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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

Persecution: homes seized in Panjshir, corporal punishment, arrests

According to several media reports, the NGO Panjshir Worldwide Council has published a report according to which around 21,000 Taliban are stationed in the province of Panjshir. They have usurped 285 houses, 13 mosques and 12 schools there and converted them into military bases or residences for the families of Taliban leaders. The districts most affected are Bazarak, Annabe and Rokha.

On 14.02.24, the Taliban in Bamiyan province had 13 people whipped for engaging in extramarital relationships and theft. The subsequent sentences ranged from two to seven years in prison (the latter for murder and theft). Eyewitnesses report that on Valentine's Day, the Taliban arbitrarily arrested couples strolling on the street and punished them for having extramarital affairs.

In Kunduz province, the Taliban arrested four women on 13.02.24 for violating the dress code. The Taliban arrested two soldiers of the former government in Maidan Wardak province on 15.02.24. Both are ethnic Hazara and are said to have co-operated with the National Resistance Front. On 09.02.24, a former employee of the Ministry of the Interior was arrested by the Taliban in Maidan Wardak province. On 12.02.24, the Taliban opened fire on a taxi at a checkpoint, killing all five passengers. The driver is said to have ignored the warnings given.¹

Burkina Faso / Mali / Niger

Sahel Alliance: withdrawal from ECOWAS confirmed

According to the Malian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, three ministers from the Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger met in Ouagadougou on 15.02.24 to continue and expand cooperation between the three countries within the framework of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) which was founded in September 2023. According to media reports, the three members also confirmed their joint commitment to withdraw from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) without delay. The three military governments had announced their immediate withdrawal from ECOWAS on 28.01.24 (cf. BN of 29.01.24). It is reported that details about the planned goals and content of the alliance have not been made public.²

Cameroon

Trial against security forces continues

The trial against three members of the Cameroonian security forces opened at the military court in Yaoundé in December 2020. The trial was beset by repeated delays and irregularities. The trial is now set to continue in February 2024 and offers a rare opportunity to obtain justice for the victims and end the impunity for military abuses that has prevailed in Cameroon to date.

The Ngarbuh killings were one of the Cameroonian security forces' worst atrocities since the crisis in the country's Anglophone regions began in late 2016. Cameroonian security forces are accused of killing 21 civilians in the village of Ngarbuh, located in the Anglophone North-West region, on 14.02.20 (cf. BN of 17.02.20). The Cameroonian government had long denied any involvement of state security forces. It was only when international pressure mounted that President Paul Biya had a commission of inquiry set up on 01.03.20.³

Central African Republic

Number of child soldiers remains high

On 12.02.24, to mark the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers (also known as Red Hand Day), the Minister for Family and Gender, Marthe Kirima, published a statement, which was picked up by a press agency, saying that around 10,000 children were still fighting alongside armed groups. 15,000 children had been able to escape from them in the past. Many of them were traumatised and had difficulties returning to a normal life. As the agency report goes on to explain, the UN offers vocational training programmes to support reintegration.

In 2022, the UN was able to verify the recruitment of 111 boys and 23 girls between the ages of seven and 17 by armed groups, but also by state security forces, according to a report published by the UN Secretary-General on 05.06.23. A total of 88 children were recruited by rebel groups belonging to the Coalition of Patriots for Change (Coalition des patriotes pour le changement (CPC)) and by two factions of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Of these, 40 boys served in combat missions. Forty-six children were recruited by security forces and used for cooking, carrying, fetching water and at checkpoints. According to Minister for Family and Gender Kirima, armed groups used the children not only in combat but also for espionage, messenger and cookery services or sexually enslaved them.⁴

Colombia

Escalation of violence in Tuluá after local gang chief arrested

On 12.02.2014, several police units were deployed to Tuluá in the Valle del Cauca department in order to restore public order there. This was preceded by retaliatory acts in the form of (attempted) homicides and several incidents of vehicles being set ablaze following the arrest of a leader of the La Inmaculada local gang, Mauricio Marín alias Nacho. The offences are said to have been ordered from a local prison by the top boss and brother of the arrested man, Andrés Felipe Marín, alias Pipe. Pipe was then transferred to a high-security prison. Public prosecutors, judges and journalists have also repeatedly received threats from La Inmaculada, as has the newly elected mayor. The latter is currently under the protection of the National Protection Unit UNP.⁵

State of emergency imposed in prisons after several security incidents

A state of emergency was declared in the prison system on 12.02.24 after several attacks were carried out against guards of the prison authorities (Instituto Nacional Penitenciario y Carcelario, Inpec). Most recently, a guard was killed near a prison in Cartagena on 10.02.24, and on the same day an attack was carried out at the prison in Jamundí (Valle del Cauca) that left several people injured. Furthermore, a guard in Cúcuta has already been killed this year and attacks on guards have been recorded in Medellín and Huila, among other places. Several officials have also received threats, including the director of Inpec. According to a spokesperson for the employees' union UTP, more than 80 Inpec officers have been killed in the past five years. Justice Minister Nestor Osuna believes that the recent attacks were triggered by retaliatory measures carried out by armed groups for the previous successes state security measures have had against their leaders. In 2023, the government of President Gustavo Petro announced the so-called Dominó plan to combat extortion in prisons and strengthen control, which includes the transfer of leaders to high-security prisons. The current state of emergency allows measures to be taken such as restricting visiting and communication rights for certain prisoners and increasing police and military presence around the country's prisons.⁶

Four killed in attack on the military in Antioquia

According to army sources, four military personnel were killed and seven others were injured in an attack carried out by the paramilitary group Clan del Golfo in the department of Antioquia on 16.02.2014.⁷

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Tear gas used at rallies against Western organisations

On 12.02.24, citizens gathered for a rally in the embassy district of Gombe in the capital Kinshasa and other cities throughout the country to protest against the presence of Western organisations in the country and against Western governments in general. According to media reports, the protesters set fire to several cars and Belgian flags as they positioned themselves in front of several embassies, including the French, US and British embassies. Dozens of police officers were deployed in the neighbourhood, and tear gas was also used to disperse the protestors in order to protect the embassies.

The head of the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has already reported attacks against mission staff and vehicles in Kinshasa on 10.02.24.

The unstable situation in the east of the country continues to worsen due to further fighting and the increasingly critical humanitarian situation. In view of this, the protesters are accusing Western diplomats of becoming accomplices of Rwanda. They say Rwanda, in turn, is guilty of supporting the rebel group Mouvement 23-Mars (M23), which is destabilising the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In eastern Congo, the Congolese army is fighting alongside Burundian soldiers and armed forces from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) against the M23 rebel group. Several million people from the hardest hit province of North Kivu have been displaced. The capacities of the reception centres and the ability to supply food and medicine are increasingly reaching their limits. International organisations are concerned about the humanitarian situation.⁸

Egypt

Three journalists released from pre-trial detention

According to media reports, the authorities released 32 people from pre-trial detention on 07.02.24. According to the head of the Egyptian Syndicate of Journalists, the released prisoners included three female journalists who worked for state-run outlets and who had been detained without trial since 2022. The three women were known for being outspoken critics of the government and the alleged corruption and were charged by the public prosecutor's office with spreading fake news and promoting terrorist acts on social media. However, it remains unclear whether the charges against them have been dropped or they will still face trial.⁹

Opposition politician and his supporters sentenced to prison

On 06.02.2024, a Cairo court sentenced opposition politician Ahmed Tantawy, along with his campaign advisor and 21 of his detained supporters, to one year in prison, according to media reports. They are accused of alleged offences in connection with Tantawy's candidacy in the 2023 presidential election campaign. The court also barred Tantawy from running for national elections for five years. Tantawy and his campaign advisor were released on bail pending appeal. In October 2023, the opposition politician withdrew his candidacy for the presidential elections to be held in December 2023 due to a lack of support. According to the national electoral authority, Tantawy's claims that the authorities had prevented his campaign from collecting the number of voters' endorsements required to officially file his candidacy and had made it difficult to hold his campaign events were unfounded (cf. BN of 09.10.23 and 16.10.23).¹⁰

El Salvador

Death of former security advisor in custody

Official sources issued a statement on 08.02.24, claiming the former security advisor to the Bukele government, Alejandro Muyschondt, who was being held in custody, had died the previous day after being transferred to a hospital. The preliminary cause of death according to the Institute of Forensic Medicine was pulmonary oedema, but the family's lawyer says the body had several unexplained injuries. He also reported further irregularities in relation to the case. Muyschondt had been accused of being a double agent by President Nayib Bukele and was arrested in August 2023 in connection with the leaking of classified information and documents to former President

Mauricio Funes and the media regarding allegations of corruption against a member of the Nuevas Ideas ruling party.¹¹

Ethiopia

NGO reports 45 civilians killed in Amhara

On 13.02.24, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) confirmed eyewitness reports that state security forces had killed at least 45 people in the town of Merawi (Gojjam zone) in the regional state of Amhara at the end of January 2024 because they were suspected of supporting the Amharic Fano militia. Other sources claim up to 80 people were killed. Both the US and the EU are calling for an independent inquiry. In the days before, fierce fighting had broken out between the Ethiopian army (ENDF) and Fano militiamen. When the militia retreated, the soldiers reportedly went from house to house, indiscriminately executing residents. The Ethiopian government has denied the allegations. A government spokesperson explained that soldiers had come under fire while they were conducting house searches and had acted in "self-defence". The authorities have shut down the internet in Amhara and restricted access for journalists, making it impossible to independently verify the events.

Since June 2023, armed clashes have erupted repeatedly between the conflicting parties in Amhara (cf. BN of 26.06.23). In August 2023, the government declared a state of emergency in the region (cf. BN of 07.08.23), which was extended again in January. Fano, together with the regional forces of Amhara and the Eritrean military, were allies of the Ethiopian army in the conflict in the neighbouring regional state of Tigray, which ended when an agreement was concluded in November 2022 (cf. BN of 07.11.22). This provided, among other things, for the demobilisation of Fano (cf. BN of 15.11.22), but they have refused to disarm. Since then, the conflict has escalated. While the ENDF controls the cities, Fano is finding increasing support in rural regions.¹²

Haiti

Security situation: violent protests, rising fatality figures, court judgement on security mission

The security situation in Haiti remains extremely tense and has recently deteriorated yet again. While the number of people killed in connection with ongoing gang fights doubled between 2022 and 2023 and the number of kidnappings increased almost two-fold, more than 800 civilians were affected by gang violence in the form of homicides, injuries or kidnappings in January 2024 alone. The violence in connection with gang warfare to gain control over areas of influence also spread to some rural areas outside Port-au-Prince last year. A UN report highlighted this issue in particular with regard to the Artibonite Department, the negative impact gang warfare was having on agriculture in the region as well as the problems that ensued for the population's access to food supplies. The UN also repeatedly warned of forced displacement, the use of gender-based violence as a weapon by various gangs and almost complete impunity for such offences.

In addition, a growing number of violent protests took place around 07.02.24 involving supporters of the former rebel leader Guy Philippe against the incumbent Prime Minister Ariel Henry. Henry had signed a non-binding agreement in December 2022 that he would step down by 07.02.24 to hold elections but has now refused to do so due to the volatile security situation. On 07.02.24, five armed members of the environmental agency BSAP were killed in a shootout with state security forces during demonstrations. The BSAP, whose members are reported to have helped lead the current protests, is said to have increasingly developed into a paramilitary unit in recent years. On 12.02.24, a report was published by the research group Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime in Geneva, which addresses the considerable revenue gangs are generating from criminal activities and how this is strengthening their foothold. The main sources of income are ransoms obtained from kidnappings, extortion of protection money and movement duties collected at checkpoints. The research group also has evidence of organ trafficking, as the discovery of corpses with missing organs has been repeatedly reported in the Cité Soleil and Canaan neighbourhoods, for example.

On 15.02.24, the WFP also warned that food distribution had been significantly reduced or even paused due to escalating gang violence in some areas; the organisation Doctors Without Borders has also been forced to restrict or suspend numerous activities due to gang violence.

The planned deployment of a multinational security mission led by Kenya, which has been authorised by the UN Security Council, remains unclear. Kenya's Supreme Court recently prohibited the deployment of a corresponding police unit at the end of January 2024, which the government said it would appeal.¹³

India

Farmer protests resume

Since 13.02.24, the farmers' protests that began in 2020/21 have continued following an interruption of several months. Demanding guaranteed minimum prices for agricultural produce, the protests continue to oppose the liberalisation of the agricultural sector. Farmers from various states, including Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, gathered to participate in protest marches to the capital territory of Delhi. The preceding negotiations between farmers and the government held on 12.02.24 were unsuccessful. Following the protests that took place in 2021, the Indian government initially withdrew three controversial laws related to the liberalisation of the agricultural sector.

In a bid to prevent the protesters from entering the capital's territory, the police sealed the borders, used tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons, set up roadblocks and imposed a ban on assemblies. More than 200 farmers' organisations joined the rally. The situation was particularly tense along the so-called Shambu border between Haryana and Punjab. Internet services were suspended in seven districts of Haryana. The protests attracted both national and international attention and highlighted the challenges facing Indian agriculture.¹⁴

Iran

One-year prison sentence confirmed for student activist

According to media reports, the one-year prison sentence for a student and former chairperson of a child protection organisation has been confirmed by the Tehran Provincial Court of Appeal. This was announced by her husband on social media. The woman was initially arrested during protests in October 2022 and was held in prison in Qarchak (near Tehran) until April 2023. She was temporarily detained again in September 2023 and released on bail in October 2023 pending the outcome of her trial.¹⁵

Religious minorities: prison sentences imposed on Baha'i

According to media reports issued on 14.02.24, a member of the Baha'i faith was arrested by security forces in Shiraz (Fars province) on 13.02.24 and taken to the local Adel-Abad prison. The reports stated that the woman had to serve a five-year prison sentence because she had been found guilty of deviant educational and propaganda activities. She was reportedly also given a ten-year deprivation of social rights and a two-year travel ban. The woman had already been temporarily detained in 2021.

It was also reported that a member of the Baha'i faith who was arrested in July 2023 has been sentenced to a total of nine years in prison. The man was accused of spreading propaganda against the system, unauthorised assembly and collusion. Of the total sentence imposed, five years are enforceable.¹⁶

Well-known women's rights activist summoned to begin prison sentence

According to media reports issued on 16.02.24, women's rights activist Sepideh Rashno has been summoned to begin serving her prison sentence of three years and eleven months. The 28-year-old is due to start serving her sentence in Tehran's Evin prison shortly.

The vocal critic of the country's compulsory head scarf law, who hit the headlines in 2022, had already been sentenced to four months' imprisonment in December 2023 (cf. BN of 11.12.23). The total sentence she now faces includes this and other penalties imposed for a public altercation between the activist and a supporter of the headscarf obligation on a Tehran bus in 2022.¹⁷

Iraq

Transgender blogger murdered

According to media reports, the Iraqi blogger known as "Simsim" was killed when he was stabbed in the street by unidentified assailants on 14.02.24. The incident took place near the centre of the city of Diwaniya in the Diwaniya province. "Simsim", whose real name is not publicly known, is described as a blogger in the field of LGBTIQ rights. Physical assaults and even murder of LGBTIQ people are widespread in Iraq. As recently as September 2023, Noor Alsaffar, known by the alias "Noor BM", was shot dead by unknown individuals in Baghdad. Alsaffar was active on several social media platforms where she posted pictures and videos of herself wearing make-up, long hair and women's clothes.¹⁸

Lebanon

Situation in southern Lebanon and northern Israel

Hezbollah and the Israeli army continue to trade fire on a regular basis. Due to the large number of incidents taking place, only events that show new trends or that affect civilians will be summarized.

The highest number of civilian casualties to date was recorded on 14.02.24. A total of 10 civilians were reportedly killed in an airstrike in Nabatieh (in which a Hezbollah commander and two other fighters were also killed) and in another airstrike carried out in Sawaneh. This marks a significant increase in the number of civilian casualties. In the days that followed, mutual shelling intensified. In the meantime, 268 fatalities have been reported on the Lebanese side, including 40 civilians, and 10 soldiers and six civilians have been killed on the Israeli side.¹⁹

Libya

Internal Security Agency violating human rights, AI says

In a report published on 14.02.24, the human rights organisation Amnesty International (AI) accused the Tripoli-based Internal Security Agency (ISA) of violating the rights of numerous men, women and children through enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention and torture in 2023. In May 2023, the General Authority of Endowments and Islamic Affairs signed a decree establishing a programme to protect Islamic virtues and values and to combat what it called religious, intellectual and moral deviations. According to AI, against the backdrop of this decree, the ISA has intensified violations of freedom of expression and freedom of belief and has committed the above-mentioned human rights violations against people who are opposed to the sometimes very conservative Islamic beliefs prevailing in the General Authority of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. Among other things, the detainees were allegedly accused of apostasy, illicit sexual intercourse and promoting views aimed at overthrowing the political, social or economic order of the state. The ISA rejected the information published in AI's report as false and accused the human rights organisation of attempting to divide Libyan society.²⁰

Mali

Road blockades in northern Mali now lifted

After the main roads from the Algerian border to the cities of Timbuktu and Gao in northern Mali were blocked by Tuareg rebels in December 2023, the coalition of armed groups known as the Permanent Strategic Framework (CSP) announced on 10.02.24 that the roads were now free again. Timbuktu had already been sealed off last year by the terrorist group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). This led to price increases and food shortages (cf. BN of 16.10.23). Around half of all shops are currently said to be closed.

Since December 2023, fighting has increased between Malian government troops and Tuareg rebels in northern Mali. Mercenaries from the Wagner Group are also said to be fighting on the side of the government troops. The conflict in northern Mali flared up again in August 2023 after the ruling military junta no longer recognised an autonomy agreement for Mali's north agreed in 2015, prompting the Tuareg rebels to rearm (cf. BN of 20.11.23).²¹

Nicaragua

Assassination attempt on Nicaraguan in exile in Costa Rica

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), five attacks on Nicaraguan opposition members in exile were recorded in Costa Rica between January 2018 and 2024, the most recent one on 10.01.2024. This was the second attempt on the life of the well-known dissident Joao Maldonado since 2021, who was attacked by unknown individuals in San José. He and his partner were hospitalised after suffering multiple gunshot wounds. According to media reports, Maldonado was granted police protection after the first attack. He is said to have been living in a safe house and was planning to move to the USA because, according to those close to him, he had received death threats from pro-government Nicaraguan organisations. The UNHCR, among others, has expressed its concern about this attack on persons fleeing their country and called on the national authorities to conduct a comprehensive inquiry into the case.²²

Nigeria

Zamfara State: deaths and abductions

Armed gunmen killed more than 10 people, including two police officers, and abducted at least 40 others in two attacks carried out on villages in Kaura Namoda and Zurmi Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the north-western state of Zamfara on 11.02.24 and 13.02.24. According to media reports, the majority of those abducted were women and children. On 15.02.24, terrorists killed seven persons and abducted 20 others in a community in Birnin Magaji LGA. Kidnappings and deadly attacks on communities have occurred in Kaura Namoda LGA in the past (cf. BN of 22.01.24).²³

Katsina State: deadly attack

Actors described as terrorists killed at least nine people in an attack on a dual carriageway between the towns of Jibia and Batsari in Katsina State on 11.02.24. According to media reports, those killed were local traders who were returning to their community by car from the weekly market in Jibia. Deadly attacks by armed groups have already occurred in Katsina State in the past (cf. BN of 30.10.23, 13.11.23 and 15.01.24). The Nigerian government has labelled violent actors in the region as terrorists since the beginning of 2022 (cf. BN of 10.01.22).²⁴

Borno State: suspected Boko Haram members released

On 01.02.24, the government of Borno state released around 500 detainees from the Nigerian army's Giwa Barracks detention facility in the state capital Maiduguri. According to media reports, those released were suspected Boko Haram members. According to the Borno State Commissioner for Women's Affairs, several women had claimed that innocent people were being held at the Giwa barracks. All those released were reportedly handed over to the Borno State Government.²⁵

Pakistan

Talks between PML-N and PPP to form government; resignation due to election rigging

Following the nationwide elections held on 08.02.24, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) have agreed to form a coalition government. Shehbaz Sharif, the PML-N president, will be the sole candidate for the office of prime minister. At a press conference held last week, it was confirmed that Nawaz Sharif's younger brother, Shehbaz Sharif, who previously held the office of prime minister for 16 months between 2022 and 2023, will take over again. Asif Ali Zardari, co-chairman of the PPP, will be nominated for the office of president. At the same time, the PPP has announced that it will not take up any ministries in the coalition government. These will mainly be filled by members of the PML-N and smaller coalition parties. Zardari's son, Bilawal Bhutto, co-chairman of the PPP, wants to avoid too close an involvement of his party in the coalition government in view of the continuing broad popular support for former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, which formally won the most seats with independent candidates (cf. BN of 12.02.24).

On 17.02.24, a senior official in Rawalpindi, Liaquat Ali Chatha, admitted that the election results had been manipulated and resigned from office. According to his statement, the Chief Election Commissioner and a judge of

the Supreme Court were also involved in rigging the elections. He said that he himself had falsified the results of independent candidates who would otherwise have been ahead by 70,000 to 80,000 votes.²⁶

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

Gaza Strip: current developments; humanitarian situation

According to media reports, the Israeli military stormed the Nasser Hospital in the city of Khan Younis on 15.02.24 after a siege lasting almost a week. According to the military, the troops were searching for more hostages, who are said to have been held there, or their bodies. One day before it was stormed, the military asked those who had fled to the hospital to leave. One person who was there for treatment was killed in a night-time airstrike and six others were wounded. The Hamas-run Ministry of Health also stated that five patients had died from lack of oxygen after a power cut disabled the ventilators. The Israeli military announced that it had detained dozens of fighters as part of the operation, including three who were allegedly involved in the attacks carried out on 07.10.23. In addition, grenades and mortar shells that had allegedly been fired from the hospital site about a month ago were found. According to the local Ministry of Health, Nasser Hospital, the second largest hospital in the Gaza Strip, had been forced to cease its operations due to a lack of staff, resources and equipment.

According to the Hamas Ministry of Health, a total of more than 28,985 people have been killed in the Gaza Strip. The ministry does not differentiate between civilians and combatants. Israel reported that it had killed at least 12,000 Hamas fighters. According to a high-ranking Hamas official in Qatar, however, around 6,000 fighters have been killed. The Israeli military announced that it had destroyed 18 out of 24 Hamas battalions, while some of the remaining ones were said to be in the city of Rafah. The statements of the two parties to the conflict cannot be independently verified.

More than 85% of the 2.3 million inhabitants of the Gaza Strip are currently displaced from their homes, and the majority of the refugees are currently living in precarious humanitarian conditions in Rafah.²⁷

West Bank: increase in settlers; deteriorating economic situation; armed clashes

According to a report published by an Israeli pro-settler group called WestBankJewishPopulationStats.com, the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) increased by a total of 3% in 2023 compared to the previous year, to 517,407 people. The report said that in the last five years, there had been an overall increase of 15%. Israeli settlements in the areas of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip that have been under Israeli control since 1967 are considered to be illegal by the majority of the international community.

The WFP warns of the deteriorating economic situation in the West Bank. Since the beginning of the war in Gaza, the economy in the West Bank is reported to have shrunk by a fifth due to increased security measures by Israel (including further restrictions on freedom of movement and freezing of work permits for Palestinians in Israel). According to the WFP, the number of people affected by food insecurity has risen from 350,000 to 600,000.

The situation generally remains tense and there are repeated escalations between armed militias and the Israeli military. According to the Palestinian health authorities run by the Palestinian autonomous authorities, more than 395 people have been killed by Israeli military personnel in the West Bank since 07.10.23, most of them during armed clashes with the military.

The Israeli human rights organisation Yesh Din says that at least nine Palestinians were killed by settlers in the West Bank during the first month and a half of the war in the Gaza Strip.²⁸

Israel: two Israelis killed by assailant

According to media reports, an assailant shot and killed two Israelis at a bus stop in southern Israel on 16.02.24. Four other people were wounded before the assailant was killed with a firearm by an (off duty) army reservist. The assailant was reportedly a Palestinian from East Jerusalem.²⁹

Russian Federation

Opposition activist Alexei Navalny dies in custody

The best-known opposition figure and regime critic Alexei Navalny is dead. The imprisoned opposition politician died in a penal colony in the Russian polar region on 16.02.24. According to the official statement released by the

prison service, the 47-year-old "felt unwell" after a walk in the prison and suddenly collapsed. The statement said that medical staff were called but were unable to resuscitate Navalny. The cause of death was currently being investigated.

Alexei Navalny had been fighting against the authoritarian political regime and the prevailing corruption in the country since 2011. Numerous support groups had formed throughout the country. Navalny and his supporters and followers were increasingly targeted by the state, and arrests were regularly made. On 20.08.20, a poison attack was carried out on Navalny, presumably by the Russian domestic intelligence service FSB, which failed. He subsequently received medical treatment in Germany and returned to Russia in January 2021, even though he knew that he was probably facing many years in prison and death. He regularly faced charges for fabricated or manipulated offences and was sentenced to a total of 19 years in prison. Navalny's already fragile health was systematically ruined during his three years in prison after January 2021, and he was denied adequate medical assistance. The detention conditions in the prison camp resembled ongoing torture, and consequently Navalny was physically weakened. Only a few weeks ago, Navalny had to leave his previous prison camp, situated around 800 km from Moscow, and was transferred to the "Polar Wolf" penal colony in the Arctic Circle, where conditions were even harsher due to the extreme cold.³⁰

More than 300 people arrested during protests

According to human rights activists in Russia, at least 359 people were detained at rallies held in memory of Navalny on the weekend of 17.02.24 and 18.02.24. It has been the largest wave of arrests in Russia since September 2022 when more than 1,300 people were arrested during demonstrations against the partial mobilisation for the Ukraine war. A number of people were detained in St. Petersburg and Moscow in particular, according to the online civil rights platform OVD-Info. Arrests were made in a total of 32 Russian cities. According to media reports, fresh flowers continued to be laid, candles lit and pictures erected in memory of Navalny in many parts of Russia despite removal operations and arrests.³¹

Senegal

Election postponement declared unconstitutional; protests and human rights situation, releases

On 15.02.24, the Constitutional Council declared the controversial postponement of the presidential election from 25.02.24 to 15.12.24 to be incompatible with the constitution and null and void (cf. BN of 05.02.24 and 12.02.24). Opposition members, among others, had filed a lawsuit. What happens next remains to be seen. The Constitutional Council has not commented on a new election date. However, it has urged the authorities to organise the presidential election as soon as possible. In a statement issued on 16.02.24, President Macky Sall announced that he would respect the decision, implement it in full and hold the necessary consultations without delay in order to hold the presidential election as soon as possible. Some opposition leaders demanded an election date before 02.04.24, when Sall's second term of office is due to end.

Since the election was postponed, the country has been rocked by a new wave of protests and violence. Amnesty International (AI) and HRW are unanimous in their reports of police violence, repression and human rights violations. At least three people have reportedly been killed, several dozen injured and hundreds arrested in the recent protests (cf. BN of 12.02.24). AI and HRW have both demanded accountability for those responsible and an end to the repression. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) also reported that journalists had been attacked, harassed and some even arrested while carrying out their work during past protests. CPJ documented 25 such cases. On 13.02.24, the authorities banned another protest march against the election postponement for reasons of order. Aar Sunu Élection (ASE), a new association of around 40 civil, religious and professional groups, had called for the march in Dakar, which had been pre-announced. The authorities also blocked mobile internet access on 13.02.24 (cf. BN of 12.02.24). The Ministry of Communications justified this with the spread of hateful and subversive messages, which had recently provoked violent protests resulting in deaths and enormous damage to property. While two further demonstrations by civil society forces and citizens against the election postponement were banned by the authorities and dispersed with tear gas in Dakar on 16.02.24, people were able to demonstrate again legally, peacefully and without disruption for the first time in a good while on 15.02.24 with the permission of the authorities. Thousands of people responded to ASE's call and demonstrated in Dakar against the postponement of the election and in favour of holding the election as soon as possible. Several demonstrators also demanded the

release of the leading opposition leader Ousmane Sonko, who is in custody. Security forces were heavily present at the demonstration, but unlike at previous demonstrations, they did not wear protective clothing. After weeks of political crisis, the release of several members of the opposition and critical civil society was seen as a sign of easing tensions. Hours before the Constitutional Council's decision, the first detainees were released, including Aliou Sané, the leader of the protest movement Y'en a marre and deputy coordinator of the heterogeneous opposition movement Mouvement des forces vives du Sénégal, who had again been taken into custody a few months ago (cf. BN of 16.10.23). Those released reportedly also included several members of Sonko's banned party African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity (Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité (PASTEF)) and a mayor of a municipality in the Dakar city region. An international news agency recently reported, citing the Ministry of Justice, that more than 130 members of the opposition and civil society had been released from prison since 15.02.24 and that numerous further releases are planned. More than 300 prisoners had already been released on 17.02.24. The media also mentioned the start of consultations on the possible release of Sonko.³²

Sudan

General and security situation

Parts of the telecommunications and internet services that have been completely or partially cut off in many regions of the country since the beginning of February 2024 have been restored (cf. BN of 12.02.24). The two network operators El Sudani and Sudatel announced on 12.02.24 that their networks were available again in all cities of Sudan without exception. According to further reports, however, only four of the 18 states are back up and running. Networks of other service providers reportedly remain disconnected.

According to local resistance committees, there has been an increase in violent attacks and looting in villages around the regional capital of Wad Madani (Gezira state) since the blackout. The paramilitary group Rapid Support Forces (RSF) is said to be responsible. The committees add that due to insufficient information from the affected villages, the exact number of victims of the attacks is currently unknown.

According to reports from the city of Omdurman, units of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) have managed to advance into the city for the first time since the fighting began in April 2023. According to the report, SAF units stationed in the north of the city managed to break through the siege of a barracks of the Corps of Engineers in the south of the city, which had been in place since the start of the fighting. The SAF had already been able to take control of isolated areas of the city in the previous week. The advances in Omdurman were preceded by warnings and requests to the civilian population to leave the city. However, some civilians who remained were reportedly arrested and abused by army soldiers.³³

Syria

UN report: refugees at risk of human rights violations upon return

According to a report published by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on 13.02.24, Many Syrians who had fled the war face gross human rights violations and abuses upon their return to Syria. The report states that these include arbitrary detention, torture, ill-treatment, sexual and gender-based violence, enforced disappearance, abduction and forced property confiscation. It says that while all Syrians are affected by these human rights violations, returnees appear to be particularly vulnerable.

The report states that all actors present in Syria, including troops of the government in Damascus, de facto authorities and other armed groups, are involved in the perpetration of these violations. The report generally concludes that the overall conditions in Syria do not permit safe, dignified and sustainable returns of Syrian refugees.³⁴

Northwest: extension of cross-border aid

On 12.02.24, the Syrian government in Damascus approved the extension of cross-border UN aid from Türkiye through the two border crossings Bab al-Salam and al-Ra'i. The use of the two border crossings was originally authorised after the devastating earthquakes in Türkiye and northwest Syria in February 2023 and has now been

extended for the fourth time. Aid deliveries are now authorised for a further three months, until 13.05.24. The extension followed just a few weeks after renewed authorisation to import humanitarian aid via the Bab al-Hawa border crossing (cf. BN of 15.01.24).³⁵

Nine killed in ISIS attack

According to reports released by the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), nine military personnel were killed in an attack on a Syrian army base carried out on 12.02.24. The attack in al-Sukhna, in the Homs governorate, is said to have wounded three others. ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attack. Since ISIS was pushed back in 2019, ISIS followers have sought refuge in the desert regions of Syria along the border with Iraq, from where they are still militarily active.³⁶

Southern Syria: five killed in attempt to smuggle drugs into Jordan

According to the Jordanian army, five people were killed on 18.02.24 while attempting to smuggle drugs from Syria into neighbouring Jordan. Four other people were reportedly wounded and large quantities of contraband were seized.³⁷

Togo

Date for parliamentary and regional elections announced

On 08.02.24, the government announced the date for the upcoming parliamentary and regional elections. These are to take place on 13.04.2024. As the mandate of the MPs had already expired at the end of 2023, some parties are clearly relieved at the announcement of a date. However, a few party representatives have also expressed concern about the short preparation period for the election campaign and the increase in the amount of money to be paid by candidates who wish to stand for election. They say it is unclear how smaller parties are supposed to raise the sum of FCFA 500,000 (approximately EUR 760, as of 19.02.24). Candidacy applications must be submitted 45 days before the election.³⁸

Türkiye

Sentencing of journalists

On 14.02.24, the 26th Istanbul Court of Serious Crimes sentenced journalists Ahmet Altan, Nazlı Ilıcak and Fevzi Yazıcı to prison for "assisting a terrorist organisation without being a member". The court found the three individuals guilty over their alleged ties to the exiled preacher Fethullah Gülen, whom the government holds responsible for the failed military coup in 2016. The court sentenced Altan to six years and three and a half months, Ilıcak to five years and three months and Yazıcı to two years and one month in prison. The three journalists have been enmeshed in multiple appeals and retrials since they were arrested in 2016 and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2018. Ilıcak was released from prison in 2019, Altan in 2021 and Yazıcı in March 2023. Ilıcak was imprisoned from 04.12.23 to 28.01.24 after losing an appeal relating to the charge of slander in connection with a 2016 column.³⁹

Ukraine

Civilian casualties

Three people, including a pregnant woman and a child, were killed and 12 people were injured in a Russian missile attack on the town of Selydove near Donetsk on 13.02.24, according to the local council. In addition to nine residential buildings, a hospital was reportedly also hit.

Reports stated that on the morning of 15.02.24, there were numerous explosions across the country as a result of large-scale Russian missile attacks. Local authorities said there were several casualties in Lviv and Zaporizhzhia. According to Oleh Synyehubov, governor of the Kharkiv region, fatalities in the municipalities of Chuhuiv and Veliky Burluk numbered one and five, respectively.⁴⁰

Development of the war

According to Ukrainian military sources, the Russian landing ship "Caesar Kunikov" was sunk by a drone attack not far from the city of Alupka on the southern coast of the Crimean peninsula on the night of 13.02.24.

On 17.02.24, the new Ukrainian commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky announced the withdrawal of all Ukrainian troops from the city of Avdiivka, which has been heavily contested since the beginning of October 2023. The decision is said to have been made due to the threat of encirclement of the units fighting there. Syrsky emphasised that the Russian army currently has a ten-to-one shell advantage. On 15.02.24, a Ukrainian military spokesperson had already announced that the eastern part of the embattled city of Avdiivka was to be surrendered by moving troops in order to establish "more favourable positions" in other combat areas. According to Ukrainian frontline soldiers, there were chaotic scenes during the dangerous retreat, with some units being forced to leave their own wounded behind. The Ukrainian government announced that it would launch an investigation into Russian war crimes following reports that captured Ukrainian soldiers had been shot by Russian troops. The capture of Avdiivka represents the biggest change to the front line since the fall of the town of Bakhmut in May 2023, which is expected to give the Russian army a major advantage in the Donetsk region due to the dominating high ground.

According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Russia has lost over 3,000 tanks in Ukraine since the start of the war, which is the equivalent of its entire active pre-war inventory. However, it says the Russian army has enough vehicles in its inventory to replace these losses for years, even if these replacements are of a lower quality. It adds that the equally heavy losses on the Ukrainian side have been compensated for by increases in Western military aid with simultaneous improvements in quality.⁴¹

Ukrainian economy

According to a joint report released by the Ukrainian government, the World Bank and the UN, direct damage totalling around EUR 142 billion has been caused since the start of the war. The housing sector has been hit the hardest, at 37%. According to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW), war damage to material assets such as machinery, buildings and infrastructure is expected to total EUR 900 billion by 2026. The IfW also forecasts a GDP loss of EUR 110 billion in Ukraine and rising inflation over this period.⁴²

Venezuela

Detained relatives of Rocío San Miguel conditionally released, ex-partner remains in custody

Following the arrest of the president of the NGO Control Ciudadano and human rights defender, Rocío San Miguel (cf. BN of 12.02.24), five relatives were also arrested on 10.02.24, according to her lawyer. Their whereabouts were also initially given as unknown on 12.02.24. Four of those arrested, namely San Miguel's daughter and her father as well as two of San Miguel's brothers, were conditionally released on 13.02.24. Her ex-partner Alejandro José Gonzáles De Canales Plaza, however, remains in custody. The former military officer is accused, among other things, of disclosing security-related political and military secrets. Numerous international institutions and various governments continue to demand the release of San Miguel, who also remains in custody on charges of treason, terrorism and conspiracy.⁴³

Closure of the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, criticism by Special Rapporteur

In a statement issued on 15.02.24, the Venezuelan government ordered the closure of the technical office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Caracas and the expulsion of the 13 staff members within 72 hours. Foreign Minister Yvan Gil justified this step with a deviation from the agreed mandate of the OHCHR and colonialist interference in Venezuela's sovereignty. Prior to this decision, the OHCHR had criticised San Miguel's arrest. In addition, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri, said in a speech given on 14.02.24, which was heavily criticised in state media, that he had received numerous indications that the state food programme in the form of the distribution of so-called CLAP food parcels was not tackling the causes of hunger in the country, that their distribution was politically influenced and that people critical of the government were sometimes denied the receipt of such parcels. He said that many people in the country still had to reduce or skip meals and were unable to afford food due to a lack of financial resources and continued high inflation (2023: below 200 %).⁴⁴

Yemen

Increased recruitment of child soldiers by Houthis

Since the outbreak of the Gaza war at the beginning of October 2023, the Houthis have recruited more fighters. According to their own sources, the Houthis recruited more than 70,000 new fighters between November 2023 and February 2024 alone. According to NGOs, this figure includes several thousand children.

The Houthis deliberately indoctrinate minors in schools and summer camps in order to recruit them as fighters. Since the Gaza war, high-ranking Houthi leaders have also been using Palestinian solidarity to attract new recruits. The recruitment of child soldiers is also widespread throughout Yemen, including in the ranks of the internationally recognised government.⁴⁵

Humanitarian situation

In a speech delivered to the UN Security Council on 14.02.24, a UN OCHA official outlined the impact the fighting in the Red Sea is having on the humanitarian situation. According to the report, the costs for cargo ships sailing to the destination ports of Hodeida (which is under the control of the Houthis) and Aden (which is under the control of the internationally recognised government) have risen enormously since November 2023. The WFP reported a price increase of 110%, other humanitarian aid organisations say prices have shot up by almost 318%. The current UN aid plan for Yemen has a funding gap of over 60%, making the increased transport costs particularly difficult. Currently, more than half the population of Yemen is dependent on humanitarian aid, and malnutrition and starvation are widespread.⁴⁶

Judge detained

On 30.01.24, it was revealed that Houthi law enforcement authorities arrested Abdulwahab Qatran, a judge, in the capital Sanaa on 02.01.24. Qatran is a public critic of the Houthis and has regularly written critical posts on social media. He had also refused to go to work for some time because of his position against Houthi policies. Officially, Qatran was arrested for producing and consuming alcohol, but his family and HRW consider these accusations to be a smokescreen and suspect his continued public criticism of the Houthis is the real reason for his arrest. Qatran most recently criticised the Houthis' attacks on ships in the Red Sea on the social network X on 31.12.23. Attacks against critics of the Houthis are frequent and have been on the rise since 2022 in particular. Those affected are mostly people with a certain social standing and influence, including teachers and imams.⁴⁷

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