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Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

11 February 2019

Egypt

Constitutional amendment to extend al-Sisi's rule

Egyptian voters are to vote in a referendum scheduled to take place in late summer 2019 in favour of a constitutional amendment that parliament intends to adopt in the weeks to come. The amendment will replace the maximum two four-year terms to two six-year terms. This new regulation will also apply to President Al-Sisi if he is re-elected at the end of his second four-year term.

Al-Sisi new chairperson of the African Union

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi was elected chairperson of the African Union at the summit of the African Union in Addis Abeba on 10 February 2019. He will have a one-year tenure. Al-Sisi's election brought to an end the one-year chairmanship of Rwanda's President Paul Kagame. Whereas Al-Sisi emphasised that he will focus on security and peace in Africa, Amnesty International warned that Al-Sisi's chairmanship might undermine the African Union's human rights mechanisms, adding that President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has demonstrated a shocking contempt for human rights and civil rights during his time in power.

Afghanistan

Suicide bombings and attacks

At least twelve Taliban insurgents were killed on 4 February 2019 during the operation initiated by the Afghan military to reopen the main road between Kandahar and Uruzghan. The Afghan armed forces succeeded in recapturing an eight-kilometre stretch of road occupied by the Taliban.

At least eleven police officers were killed in Baghlan province (north-eastern Afghanistan) and at least 28 police officers were killed by Taliban insurgents in Kunduz province (northern Afghanistan) on 5 February 2019. Six other police officers were killed on 7 February 2019 in Nimroz province (south-western Afghanistan) and a further eight were killed on 10 February 2019 in Helmand province (southern Afghanistan).

On 8 February 2019, operations against the Taliban were successful in the provinces of Khost (eastern Afghanistan), Kandahar (southern Afghanistan) and Kunduz (north-eastern Afghanistan). At least ten Taliban insurgents were killed in another military operation in Ghazni province (south-eastern Afghanistan) on 9 February 2019.

On 10 February 2019, at least seven ISIS fighters were killed in military operations in the provinces of Balkh (north-eastern Afghanistan), Nangarhar (eastern Afghanistan) and Helmand (southern Afghanistan). At least 20 Taliban insurgents were killed in the provinces of Kunar (eastern Afghanistan), Ghazni, Paktika (south-eastern Afghanistan) and Uruzgan (southern Afghanistan) during other military operations on 10 and 11 February 2019.

US Secretary of Defence arrives in Kabul for talks

On 11 February 2019, US Secretary of Defence Patrick M. Shanahan arrived in the capital Kabul for talks with the supreme commander of NATO and the US Armed Forces. Talks with the Afghan government are also planned. The main demand of the Taliban, which has so far refused to negotiate with the government in Kabul, is the withdrawal of international troops. According to the US Secretary of Defence, he has no

instructions from the White House to reduce the troop level in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad says he hopes a peace agreement can be reached with the Taliban before the presidential elections scheduled for mid-July 2019 are held.

China

Xinjiang: prisoners transported to other provinces

Citing local sources, news media claim that prisoners have been transported from re-education camps in Xinjiang to prisons in Gansu and Shaanxi provinces, among others. They say an unknown but larger number of detainees have been affected by the measure which was attributed to overcrowding at facilities in Xinjiang. The transports were carried out in secret. Around 3,000 Uyghurs were being held at a prison in the city of Tongchuan (Shaanxi province) alone. Transfer of prisoners to prisons in Heilongjiang province began back in October 2018.

Iraq

Security situation

At least two troops were killed and two others were wounded in a bomb explosion in the city of Kabisa, Anbar province on 9 February 2019. The attack was aimed at an armoured vehicle belonging to the armed forces.

On 8 February 2019, one policeman was killed and two others were injured in an attack carried out by ISIS fighters near the town of Qaradar in Dubiz district, Kirkuk province. On the same day, ISIS fighters killed three brothers in Salahaddin province who had been kidnapped a few days earlier.

According to Iraqi sources, a police officer was injured in a bomb attack on his vehicle near Mahmoudiya, Hawija district, Kirkuk province, on 5 February 2019.

Anti-ISIS operations

The Iraqi security forces and their allies repeatedly conduct operations against ISIS fighters and their quarters. According to Iraqi security forces, a senior ISIS leader was arrested on 9 February 2019 during an operation in Ramadi, Anbar province. At least seven ISIS fighters were killed in a US-led coalition air raid in Hawija district, Kirkuk province, on 9 February 2019. Eight ISIS fighters were killed and their base was burned in an operation carried out in the Siniah Desert, Salahddin Province on 6 February 2019. In the area al-Riyadh, Kirkuk province, the ISIS training officer and six other fighters were reportedly killed in Kirkuk province on 6 February 2019. One terrorist was killed, two others were arrested and small arms and ammunition were seized during a raid near Buhrez, Diyala Province, on 6 February 2019. Iraqi security forces reportedly killed five ISIS fighters and seized weapons and ammunition in the al-Multaqa sub-district, some 20 kilometres south-east of Kirkuk also on 6 February 2019.

Mass grave discovered

On 7 February 2019, security forces in Al-Baaj District, Niniveh province, found a mass grave containing 46 bodies of persons who had been killed by ISIS. The majority of them were reportedly police officers.

Iraqi writer shot dead

The Iraqi writer Alaa Mashzoub was shot dead by unknown attackers in his native city of Karbala on 2 February 2019. According to media reports, Mashzoub was open in his criticism of Shia militia, corruption and foreign intervention in Iraq's interior policy. No group has claimed responsibility for the assassination.

Iran

Amnesty for four prisoners

According to news agency ISNA, the leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has responded to a request by the head of the judicial system Ayatollah Sadegh Amoli Larijani who had proposed an amnesty or commuted prison sentences for certain categories of prisoners. He did not say

whether the amnesty will also apply to political prisoners. According to official figures, there are almost 250,000 prisoners in Iran. Larijani says that to mark the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution on 11 February 1979, approximately 50,000 prisoners will be released or will have their sentences commuted. In his reply to the Chief Justice's request, Ayatollah Khamenei noted that he welcomed the Chief Justice's proposal to grant amnesty to a large number of lawfully convicted and detained persons in Iranian prisons. "To commemorate the Islamic Revolution, it is truly fitting that the families of the prisoners should participate in the general joy of the Iranian nation," the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution said.

Decades of human rights violations documented in Iran

For the first time, Reporters Without Borders has unveiled decades of human rights violations with a file from the Iranian judiciary that was leaked by a whistleblower. The file handed over to the Reporters Without Borders contains approximately 1.7 million records of judicial procedures concerning people from all categories of Iranian society. According to the human rights organisation, at least 860 journalists were persecuted, arrested, tortured, imprisoned and in some cases executed in the Tehran region alone between 1979 and 2009. Reporters Without Borders will present its findings to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, "so that Iran can be held to account."

Cameroon

Anglophone crisis: around 70 persons killed during the boycott of National Youth Day

On 9 February 2019, the multimedia agency Voice of America reported that, according to government figures, at least six troops, 47 armed separatists and 16 civilians have been killed in fighting between security forces and armed separatist fighters since 5 February 2019 in the two Anglophone regions of Northwest and Southwest regions. The separatists reportedly claimed in social media that they killed more troops than the government had indicated. Armed separatists had asked the population to stay at home in the period from 5 February 2019 to 14 February 2019 in order to boycott the events making National Youth Day on 11 February 2019.

Pakistan

Dispute over plans to extend the tenure of military courts

The two largest opposition parties, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), oppose the plan of the government led by Prime Minister Imran Khan (Tehreek-e Insaf/PTI) to extend the tenure of military courts for two years. These were established in January 2015 in response to the terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar on 16 December 2014 as part of a National Action Plan to Combat Terrorism and were originally planned for a period of two years. In March 2017, the tenure of military courts had been extended for the first time by the then incumbent government under PML-N for a further two years.

Russian Federation

Jehovah's Witness sentenced to lengthy prison term

The district court in the city of Oryol sentenced the Danish national and Jehova's Witness, Dennis Christensen, to six years in prison on 6 February 2019. Dennis Christensen is accused of organising activities related to an "extremist organisation". The religious community of Jehova's Witnesses was banned in the Russian Federation in April 2017. Christensen had been in pre-trial detention since May 2017 before being sentenced. His lawyer announced that he would appeal the verdict.

Sierra Leone

State of emergency declared

President Julius Madaa Bio has declared a state of national emergency owing to the sharp rise in rape and sexual violence. The number of reported cases is said to have almost doubled in the past year. Thousands of cases have not been reported because of a culture of silence and indifference. President Bio announced that sexual offences against minors would in future be punished with life imprisonment, instead of the current maximum of 15 years.

Somalia

Attacks

Nine civilians were killed and several others were injured when a car bomb detonated outside the Hamar Weyne Market shopping centre in Mogadishu on 4 February 2019. Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for the attack which was aimed at a meeting of senior officials in a restaurant next to the shopping centre.

On 4 February 2019, an Al-Shabaab extremist murdered an Italian citizen in Boosaaso who worked for the Emirati company DP World in the administration of the port of Boosaaso. DP World had been awarded a 30-year contract for the management and development of the port of Boosaaso. Numerous inhabitants of the city protested against this.

Al-Shabaab members murdered two high-ranking officers of the Somali army near the village of Dhanaane (Lower Shabelle region) on 5 February 2019 using an improvised explosive device.

Hostilities

40 Al-Shabaab militants were reportedly killed in an operation carried out by the Somali army near the village of Farsooley (Lower Shabelle region) on 4 February 2019.

Six troops were killed in an attack carried out by Al-Shabaab on a Somali military base and Jubaland security forces in the Lower Juba region on 6 February 2019.

Ten extremists were reportedly killed on 7 February 2019 in a US-based ground and air offensive by the Somali military against Al-Shabaab near Barire (Lower Shabelle region).

United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) carried out several airstrikes. No announcement was made regarding the number of persons killed in an attack carried out on 5 February 2019 near Leego (Bay region). Eleven extremists were killed in an attack carried out near Gndershe (Lower Shabelle region) on 6 February 2019 and four extremists were killed in an attack carried out near Barire (Lower Shabelle region) on 7 February 2019. Eight Al-Shabaab militants were killed in another air raid near Kismayo (Lower Juba region) on 8 February 2019.

Syria

Offensive against last remaining ISIS stronghold

On 9 February 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led by the Kurdish militia YPG launched a military offensive against the last remaining bastion of the terrorist organisation ISIS in the province of Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria. They are being backed by fighter jets of the international anti-ISIS coalition led by the USA. The fighting is concentrated in the village of Baghuz (Baghuz al-Fawkani) directly on the Euphrates and near the Iraqi border. Many foreign ISIS followers and other fighters, who are regarded as particularly experienced, reportedly remain there. In the past few days and weeks, according to media reports, more than 20,000 civilians from the area have already been brought to safety. However, around 1,500 civilians and 500 ISIS fighters remain in the besieged village. According to the pro-opposition Syrian Human Rights Observatory, numerous families are now at risk due to the fighting for Baghuz. The ISIS fighters frequently use civilians as human shields.

According to the international anti-ISIS coalition, ISIS now controls less than one percent of its former territory in Syria and Iraq. A recent report published by the US Department of Defence says that ISIS remains active despite the loss of territory and could regain strength in six to twelve months. The number of ISIS fighters remaining on Syrian soil is estimated to be 2,000, many of whom have gone into hiding in the vast desert areas to carry out guerrilla attacks from there.

Turkey

Bounty for military servicemen who escaped

Shortly before the arrival of Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras in Ankara on 12 February 2019, according to media reports, Turkey offered a bounty for military servicemen who escaped to Greece. The Turkish Ministry of the Interior added the names of eight military servicemen to the so-called Red List of Most Wanted Terrorists. The bounty that was placed on each of the eight soldiers' heads is Turkish lira 4 million (approx. €673,000).

The governments in Athens and Ankara have been arguing for some time about how to deal with the military. After the failed coup in July 2016, the military servicemen left Greece by helicopter and applied for asylum there. Turkey is demanding their extradition, while Greece refers to the independence of the judiciary. The Greek courts rejected the extradition request with reference to the human rights situation in Turkey. Three soldiers have now been granted asylum. The Greek government has also announced that it will not extradite the remaining soldiers regardless of the final outcome of their trials.

Turkey's list of most wanted terrorists is divided into five color-coded categories, with red as the most wanted, followed by blue, green, orange and grey. According to the news agency Anadolu, 74 former soldiers accused of being involved the coup attempt have so far been added to the list.

Tunisia

State of emergency extended

The state of emergency which has been in effect since 2015 has been extended until 6 March 2019. The Tunisian government declared a state of emergency in November 2015 in the wake of a deadly attack by ISIS. The Tunisian parliament is currently discussing new state of emergency regulations.

Trials against terror supporters concluded

Seven defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment for indirect involvement in the terrorist attacks at a tourist hotel in Sousse and on the Bardo Museum in Tunis. Other defendants were sentenced to between six months and 16 years imprisonment. Proceedings were dropped against 27 defendants.

Koranic school closed

The authorities have closed a Koranic school in the small town of Regueb in the centre of Tunisia.

The director of the school has been arrested. At the school, 42 children between the ages of ten and 17 are reported to have been beaten, sexually abused, subjected to forced labour and deliberately indoctrinated with extremist interpretations of the Koran. Some graduates of the school are reported to have joined radical militias in Syria.

Venezuela

Aid deliveries

Since 5 February 2019, relief supplies provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have been arriving at pre-designated collection points outside Venezuela, in particular in Colombia. This aid mainly consists of food and medical supplies. While the Maduro government rejects the aid deliveries, self-proclaimed interim president Guaidó and other opposition leaders are trying to influence the military leadership to allow these relief supplies to enter the country and to organise their distribution. On 7 February 2019, under orders from Maduro, Venezuela's military blocked the Tienditas bridge (this bridge on the border between Colombia and Venezuela, which was only completed in 2016, has never been opened to traffic, however), which was to be used to allow relief supplies to cross into Venezuela from the collection point in Colombia. This has given rise on the Colombian side to protests from Venezuelans against this blockade. On 10 February 2019, several dozen Venezuelan physicians participated in a demonstration at the Tienditas border bridge in favour of allowing humanitarian aid to enter the country, saying that without these supplies patient lives were at risk. Supporters of Maduro reject the aid as a kind of Trojan horse, for the most

part denying that Venezuela is suffering from any humanitarian crisis and saying it is all propaganda for Guaidó.

Crisis in Venezuela's health system

Employees at the Luis Razetti hospital in the coastal city of Barcelona granted a team of journalists access to the hospital's wards so that they could document the effects of an outbreak of amoebiasis – a form of dysentery transmitted by contaminated food or water. As of 8 February 2019, 14 children suffering from malnutrition had already died as a result of the outbreak at that hospital alone. It is very difficult to make statements about the state of the health system as a whole, as the Maduro government has not published any figures for years.

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