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Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

10 February 2020

Afghanistan

Peace negotiations still without results

In a message posted on social media on 04.02.20, the Taliban accused the U.S. of obstructing the talks to find a political solution to the 18-year-old conflict in Afghanistan that have been underway for about one and a half years. Before signing a possible agreement with the Taliban, the U.S. is demanding clear evidence of the Taliban's willingness to reduce violence in Afghanistan.

An agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban is to contain a timetable for the withdrawal of international troops and, in return, Taliban guarantees that Afghanistan will never again be used as a base for terrorism. This is also intended to pave the way for peace talks within Afghanistan.

Attack on U.S. troops in Nangarhar

According to a military spokesperson, two U.S. soldiers were killed and at least six others were wounded during a joint operation with Afghan security forces in the Sherzad district in the eastern province of Nangarhar on 08.02.20 when an Afghan dressed in an Afghan army uniform opened fire with a machine gun. The background to the incident remains unclear. According to media reports, Afghan security forces were also killed in the gunfire.

Officially, between 12,000 and 13,000 U.S. soldiers are still deployed in Afghanistan. Around 8,500 are involved in NATO's Resolute Support Mission for the training of Afghan security forces in the country.

Algeria

Suicide attack on military barracks

According to local media reports, a suicide attack was carried out on a military barracks in the south of the country on 10.02.20, in which at least one person was reportedly killed. No such attacks have been carried out in Algeria for several years. It is not yet known who is behind the attack.

President pardons thousands of prisoners

On 03.02.20, Abdelmadjid Tebboune signed a presidential decree providing pardon for 3,471 prisoners who have only six months or less in their sentence. A second decree followed on 06.02.20, in which another 6,294 prisoners were pardoned. Many of the detainees pardoned had been imprisoned for participating in protests against the Algerian government and the Algerian power system. Persons convicted of capital crimes were explicitly excluded from the amnesty.

Azerbaijan

President Aliyev's party wins parliamentary election

The ruling party of the authoritarian President Ilham Aliyev won the general election on 09.02.20. After counting 87% of the electoral districts, his New Azerbaijan Party won 65 of the 125 seats in parliament. A

total of 1,300 candidates from 19 parties had stood for election. The parliamentary elections were originally scheduled for November 2020, but the parliament dominated by Aliyev's party decided to dissolve itself in December 2019 and to bring forward new elections by eight months. While Aliyev's party promised free, fair and democratic elections, the opposition raised accusations of irregularities. There had been numerous attempts at vote-rigging, for instance, including the names of people who are deceased in voter lists and intimidation of election observers.

Cameroon

Parliamentary and municipal elections

The parliamentary and municipal elections, originally scheduled to take place in 2018, were held on 09.02.20. According to the AFP, the election process was only disrupted in the separatist stronghold of Muyuka (Southwest region) when gunfire was exchanged between security forces and separatists. The large opposition party Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Cameroun (MRC), which is active nationwide, and the separatists in the two English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions called for a boycott of the elections. The militant separatist group Ambazonia Defence Force (ADF) imposed a curfew on the population for the period between 07.02.20 and 12.02.20 (11 February is the annual Youth Day celebration in Cameroon). It also threatened to consider and treat as enemy anyone who did not obey its order. In December 2019, militant separatists kidnapped about 40 candidates of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party, because the SDF rejects a secession of the anglophone regions of Cameroon. The kidnapped candidates are not to be released until after the elections. As a result, several candidates of the SDF, whose regional stronghold is the two Anglophone regions, withdrew their candidacies. According to the International Crisis Group, the security forces, whose strength in the anglophone regions was increased by 700 men in January 2020, killed at least 16 people in several villages and burned down hundreds of houses between 12.01.20 and 20.01.20. It is expected that the ruling party CPDM, which already has 148 of 180 seats in parliament, will further increase its lead in yesterday's elections.

China

Coronavirus continues to spread

The respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus 2019-nCoV continues to spread. So far, 40,171 infections have been officially confirmed and 908 people have died. More than 300 cases have been confirmed so far outside the People's Republic.

Coronavirus: authorities come under fire following the death of physician

The death of the physician Dr Li Wenliang highlights shortcomings in the way the authorities are dealing with the respiratory disease. In December 2019, Dr Li was one of the first medical professionals to sound the alarm on the potentially dangerous outbreak of the disease in Wuhan. The police prohibited him and other doctors from spreading reports of the disease. Shortly afterwards, Dr Li contracted the virus from a patient. He died on 06.02.20. When news of his death became public, this led to widespread criticism of the hesitant way in which the authorities handled the outbreak initially. In an unusual move, state media picked up on the case and reported that a commission was being sent to Wuhan to investigate the case. This shows the importance the leadership attaches to the growing discontent among the population about failures to deal with the respiratory disease.

Ethiopia

Protests against Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed

Protests continue throughout the country. Thousands of demonstrators called on the government to do more to combat the rampant ethnic violence. Unrest had been triggered by the kidnapping of a group of university students in early December 2019, whose whereabouts are still unknown. According to reports, armed men attacked several students of Dembi Dollo University in the Oromia region who were on their way home from lectures. Most of them belong to the Amhara ethnic group. Relatives have launched a campaign under the

hashtag #BringBackOurStudents. Violent clashes have erupted repeatedly between members of the Oromo and Amhara in the past, resulting in several deaths. Both ethnic groups together make up two-thirds of the country's population.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his efforts to resolve the border conflict with neighbouring Eritrea, is therefore coming under increasing pressure. Although he relaxed censorship, released political prisoners and called on opposition members abroad to return, he has not yet managed to find ways to prevent the escalating ethnic violence in Ethiopia.

India

Elections in New Delhi

On 08.02.20, the elections for a new regional parliament began in New Delhi. More than 14 million people were eligible to vote. 672 candidates were in the fray for about 70 seats. The official election result is expected on 11.02.20. In the last election held five years ago, the Common Man's Party (Aam-Aadmi-Party (AAP)) won 67 of the 70 direct election mandates. According to the latest projections, the AAP could win 50 of the 70 mandates and also win this year's elections. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is poised to come second and the Congress Party (INC) third.

Iran

Thousands of candidates are rejected by the Guardian Council in the run-up to the presidential election

The Guardian Council, which is responsible under Article 91 of the Iranian Constitution for the admission of candidates to the Iranian parliamentary elections on 21.02.20, has barred thousands of candidates from the election. The spokesperson of the Guardian Council, Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei said 14,000 candidates had applied to stand in the election before the deadline in December 2019, but only 5,000 of them had been classified as suitable. Among the rejected candidates are a number of people who are currently active as members of parliament. According to the newspaper Etemad (meaning "Trust" in English is a reformist newspaper published in Tehran), most of the rejected candidates belong to the circle of moderates and reformists. This makes the election an internal vote among hardliners, the newspaper says.

Khamenei critics handed long prison sentences

Eight activists and former political prisoners, who in June 2019 had called for the resignation of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as well as for a fundamental reform of the constitution of the Islamic Republic, were sentenced to a total of 72 years in prison and several years of exile, according to information provided by their lawyer on 02.02.20. Shortly before, another 14 Iranian activists had already called for Khamenei to resign and the end of the Islamic Republic in a similar letter.

Iraq

People killed and injured in attacks against anti-government protestors in Najaf

20 followers of Muqtada al-Sadr attacked an anti-government protest camp in the city of Najaf on 05.02.20. The supporters of al-Sadr who are nicknamed blue caps are accused of throwing petrol bombs and attempting to clear the camp using firearms, batons and knives. According to reports, eight people were killed and at least 100 people were injured. Eyewitnesses say security forces did not intervene to protect the demonstrators. According to media reports, al-Sadr has struck a deal with Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Fatah bloc and leader of the Badr organisation, in Qom (Iran). The aim was to support Ayad Allawi as prime minister (see BN of 03.02.20) and to put an end to the protests. Student protests and strikes continued in several cities on 09.02.20.

Attack against anti-government activists in Nasriyah

On 05.02.20, a sound bomb detonated in a protest camp near the tent of the anti-government activist Dr. Alaa al-Rikabi in Nasriyah, injuring at least one demonstrator. Since anti-government protests erupted in October 2019, targeted attacks have been carried out repeatedly against activists.

Leaders of Saraya al-Salam killed

On 04.02.20, a commander of the Saraya al-Salam militant group, Abu Muqtada al-Izrajawi, was injured in an attack near his home in Maysan province. He later died of his gunshot wounds. On 06.02.20, another Saraya al-Salam militia leader, Sheikh Hazim al-Halfi, was shot dead in Basra City. It is not yet known who is behind the shooting and whether the incidents are related to each other. Saraya al-Salam (*2014) is a revitalised form of the former Mahdi Army (2003-2008) that was formed in the face of the fight against ISIS. It is led by the politician and Shiite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, and is part of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi).

Protest against militia in Sahel (Nineveh)

On 06.02.20, dozens of people demonstrated against the presence of militias of the Popular Mobilisation Front (Hashd al-Shaabi) in the Sahel region (Nineveh). The protesters are objecting to the interference of the Popular Mobilisation Front in political, economic and security-related matters, among other things. The Popular Mobilisation Front drives out local residents and prohibits internally displaced persons from returning to their homes. In addition, they levy taxes and fees for the transport of goods to Mosul and the Kurdistan-Iraq region.

Kazakhstan

Ethnic clashes in the south-east

In the early hours of 08.02.20, violent clashes erupted between ethnic Kazakhs and the Chinese Muslim Dugan minority in several villages in the south-eastern region of Shambylan on the border with Kyrgyzstan. During the heavy riots, numerous houses and cars were set on fire. According to media reports, between eight and ten people were killed and more than 100 people were injured. The security forces arrested 50 people. It is not clear what triggered the clashes. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev promised humanitarian aid to the people in the region.

Kosovo

New government

Four months after the early elections (see BN of 11.11.19), the parliament voted for a new government under Albin Kurti on 03.02.20. According to media reports, 66 of the 120 MPs voted in favour of supporting the new government.

The day before, the leaders of the two previous opposition parties, Albin Kurti from the left-wing national party Vetëvendosje and Isa Mustafa from the conservative Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), had agreed to form a joint government.

Together with some ethnic minority MPs, the coalition has an absolute majority in the new parliament. It replaces the previous government led by former militia commander Ramush Haradinaj, which critics described as corrupt and inefficient. In his government address, Kurti said a new era is dawning without corruption and nepotism.

Libya

Sufi shrine destroyed in Sirte

On 05.02.20, a Sufi shrine was destroyed and several practicing Sufis were arrested in Sirte, a city occupied by the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Khalifa Haftar. A Madkhali Salafi group that had joined Khalifa Haftar is being accused of destroying the shrine. A significant number of Madkhali Salafist followers have joined Haftar, while others continue to fight for the Government of National Accord (GNA).

Clashes in Tripoli

Several civilians were reportedly killed in a missile attack on Al-Hadba Al-Badri as well as Sawani in the south of Tripoli on 04.02.20. and 05.02.20. Fighting is reportedly taking place in the axis of the airport road, while things seem to be remaining calm on other fronts.

Mali

Jihadists killed

According to French army sources, at least 30 jihadists were killed and several vehicles destroyed during three separate military operations in the Gourma and Liptako regions between 06.02.20 and 07.02.20.

Mauritania

LGBTI persons handed prison sentences

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), eight men were sentenced to two years' imprisonment in the capital Nouakchott on 30.01.20 for "committing indecent acts" and "inciting debauchery". This follows a video on social media showing the men at an alleged same-sex wedding in a restaurant (see BN v. 27.01.20). Even though the police's interrogations had shown that it was not a wedding, but rather the birthday party of one of the men, the judge still accused the men of imitating women and thus violating public morals. A woman who attended the ceremony received a suspended one-year sentence. The owner of the restaurant was acquitted.

Mauritania is an Islamic country that prohibits same-sex sexual activity between Muslims. Men face the death penalty for committing homosexual acts. However, no executions have been carried out since 1987. Where LGBTI persons have been arrested and imprisoned in the past, this has been for other reasons, such as irregular immigration.

Montenegro

Montenegro's President warns against church protests

According to recent media reports, Milo Djukanovic, the President of the Republic and Chairman of the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), has warned members of his party not to participate in the protest movement against the so-called Religious Freedom Act passed in Parliament on 27.12.19 (see BN of 13.01.20). He said party members who took part in the protest marches of the churches risked being expelled from the party. He said that anyone who wanted to build a democratic and pro-European society would have to exclude themselves from those parts of the Church manifestations that affect the state of Montenegro. Since Montenegro's parliament passed the law on 27.12.19, tens of thousands of Serbian Orthodox Church priests, believers and supporters have been protesting twice a week across the country, demanding its withdrawal.

Pakistan/India

Kashmir Solidarity Day

In the context of the Day of Solidarity with Muslims in Indian-administered Kashmir, rallies and solidarity marches took place throughout Pakistan on 05.02.20. Students protested against the Indian government in Muzaffarabad, capital of the Pakistani part of Kashmir. Further large gatherings and human chains took place in the capital Islamabad, in Peshawar (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) and in the southern metropolis Karachi (Sindh). The majority population of Pakistan perceives India's rule over the predominantly Muslim Kashmir Valley as a hostile occupation and is demanding more self-determination for the Kashmiris living there.

The Pakistani government expressed great concern in a memorandum sent to the UN with regard to the conditions in the Indian part of Kashmir. The continued deployment of more than 900,000 soldiers has turned the region into an open-air prison and one of the most militarised areas in the world, it said. Indian security

forces are accused of committing human rights abuses against the civilian population, in particular extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and the uncontrolled use of bullets.

Russian Federation/North Caucasus

Security situation

The human rights situation in the North Caucasus remains tense, especially in Chechnya under the regime of Ramzan Kadyrov. By contrast, the overall security situation has improved and stabilised considerably. Since 2013, the death toll from attacks and fighting in the North Caucasus has declined sharply. According to official figures, 134 people died in 2017 in attacks and fighting between security forces and separatist or Islamist insurgents (2016: 202; 2015: 208; 2014: 341; 2013: 529; 2012: 700). In 2018, the death toll fell below 100 for the first time. According to the Russian Internet newspaper Caucasian Knot, a total of 82 people died in the North Caucasus in 2018. According to the preliminary information provided by the same source at the beginning of February 2020, the number of casualties in 2019 fell to a total of 31. The main reason for the considerable decline in the number of people killed in recent years compared with 2012 is likely to be that since the end of 2014, an increasing number of fighters from the North Caucasus have joined the terrorist militia ISIS in Syria and Iraq, where many have been killed.

Somalia

Fugitive minister returns to Somalia

The former security minister of Jubbaland, Abdirashid Hassan Abdinur (also known as Abdirashid Janan) was arrested on 31.08.19 for committing crimes against international law and other human rights violations, including the killing of civilians and the obstruction of humanitarian aid. On 28.01.20, he escaped from custody and is said to have subsequently fled to Kenya. On 04.02.20, he returned from Nairobi to his hometown in Jubbaland. Amnesty International (ai) has urged the Kenyan government to arrest Abdirashid and to return him to Somalia for prosecution. Abdirashid has the support of the regional authorities in Jubbaland which is embroiled in a conflict with the Somali central government.

Clashes between clans in southern Somalia

According to reports from 04.02.20, at least 20 people were killed and another 20 were injured in clashes that erupted between two clans on the outskirts of Kismayo in the Lower Jubba region. The Jubbaland government has endeavoured to end the fighting for land resources but has so far been unsuccessful.

Syria

Fighting in Idlib

Syrian state media announced on 08.02.20 that Syrian government troops and militias had seized the city of Saraqeb, bringing another city which lies on the strategically important M5 highway under government control. Saraqeb lies at the meeting point of Syria's main north-south highway linking Aleppo with Damascus via Hama and another road connecting Aleppo to the Mediterranean port of Latakia.

The Syrian army is also said to have reconquered more than 600 square kilometres of the last remaining rebel-held areas in Idlib and parts of the neighbouring provinces by 09.02.20. The army and the militias allied with it are now less than 15 km away from the provincial capital of the eponymous Idlib. Meanwhile, the Turkish military has massively increased its outposts in the region with equipment and personnel.

According to UN figures, some 586,000 people fled the region between 01.12.20 and 02.02.20, many of whom have been repeatedly displaced.

Israeli air strikes near Damascus

On 06.02.20, according to Syrian state media, Israel carried out an air strike in a suburb of Damascus. Eight soldiers were reportedly injured in the attack. The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says 23 people were killed, including Iran-backed militias. Israel has not yet commented on the events.

OPCW identifies cause of contradictory information

On 06.02.20, the International Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) published the results of the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) charged with investigating the unauthorised release of internal documents which contradicted the findings of a highly regarded 2019 report on a chemical weapons attack on Douma. The report determined that two former employees of the organisation wilfully passed on information to the public, in which they erroneously reported there was evidence to suggest that the chemical weapons attack of 07.04.18 had been staged in a suburb of Damascus. Supporters of Syria and Russia had described the two employees as whistle-blowers. Contrary to all criticism, the OPCW has always stood by its conclusion that a chemical weapons attack took place in Douma.

A joint investigation by the OPCW and the UN came to the conclusion that units of the Syrian army used both the nerve poison sarin and chlorine in the Syrian conflict. According to this, ISIS fighters carried out an attack with mustard gas.

Yemen

First flight in three years leaves North Yemen

On 03.02.20 and 08.02.20, a total of 28 seriously ill Yemeni patients were flown from Sanaa to Jordan for medical treatment on a UN-sponsored flight. These are the first civilian flights permitted to leave Yemeni airspace since civil air traffic was shut down by Saudi Arabia about three years ago as part of the air and sea blockade. The flights are the result of months of negotiations between the UN and Saudi Arabia. Humanitarian actors hope that more seriously ill people will be able to receive medical treatment abroad that is not available in Yemen.

Qassim al-Rimi killed in Yemen

The leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Qassim al-Rimi, was reportedly killed in a U.S. military operation in January 2020. The U.S. announced this on 06.02.20 without divulging any further details. AQAP has not yet confirmed the death of al-Rimi. Al-Rimi had recently stated that AQAP was responsible for an attack carried out against a military base in Florida on 06.12.19 in which a Saudi military officer killed three Americans.

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