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Group 22 - Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

21 March 2016

Afghanistan

Military confrontations

Last week, armed clashes took place, inter alia, in the provinces of Jawzjan (northern Afghanistan), Kunar (eastern Afghanistan), Kunduz, Baghlan (north-eastern Afghanistan), Ghazni, Nangarhar (south-eastern Afghanistan), Uruzgan, Helmand (southern Afghanistan). In Helmand, the Taliban overran Khanshin district following heavy fighting. According to the "Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission", 242 civilians have been killed in Helmand in the past 18 months and 828 have been wounded. The number of civilians killed has risen by 35 percent year-on-year. In addition, around 3,500 troops and police officers have been killed or wounded.

Suicide bombings and attacks

On 15 March 2016, the Taliban shot the deputy police chief of a district in Nuristan province during an attack on the neighbouring province of Laghman.

Syria

President Putin announces withdrawal of the majority of Russian troops

On the evening of 14 March 2016, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, abruptly declared that he is withdrawing the majority of Russian troops from Syria, saying the military intervention had largely achieved its objective. Withdrawal of some troops began on 15 March 2016.

Airstrikes on ISIS stronghold Raqqa

On 19 March 2016, 44 persons, including 39 civilians, were killed in heavy airstrikes on the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa, presumably by either Syrian or Russian aircraft, according to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Five ISIS police officers were reportedly killed and more than 40 persons were wounded. On 18 March 2016, 16 persons were killed in airstrikes in Raqqa.

Kurds declare autonomous region in the North

On 17 March 2016, the Kurds declared an autonomous region in the North of Syria which includes the three already existing distinct enclaves, or cantons (Kobani, Afrin and Jazira). Kurdish representatives have given their assurance that the region will continue to be part of Syria. The aim is to establish a contiguous, autonomous region in western Kurdistan (known as "Rojava" in Kurdish). Both the Syrian government and Syria's largest opposition group have criticized the move.

Yemen

Fighting continues

On 15 March 2015, 119 persons, including 22 children, were killed in airstrikes carried out by a Saudi-led military coalition in the capital of Sanaa, north-west of Yemen, according to local authorities. More than 47 persons were wounded when a market was pounded in the Hajja province, according to UNICEF. Since the

end of March 2015, the military coalition has been carrying out airstrikes which have killed more than 6,200 persons so far.

Saudi Arabia to end major combat phase

Saudi Arabia announced on 17 March 2016 that its main combat phase of the military intervention is almost over. It is planning to focus on air support and training of forces fighting Houthi rebels in future.

Turkey

Suicide bombing in Istanbul

Four persons were killed in a suicide bombing in Istanbul on 19 March 2016 and at least 36 persons were wounded.

Twelve were reportedly foreigners, but the Federal Foreign Office says none of them were German. The suicide bomber blew himself up in Istiklal Street, Istanbul's most popular shopping street in Beyoglu district that is known for its liberalism and busy night life. The Turkish government is blaming ISIS for the attack. The suicide bomber has been identified as a Turk who was born in Gaziantep in 1992 and had links with ISIS. There had been no previous warrants issued for the suicide bomber. Several persons have been arrested since the bombing, including the suicide bomber's father and brother.

Response to bombing in Ankara

On 17 March 2016, the organisation "Kurdistan Freedom Fighters" (TAK) claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing on 13 March 2016. They said the attack was carried out in retaliation for the victims of clashes in Citre and was aimed at special Turkish police officers who have been permanently patrolling Kizilay Square since the Gezi protests in spring 2013. TAK confirmed the name of the 23-year-old suicide bomber in its online statement but it did not publish any details about the second suicide bomber. TAK claimed responsibility for a suicide attack on a bus transport in Ankara in February 2016 in which 28 persons were killed. TAK claims to be a faction of Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that broke away from the PKK in 2004. The Turkish authorities do not think this account credible. In the wake of the bombings, the army stepped up the number of airstrikes against PKK strongholds in northern Iraq and security forces expanded their operations against the PKK to regions in the south-east of the country. Meanwhile at least 47 suspects have been arrested, including several pro-Kurdish lawyers.

The German Embassy in Ankara was closed on 17 March 2016. The German General Consulate and German school in Istanbul also remained closed because of evidence that an attack was to be carried out. The Federal Foreign Office advised increased caution in Istanbul, Ankara and other major Turkish cities.

EU-Turkey deal enters into force

The deal between the EU and Turkey on returning migrants who cross the Aegean sea to Greece came into effect on 20 March 2016. Greece will need around 4,000 extra specialist staff. The EU has pledged to deploy staff, Germany will also provide assistance. Around 1,000 refugees reached the Greek islands at the weekend.

West Africa/Ebola

Current situation

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the flare-up of the Ebola virus to have ended in Sierra Leone on 17 March 2016, after 42 days, or two incubation periods, had passed since the last known victim of the Ebola virus tested negative. This is the third time it has declared the country to be Ebola-free following announcements made on 7 November 2015 and 14 January 2016 when several deaths as a result of Ebola were reported.

Guinea confirmed on 17 March 2016 that two new cases of the Ebola virus had been reported in the town of Koropara and that three suspected cases has also been reported in the South. Guinea had been officially declared free of the Ebola virus on 29 December 2015.

So far, there have been 14,124 reported cases of Ebola in Sierra Leone with 3,956 deaths, in Guinea there have been 3,804 reported cases of Ebola with 2,536 deaths and in Liberia there have been 10,675 reported cases of Ebola with 4,809 deaths.

So, far there have been a total of 28,639 officially reported cases of Ebola and 11,316 deaths.

Nigeria

Boko Haram: over 20 killed in suicide bombings

At around 5 a.m. on 16 March 2016, a female suicide bomber dressed as a man blew herself up during morning prayers at a mosque in the village of (Molai)-Umarari (near Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state). Shortly afterwards a second female suicide bomber wearing a suicide belt blew herself up around 50 metres from the explosion site in the midst of persons who had rushed to the scene to help. At least 22 persons were killed in the attack which is being blamed on the terrorist organisation Boko Haram.

Cameroon

Boko Haram: 89 insurgents receive the death penalty

According to a number of press releases issued on 17 March 2016, 89 Boko Haram insurgents were sentenced to death by a military court in Cameroon before or on 16 March 2016 on the basis of an Anti-Terror Law that entered into force in 2014.

Nigeria/Cameroon

Boko Haram: 20 terrorists killed

On 16 March 2016, Cameroonian troops killed 20 Boko Haram militants during a raid on the Nigerian village of Djibrila (which is around ten kilometres behind the border with Cameroon) and freed twelve hostages.

Democratic Republic of Congo

18 Lucha activists arrested in Goma

On 15 March 2016, police arrested 18 out of around 20 activists of the Struggle for Change (Lucha) group in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo city of Goma shortly after they had begun marching and charged them with disturbing the public peace. According to the police chief of Goma, the mayor banned all Lucha activities in December 2015 which means the group is illegal. The protest was held to press for the release of Fred Bauma (a member of Lucha) and Yves Makwambala (an activist of the pro-democracy organisation Filimbi) who had been arrested in Kinshasa in March 2015 together with around 30 protestors (cf. BN of 16 March 2015). They are the only persons who continue to be detained.

Serbia

State of emergency due to floods lifted

Serbia lifted the nationwide state of emergency declared due to floods on 11 March 2016. More than 700 homes were flooded. Nobody died in the floods (cf. BN of 14 March 2016). Some of the regions hit by a series of floods in 2014 were once again affected by flooding.

Human rights situation unsatisfactory

According to the 2015 annual report by the Serbian Ombudsman submitted to Parliament on 16 March 2016, the human rights situation in Serbia, despite certain progress, is unsatisfactory. The secret services in particular are not under complete democratic control, the report says. Recommendations made by the ombudsman have not been implemented. The freedom of the media continues to show major deficits. There has also been

an increase in the number of attacks and threats against journalists. The so-called Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2016) also ascertained that although the freedom of opinion is observed in general, the independence of the media is being adversely affected by political influence, economic dependencies and self-censorship. The independence of the judiciary is also being hampered by political influence, inefficiency, nepotism and corruption. The latest report published by Human Rights Watch comes to a similar conclusion. This report claims Serbia has made little progress in the critical areas. The judiciary, media and situation of minorities (Roma) are unsatisfactory.

Kosovo

Fight against Islamists

On 16 March 2016, a fundraiser for the terrorist network "Islamic State" was arrested. The businessman is also said to have recruited fighters for ISIS.

Participations in international wars was banned by law in early 2015. Any individual breaching this law may face up to 15 years in prison. According to recent reports by public authorities, around 70 Kosovan nationals have taken part in the wars in Syria and Iraq. Up to then, it had been thought this figure was around 200. It is considered to be a success that in the past few months no Kosovans have travelled to Syrian to join the fighting.

Opposition appeals presidential election

The opposition parties in Kosovo have appealed the election of Hashim Thaci as the new President with the Constitutional Court. They say there were procedural and substantive errors in the parliamentary election held on 26 February 2016. The opposition boycotted the vote (cf. BN of 29 February 2016).

Prime Minister's brother files an application for asylum in Europe

The brother of Prime Minister Isa Mustafa filed an application for asylum in France and Germany in 2015 because he was suffering from an illness that could not be treated adequately in Kosovo. The applications were rejected.

Pakistan

Bomb blast on government employees

On 16 March 2016, 15 persons were killed in a bomb attack on a bus bringing government employees to work in Peshawar (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province). 35 persons were wounded.

China

Prosecutions on state security and terrorism charges

1,419 persons (compared to 712 persons in 2014) were convicted of threatening national security or of being involved in terrorist activities. This was reported by Human Rights Watch on 16 March 2016, citing figures published by the Supreme People's Court.

Myanmar

President elected

The Parliament elected Htin Kyaw, a close confidante of Aung San Suu Kyi, (both of whom are members of the National League for Democracy - NLD) as President on 15 March 2016. The successor of ex-General Thein Sein is the first elected civilian President since the military rule began in 1962. As the mother of two children who hold a foreign passport, the Constitution barred the NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi from running for president herself. She therefore announced in the run-up to the elections that she wanted the country to be run by a confidant who was elected President. A new government will rule from 1 April 2016. It faces major challenges, including the relationship with the army which continues to hold a lot of power, dealing

with political prisoners, the conflict between nationalist Buddhists and Muslim Rohingya as well as other Muslims and carrying on with the peace process with rebel groups of ethnic minorities. Clashes took place in Shan State in March 2016 between the army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army which several thousand persons fled from, according to a number of sources.