of the election reform in 2014. The police cited security concerns for the ban, which did not prevent thousands from taking to the streets. Thereafter violent clashes with the police started and the police used tear gas and water canons. The water was dyed blue, probably to make it easier to identify the protesters later on.

On 01 September 2019 the protesters blocked the airport for several hours which interfered with air traffic. Train services to and from the airport were suspended.

On 28 August 2019 thousands protested against alleged sexual abuse of arrested protesters by the police.

### **Hong Kong: Arrests**

Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow, members of the Demosisto party and leading activists of the protest movement, were arrested on 30 August 2019. They are charged with calling for an unauthorized rally on 21 June 2019 and participating in it. Wong is also accused of having organized the event. Both of them were released on bail on the same day. One day before Andy Chan, leader of the outlawed Hong Kong National Party was arrested, allegedly for participating in riots and attacking a policeman. Three members of parliament who are close to the democracy movement, Jeremy Tam, Au Nok-hin and Cheng Chung-tai, were also arrested on 30 August 2019.

### **Author arrested for espionage**

On 27 August 2019 it became known that former Chinese diplomat Yang Hengjun is charged with espionage. He is known in China as author of novels and as a blogger critical of the government. Yang holds Australian citizenship and had been arrested during a trip to China in January 2019. There is no information on the facts on which the charges are based.

### **Xinjiang: Show-off camp**

Social scientist Adrian Zenz reported that showcase facilities are prepared to deceive the international public with an embellished impression of the situation in the camps. He said that the analysis of satellite images suggested that in facilities selected for visits the watchtowers and the barbed wire typical for prisons had been dismantled some months ago. This analysis is supported by recent reports of tightly state-monitored and controlled visits of foreign journalists to Xinjiang.

## **Colombia**

### **FARC dissidents to take up arms again**

Luciano Marín Arango, alias Iván Márquez, second-highest in command of the former rebel organisation Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), published a video message in the night to 29 August 2019 announcing that the FARC would resume its armed fight against the government, because the government had violated the peace agreement with the rebels. He said that he was seeking an alliance with the rebel organisation Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and former FARC members. His group includes more former FARC commanders, such as Seuxis Hernández Solarte, alias Jesús Santrich, who is internationally wanted for drug trafficking. The political party Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (FARC) that emerged out of the former rebel organisation and is represented in the parliament elected in 2018, denounced the resumption of armed fighting and pledged its loyalty to the peace agreement. Colombian President Iván Duque Márquez ordered a special unit to be set up to fight the rebels.

Under the peace agreement made in 2016 by then President Juan Manuel Santos and FARC leader Rodrigo Londoño (alias Timochenko), about 13,000 FARC members were registered for reintegration into society and at least 10,700 took part in the process. Up to 3,000 former FARC fighters are said to have ignored the demobilization process as FARC dissidents or to have joined other criminal groups. Problems with the

implementation of the peace agreement under the acting President Iván Duque Márquez are cited as one of the reasons for this. Duque Márquez is considered to be an opponent of the peace agreement. Since the agreement was made, about 150 former FARC fighters and members have been assassinated. In some instances power vacuums resulted when the rebels withdrew from the areas they had controlled and now FARC dissidents, other rebel groups and criminal gangs are fighting for control over the profitable growing and trafficking of drugs (see BN of 12 August 2019).

## **El Salvador**

### **Extrajudicial executions**

The office of the Commissioner for Human Rights informed on 27 August 2019 that in the fight against gang violence at least 116 people were killed by the police between 2014 and 2018. It said that there are indications of extra-judicial executions, excessive use of force and torture. Contrary to what the police maintained, the alleged gang members did not die in armed confrontations. Of the 48 cases investigated only 19 had been tried in court, sentences had been pronounced in only two cases. One of the country's major problems is the violence emanating from youth gangs (Maras). In 2018 El Salvador's murder rate was among the highest in the world at 51 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. Most murders are attributed to gang members.

## **Eritrea**

### **Christian media: At least 150 Eritrean Christians detained**

Christian media reported that at least 150 Christians have been arrested in Eritrea since end of June. The arrests were made in the capital Asmara and in Keren, about 90 km north-west of Asmara. In the first wave of arrests on 23 June 2019 security forces allegedly took 70 Christians (35 women, 25 men and 10 children) from Faith Mission Church of Christ in Keren to Hashferay prison in Hagaz (see BN of 24 June 2019). On 18 August 2019 further arrests were made in Godayf, a southern district of Asmara, the reports say.

The Eritrean-Orthodox, the Catholic, and the Protestant-Lutheran churches as well as Sunni Islam are recognized by the state in Eritrea. Members of smaller religious communities (Jehova's Witnesses, pentecostal or evangelical minority sects as well as Muslim Wahabites) have been susceptible to state persecution since 2003.

## **India**

### **Assam: Two million inhabitants affected by loss of citizenship**

About two million inhabitants of the north-eastern Indian state of Assam are not included in the recently published National Register of Citizens (NRC). According to the government the status of these people could not be clarified, because innumerable unregistered refugees from neighbouring Bangladesh are living in Assam. Critics are concerned that the authorities will seize this opportunity to deport more Muslims to the neighbouring country even though they might not have fled directly from Bangladesh. Muslims account for one third of the population in Assam.

## **Iraq**

### **Security situation**

Attacks are continuing in Iraq. Most affected were the provinces of Anbar, Kirkuk, Diyala, Bagdad and Babil.

### **Security operation against IS**

In an operation of Iraqi security forces against IS in Diyala province two IS fighters, including one local IS leader were killed on 30 August 2019.

### **Mass grave discovered**

In Sinjar, Ninive province, a mass grave with at least 13 victims was found.

### **Resettlement of internally displaced persons**

On 28 August 2019 the Iraqi authorities brought back hundreds of internally displaced persons from Hammam al-Alil camp, Ninive province, to Hawijah district in Kirkuk province where they had originally come from.

## **Iran**

### **Ban on visiting football stadiums for Iranian women abolished**

The Iranian ministry of sports informed that the 'necessary conditions' for abolishing the statutory prohibition of stadium visits for women should be prepared immediately. Thus Iranian women will be allowed for the first time since the Islamic Revolution, that is after forty years, to visit a stadium for the qualification games to the world championship. Lifting the ban on stadium visits for women had been repeatedly promised since President Hassan Rohani took office. Women will be allowed to personally attend the game in the stadium in Tehran for the first time on 10 October 2019 when the Cambodian and the Iranian teams meet for the WC qualification. The world football association FIFA had threatened to immediately exclude the Iranian football association from the 2022 world championship, if the ban for stadium visits by women would persist.

### **Iranian Kurds**

The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, Javaid Rehman, reported on 27 August 2019 that only this year a total of 199 Kurdish citizens had been arrested for their political views. In addition a large number of Kurds had been sentenced to death. Kurdish political activists are demanding a greater degree of autonomy from the Iranian government. The three major Kurdish organisations in the Islamic Republic are: the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (DPKI) that has existed for a long time already, the underground organisations Komala (Community) and PJAK (Party for Free Life in Kurdistan). The latter was established in 2004 and is considered to be the Iranian branch of the PKK. PJAK is fighting a war against the Iranian military for an ethnically homogeneous Kurdistan in the Kurdish areas. There are estimates that up to now hundreds of Iranian soldiers lost their lives in the PJAK's military operations.

### **Iranian criminal law: Release from detention on bail despite death sentence**

Former Tehran mayor Mohammad Ali Najafi was released from prison against bail of approx. € 87,000 on 28 August 2019. In July a criminal court had convicted Najafi of shooting his wife M. Ostad. Because Ostad's family had demanded revenge according to the Islamic legal principles (Oisas - art. 204 to art. 293 of the Iranian Penal Code) Najafi was sentenced to death. Later, however, the victim's family had not insisted on the execution of the sentence against payment of damages.

### **Punishment of labour protests and strikes**

Labour protests and strikes have been on the rise in Iran for months. The ultra-conservative head of the justice system Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi stated on 26 August 2019 that some labour protests are „masterminded by enemies of the state“ and would therefore be severely punished. On the same day the works council of the Haft Tapeh sugar cane factory in the southern province of Khuzestan informed that nine factory employees have been sentenced to eight months in prison and thirty lashes for attending protests. The same punishment had previously been given to 16 other workers (as legal bases e.g. the following articles were cited: art. 183 to 196 of the Iranian Penal Code “enmity against god; „Mohareb“ or „corruption on earth“: „Mofzed bil Arz“; Punishment: corporal or even capital punishment).

### **Migration pressure due to US sanctions**

According to a current study of the Iranian parliament (Majlis-e Shura-ye Eslami) unemployment went up further in 2018 and now stands at almost 14%. Unemployment is said to affect about one third of the young people and even more among university graduates. Official Iranian statistics do not count anyone as unemployed who engages in any type of activity for only one hour per week. Reports say that many simply

stopped looking for a job altogether. Especially many of the well-trained young graduates try to find employment abroad.

### **New currency in planning**

Hoping to positively impact the economy the Iranian cabinet adopted a bill to change the national currency. According to the bill the new currency would be called Toman. One Toman would correspond to 10,000 Rial. The government's plan has already been approved by the Majlis and the Guardian Council. During the transition both currencies will be valid.

## **Israel/Palestinian Autonomous Areas**

### **Fire-fights on the Golan Heights**

After Israel had attacked targets in Syria and Lebanon (see BN of 26 August 2019) the revenge strike announced by the Hezbollah followed on 31 August 2019. At least two shells were fired at a military base on the Golan Heights near Avivim in northern Israel. A military vehicle was destroyed.

The Hezbollah maintained that Israeli soldiers were riding in the vehicle and were seriously wounded or even killed. In fact, however, there were no casualties and no wounded persons. As a deception the Israeli army propped up dolls as decoys at several posts and staged an ambulance deployment after the Lebanese shells had hit.

The reporting of these facts was withheld by the Israeli military until the Hezbollah had been able to gain a propaganda victory. The Israeli army then responded to the attack with artillery fire onto an uninhabited area in Lebanon.

According to observers neither side is currently interested in a major conflict.

### **Gaza Strip: Suicide attack on a checkpoint**

A total of three policemen were killed and several civilians were wounded by explosions at two police checkpoints in Gaza City on 27 August 2019. The Hamas-led interior ministry proclaimed a state of emergency and set up further checkpoints in the Gaza Strip. As both explosions were suicide bombings it is assumed that radical Islamists are responsible for the crimes. So far, no group has claimed responsibility for the assaults.

The Hamas leadership, Israel and Egypt are concerned that IS sympathisers have been gaining strength in this section of the coast for some time already.

Thousands of Palestinians attended the funeral of the three killed policemen on 28 August 2019. Hamas already announced the arrest of ten suspects who were allegedly involved with the suicide bombings.

## **Libya**

### **Murzuq**

According to reports General Haftar's LNA again flew two air raids on the city of Murzuq on 31 August 2019; no victims have been reported. In recent months several local groups clashed in Murzuq after the LNA withdrew due to the Tripoli offensive. The UNHCR reports at least 90 civilian deaths and about 200 wounded related to the fighting in Murzuq this year, thousands have been displaced.

### **Tripoli**

Four people were injured when Mitiga airport was shelled in the night of 31 August 2019 to 01 September 2019, three of them allegedly were returning from the Hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. The airport was closed on Sunday and air traffic was resumed again on Monday.

Fighting and drone attacks were reported from different parts within Tripoli and its surroundings, in particular from Ghayran, Ain Zara und Wadi Rabea.

## **Nigeria**

### **Terror attacks causes casualties in the North East**

Alleged fighters of a terrorist organisation killed eleven construction workers in Wajirko (Borno state in the north-east) where they installed cables. A member of the local civilian militia blamed the attack on fighters of the group Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), a West African offshoot of IS and a splinter group of the Boko Haram terror organization.

Eight soldiers were killed in another attack on a military convoy 35 km west of Monguno city on 30 August 2019, five others are still missing. The attackers also destroyed two military trucks and a vehicle equipped with a machine gun and looted arms. The military assumes that ISWAP followers are behind this attack as well.

For years the Boko Haram terror organization has been terrorizing the population in north-eastern Nigeria and the neighbouring countries of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. There are different estimates of the number of people killed in the attacks and assaults of this group over the last ten years, they range between 20,000 and 35,000 and more than two million people have fled.

### **Murder of a priest**

Nigerian media reported that the priest David Tanko was ambushed and killed in Tabara state on 28 August 2019. He was on his way to a meeting to discuss a peaceful solution for the conflict between the ethnicities of the Tiv and the Jukun. This is the third murder of a priest since the beginning of the year.

## **Pakistan**

### **Solidarity rallies for Kashmir population**

As a show of solidarity with the population in the Indian part of Kashmir whose autonomy rights were revoked by the Indian government on 05 August 2019 (see BN of 19 August 2019) nationwide protests were held on 30 August 2019. There were some additional isolated protests in the following days.

## **Somalia**

### **Fighting**

According to reports Somalia National Army (SNA) and AMISOM troops took control from al-Shabaab over the city of Burweyn in Hiraaan region on 25 August 2019.

On the same day 18 al-Shabaab fighters were allegedly killed by SNA soldiers in Sablale, Lower Shabelle region.

## **Syria**

### **Idlib: Government troops advance further**

Following heavy fighting that brought the Syrian government further territorial gains the Russian military announced a ceasefire on 30 August 2019 that was to enter into force on 31 August 2019.

On 26 August 2019 at least four people were killed by air strikes and Syrian military artillery fire in the villages of Basqala and Maaret Harmeh. Syrian state media reported an offensive on Marret al-Numan, a strategically important town on the M5 motorway. On 28 August 2019 reports followed of at least twelve civilian casualties in an air strike on Marret al-Numan. Most of the estimated 140,000 inhabitants have allegedly left the city over the last weeks.

By 30 August 2019 the villages of Khwain, Zarzoor and Tamanah had come under the control of pro-regime forces.

On 30 August 2019 hundreds of Syrians protested at the Syrian-Turkish border crossing Bab al-Hawa demanding a Turkish intervention in view of the continuing bombing of Idlib by Syria and Russia. When some of them tried to advance to the Turkish side of the border Turkish security forces used tear gas.

The Russian Foreign Minister stressed that the Idlib offensive does not run counter to any agreements with Turkey. The Turkish military outpost in Morek is still surrounded by the Syrian army (see BN of 26 August 2019). The Minister added that Russian special forces are used to prevent any confrontation between Turkish and Syrian troops.

The Russian Defence Ministry promised that Russia would assist the Syrian government in the reconstruction of Khan Sheikhoun which it recently conquered.

### **Idlib: US bombs al-Qaeda bases**

The US reported that several US air strikes destroyed an installation of al-Qaeda leaders near Ma'arrat Misrin on 31 August 2019. The pro-opposition Human Rights Observatory reported that more than 40 fighters were killed.

The Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), that cut its ties with al-Qaeda in 2016, is currently dominant in Idlib, but at the same time several other groups of different ideologies are still active in the last rebel stronghold.

### **YPG pulls back from the Turkish border**

The Kurdish autonomous administration in the north-east informed on 27 August 2019 that it started to withdraw fighters of the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG) from bases near the villages of Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad along the Turkish border. These are actions included in the agreement made between the US and the Turkish government to create a "security zone" from which all Kurdish militias have to be withdrawn. The Kurdish autonomous administration also stated that it replaced the YPG fighters with 'local forces' without giving any more details.

A spokesman of the Democratic Forces of Syria (SDF) said that the agreed buffer zone would be between 5 and 14km wide and include both rural areas and military bases; villages were, however, excluded from the troop withdrawal. A spokesman of the Turkish government, however, said that Turkey would insist on a 32km wide zone, after having demanded a width of 30-40km from the start. On 31 August 2019 President Erdogan again threatened to launch a Turkish invasion, if the agreement with the US would not be implemented as envisaged by Turkey.

### **Attack in Azaz**

On 27 August 2019 a bomb was detonated in a van in the Turkish occupied part of the country. Two people were killed, nine more were injured.

### **Trade fair in Damascus hoped to promote reconstruction**

For the third time since 2017 a major trade fair opened in the capital on 28 August 2019. Until the conflict broke out in 2011 the fair had always attracted influential investors and prominent guests from the Arab world. However, since 2017 mainly Syrian companies and Lebanese, Iranian and a few Russian ones had attended as well.

The US government warned international enterprises of participating and threatened to impose sanctions. But the Chinese ambassador in Syria announced that this year 58 Chinese companies will exhibit at the fair and will also contribute to the reconstruction of the Syrian economy.

A delegation from the United Arab Emirates participated this year as well, after the UAE only recently reopened its Damascus embassy in December 2018. The UAE had long supported opposition forces in the war in Syria, however, not to the same extent as the two other Gulf states Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

## **Tanzania**

### **Tanzania plans to deport 200,000 refugees from Burundi**

Tanzania is planning the deportation of about 200,000 refugees from Burundi. The interior ministry informed on 28 August 2019 that the refugees had time to leave the country voluntarily until 01 October 2019, thereafter they would be forced to leave. There have been repeated outbreaks of violence and fighting as part of the controversial re-election of President Pierre Nkurunziza in 2015. Hundreds of thousands were displaced or fled to neighbouring countries. The media reported an agreement between the governments of Tanzania and Burundi providing for the return of 2000 people per week as of October.

## **Ukraine**

### **New government formed**

On 29 August 2019 the formation of the new Ukrainian government was announced. It consists of 12 men and six women: friends and former business partners of acting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, technocrats, civil society activists and two ministers of the former government. 35-year-old Alexey Goncharuk was elected prime minister with a clear majority and thus becomes the youngest head of any Ukrainian government in the country's modern history. The president's party won 254 of 450 seats in the parliamentary elections of July 2019 and therefore holds the absolute majority.

## **Venezuela**

### **Guaidó appoints presidency commission**

The institutional crisis is aggravated by the formation of a presidency commission led by Juan Guaidó which in effect is a counter-government. Leopoldo López was appointed head of the commission and still is protected by his stay in the Spanish embassy. Fighting Venezuela's humanitarian crisis was named as the new commission's first priority.

## **Yemen**

### **Prison hit by air strike**

On 01 September 2019 the Saudi-led coalition flew an air attack on the Houthi-controlled city of Dhamar. One of the air strikes hit a prison. The number of casualties has not yet been confirmed. The Red Cross assumes that more than 100 people died. The shelled building used to be an educational facility before it was converted to a prison. Many of the inmates were political prisoners. The coalition said that drones and missiles were stored in the building

### **Fighting in southern Yemen**

The battle between pro-government troops and the insurgent Southern Transitional Council (STC) for Aden city and other areas in southern Yemen continued last week. On 29 August 2019 the STC regained control of Aden, after government troops had taken it only one day before. There are reports that the STC received air support from the UAE. There is no information on the number of dead or wounded. The Yemeni government maintained that at least 300 people died in the UAE air strikes. It is reported that the STC arrested dozens of people in Aden that it considered loyal to the government. Thousands have left the city due to the fighting, it is said.

On 30 August 2019 a Yemeni branch of IS assumed responsibility for a suicide bombing in Aden that killed six STC fighters.