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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

22 June 2020

Afghanistan

COVID-19 pandemic

A substantial number of confirmed COVID-19 cases relate to health workers. A report published by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on 17.06.20 points out that the recent increase in violence involving targeted attacks on health facilities is making it more difficult to access medical care. The breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic poses a major challenge to the healthcare system, which is generally strained as a result of the hostilities in the country and whose capacities are particularly inadequate in regions affected by conflicts. ICRC-supported Mirwais Regional Hospital in Kandahar, for example, serves as the central healthcare facility for around six million people living in the south of the country. Many patients come from regions in which there is fighting between Taliban and government troops. As a result of the increase in COVID-19 cases, the hospital is currently operating at reduced capacity, despite having the usual number of patients.

An air link between Kabul and Dubai is to be re-introduced from 25.06.20 and domestic flights are to resume as of 01.07.20.

Hostilities, attacks, civilian casualties

An analysis of confirmed reports of security incidents by the New York Times has revealed that 186 members of the government forces and 94 civilians have died in June 2020 (as per 18.06.20). In the period from 12.06. to 18.06.20, 111 members of the government forces and 52 civilians were killed.

The most serious attack took place on 17.06.20 in Jowzjan province, where the Taliban attacked two military bases in the Aqcha district. 14 soldiers and two police officers were killed, nine people were injured and five were taken prisoner. The Taliban also took weapons, ammunition and equipment from both bases.

On 15.06.20 the Taliban attacked four villages in the Tagab district of Kapisa province, capturing 25 outposts and military bases. Four members of the government-allied security forces were killed and eleven were injured. The attacks also claimed civilian lives. In the course of the attacks, a mortar shell fired by the Taliban hit a house, killing three civilians and injuring eight. An attack on a school in Takhar province on 18.06.20 claimed the lives of nine civilians. Civilian fatalities have also been reported in the wake of attacks in the capital, Kabul, and in the provinces of Faryab, Ghazni, Ghor, Helmand, Herat, Kandahar, Kapisa, Khost, Logar, Nangarhar and Paktia

Algeria

COVID-19 pandemic

On 14.06.20 the government eased the restrictions introduced to contain the risk of infection. The lockdown was lifted in 19 provinces, while in the remaining 29 provinces, including the capital, Algiers, the curfews were shortened

to cover the period from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. A decision on opening the national borders, which have been closed since 17.03.20, is to be made in July 2020.

Journalists and protest movement activists arrested

The security services have arrested at least four activists belonging to the Hirak protest movement and a number of journalists since 12.06.20. They are accused of having released publications contrary to the national interest and of having endangered people's lives during the restrictions to combat coronavirus.

China

Prison sentence for human rights activist

On 17.06.20 a court in the city of Xuzhou (Jiangsu province) sentenced human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng to four years in prison for inciting the subversion of state power in a secret trial. He had already been found guilty in a secret trial held in May 2019. Wensheng was arrested in January 2018. Among other actions, he had published an open letter proposing amendments to the constitution. He had also defended other human rights lawyers, activists and petitioners in court.

COVID-19 pandemic

More than 230 people have become infected since a new outbreak of the pandemic came to light at the Xinfadi central market in Peking's Fengtai district on 11.06.20. The market, which supplies a major portion of Peking's fruit and vegetables, has been closed. The Chinese capital has been partially sealed off, air traffic to and from Peking has been substantially reduced and bus services to other provinces have been suspended.

Colombia

Guerrilla organisation frees hostages

According to media reports, the rebel organisation Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) freed a total of eight abductees in mid-June 2020. Two employees of an oil company were released in the town of Arauca on 12.06.20 and six people were freed in the department of Norte de Santander on 14.06.20. The latter included four civilians and two police officers. The group of six were handed over to envoys from the national ombudsman's office for human rights and representatives of the Catholic church and the Red Cross. All those released were in good health. Some of them had been held by the ELN for as long as four months.

The release of abductees is one of the key preconditions stipulated by the government headed by president Iván Duque for peace talks with the guerrillas. The previous government headed by Nobel Peace Prize winner Juan Manuel Santos began negotiations with the ELN in February 2017. Duque suspended the talks following an ELN attack on a police academy in Bogotá in January 2019 which killed 22 people and injured dozens.

DR Congo

President's chief of cabinet sentenced to forced labour

On 20.06.20 a court in Kinshasa sentenced president Félix Tshisekedi's chief of cabinet, Vital Kamerhe, to 20 years' forced labour for corruption. He was found guilty of having embezzled public funds to the sum of around 49 million US dollars together with co-defendant Jammal Samih, a 79 year-old Lebanese businessman, who was also sentenced to 20 years' forced labour. The money was intended primarily for the construction of 1,500 subsidised housing units, which Tshisekedi had announced after taking office in January 2019. Kamerhe supported Tshisekedi in the last presidential election in 2018 and was intending to run for office himself in the next elections. Kamerhe is the highest-ranking politician to be convicted for corruption in the country to date. The trial also caused a stir because the judge who presided over the proceedings, Raphaël Yanyi, died suddenly in May 2020. The police initially stated that he had died of a cardiac arrest. On 16.06.20 the justice minister announced that an autopsy had revealed

that Yanyi had suffered a brain haemorrhage as a result of blows to the head. A murder inquiry has been initiated into his death.

New Ebola outbreak

The eleventh outbreak of Ebola in the country occurred in the city of Mbandaka, Équateur province, on 01.06.20. As per 21.06.20, 21 confirmed cases had been reported in the north-western province of Équateur. 13 infected people have died to date.

India

Kashmir: Military operation against insurgents

The Indian military has continued its operations with the police against insurgents in the Indian union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Eight insurgents were killed in operations in Shopian and Pampore on 19.06.20 and three rebels were killed in another operation in Srinagar on 21.06.20.

India / China

Kashmir/Ladakh: Fatal clashes

According to information from the Indian military, 20 Indian soldiers were killed in clashes with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Ladakh on 15.06.20. China has not released any figures regarding its own casualties. The two countries accuse each other of border violations in the Galwan Valley. Following the escalation, both sides announced that they were working towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict (cf. BN of 08.06.20). On 19.06.20 the Chinese foreign ministry stated that China was laying claim to the Galwan Valley.

Iran

State persecution of Baha'í intensifies

The German Baha'í community reported in a statement on 11.06.20 that members of the Baha'í are vulnerable to pressure from the state. According to the statement, 71 members of the religious community have been under surveillance by the Iranian judiciary in recent weeks, and 26 of these have been charged and sentenced to long prison terms. The influential ayatollah Moussavi Bojnourdi has stated that Baha'í must not be granted any civil rights in Iran, describing them as "enemies of Islam". The German Baha'í community also criticises state-controlled media for publicly vilifying the Baha'í via the "increasingly coordinated dissemination of disinformation". Some 300,000 Baha'í live in Iran. They represent the largest religious minority in the country.

Far-reaching consequences of COVID-19

The head of the anti-corona team in Teheran, Alireza Zali, stated on 21.06.20 that coronavirus would bring change to virtually the entire administrative system. In this connection, he spoke of a "corona bonus", explaining that in addition to giving rise to a state of emergency in the medical sector in Teheran it was also leading to economic, cultural and social change. The government does not expect the crisis to end until into 2022.

Iraq

Security situation

Security incidents involving attacks by IS fighters continue, with casualties among both the security forces and the civilian population. The Iraqi security forces are presently launching security operations against IS fighters. The key focus is on the provinces of Diyala, Salahaddin, Ninive, Kirkuk and Baghdad.

COVID-19 pandemic

On 18.06.20 the health ministry reported that the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the country had risen to 25,717. The regions in which the highest numbers of new cases were reported were Baghdad, Sulaimaniyah and the province of Maysan.

Montenegro

Budva: Police accused of breaching the law

According to current media reports, civil rights activists and opposition parties are accusing the police of having used disproportionate force when they arrested a mayor and other local politicians on 17.06.20. The arrests came in the wake of a protracted period of tension between local political parties. The independent civil supervisory body to monitor police work has reportedly also issued warnings regarding individual officers exceeding their powers. Referring to the incident, the British ambassador is said to have pointed out that respect for human rights and adherence to the law form the basis of democracy.

Morocco

COVID-19 pandemic

On 09.06.20 the government extended the state of emergency until 10.07.20 and resolved that measures to combat the pandemic can be decided in a flexible manner according to the given infection situation - by the government at national level and by the Walis (governors) at regional level.

Nepal

Murders of dalits spark protests - accusations of discrimination against castes

The violent death of a group of four young dalits has sparked numerous protests and calls for an end to discrimination based on caste. The attack in the village of Soti in the district of Rukum took place because a 21 year-old from this group wanted to meet up with a 17 year-old girl from a family belonging to a higher caste. The head of the dalit's representative body, based in Kathmandu, accused the government of failing to prevent attacks although such activities are prohibited. The police have since arrested 29 people from the family of the victim's girlfriend and people associated with her family.

Although Nepal passed a law against discrimination based on caste in 2006, cases of discrimination, marginalisation and mistreatment continue to be reported on a regular basis. Prejudice against lower castes make it difficult for their members to gain access to education, jobs and housing. Dalits, who used to be referred to as "untouchables", are at the bottom end of the old caste hierarchy. They make up approx. 13 % of the population in Hindu Nepal.

North Macedonia

Parties agree date for elections

Following the postponement of the new elections originally scheduled for 12.04.20 due to COVID-19, the leading political parties in the country have agreed on a new date for the parliamentary elections. According to current media reports, the leader of the Social Democrats (SDSM), who are co-governing the country as part of an interim government, and former prime minister Zoran Zaev announced on 15.06.20 that the parties had agreed on 15.07.20 as the date for the outstanding ballot.

Pakistan

Attack in Rawalpindi

At least one person was killed and twelve injured when an explosive device which had been planted at a busy marketplace blew up in an attack in Rawalpindi in Punjab province on 12.06.20. No-one has claimed responsibility

for the attack. The headquarters of the Pakistani armed forces are located in Rawalpindi, which is not far from the capital, Islamabad.

Call for release of activists

An announcement by Amnesty International (AI) on 18.06.20 calls on the government to release human rights activist Muhammad Idris Khattak, who disappeared in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province in November. The security services state that Khattak is being held on the basis of the controversial espionage act. His whereabouts are not known. No formal charges have been brought against Khattak.

Thousands of legal activists, members of ethnic minorities and critics of the influential military have disappeared in recent years.

Pakistan/India

Kashmir: Civilian casualties at the demarcation line

According to the Pakistani military, four civilians were killed in the Pakistani part of Kashmir in two incidents on 17.06.20 when Indian soldiers threw grenades along the demarcation line which separates the Indian from the Pakistani part of Kashmir.

Serbia

Ruling party wins parliamentary election

It emerges from media reports based on meaningful partial results which were published on 22.06.20 that president Aleksandar Vucic's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won an absolute majority in the parliamentary election on 21.06.20. The turnout was moderate. The SNS has ruled the country since 2012. Various opposition parties declined to take part in the parliamentary election. According to representatives of the opposition, this boycott was staged because the conditions for free and fair elections were not met. Vucic has been Serbia's prime minister since 2014 and the country's president since 2017. Observers note that his style of governing the country is becoming increasingly authoritarian. Most Serbian media are controlled by him and people from his inner circles. Serbia is among the countries which are classified as so-called 'hybrid regimes' rather than democracies in a report which was published by the non-governmental organisation Freedom House at the beginning of May 2020 (cf. BN of 11.05.20).

The election was originally supposed to have been held at the end of the parliament's four-year mandate on 26.04.20, but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The chamber of deputies in the semi-autonomous province of Vojvodina and local councils throughout the country were elected on the same day.

Somalia

Bomb attacks

Two bombs exploded outside the home of a military officer in Wanlaweyn, Lower Shabelle region, on 20.06.20. Four people, including civilians, were reportedly killed. No-one has claimed responsibility for the attack.

On 21.06.20 a suicide attacker blew himself up at a military checkpoint in the town of Bacadweyn, Mudug region. Three soldiers were reportedly killed and two injured.

Syria

New US sanctions and currency crisis

On 17.06.20 the US State Department imposed sanctions under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which was named after the pseudonym of the Syrian military photographer who documented torture in Syrian prisons, fled Syria and shared his photographs with the global public.

The sanctions penalise all individuals who have business relations with 39 selected Syrian nationals (including president Assad, his wife and family members, as well as business people and members of the military). For the first time, the Caesar Act also punishes foreign individuals who enter into business relation with the listed Syrians. Further penalties were imposed on 24 companies and private individuals who are linked to reconstruction projects in Syria.

On the following day, the Iranian leadership denounced the new sanctions and vowed to strengthen its own trade relations with Damascus in response. For its part, the Syrian government has devalued its own currency by 44 %.

Although not directly affected by the sanctions, the Kurdish-dominated regional administration in the north-east of the country also reacted to the difficult economic situation by raising its employees' wages by 150 % on 18.06.20. According to media reports, the rebels supported by Turkey in the north-west are increasingly switching to the Turkish lira as their trading currency.

Tunisia

Violent disturbance at protests in Tataouine

On 21.06.20 the protests which have been continuing peacefully for some weeks now in the city of Tataouine in the south of the country turned violent after security forces arrested one of the protesters' spokesmen. The demonstrators blocked roads with burning tyres and threw stones at the security forces, who responded with tear gas.

The protesters are calling for the creation of new jobs in the oil and gas sector in recognition of an agreement from 2017 between the then government and the protest movement, which had blockaded the El-Kamour oil production facility from April to June 2017.

Turkey

COVID-19 pandemic: Measures

The curfews in the country have been lifted. Exceptions apply solely to people aged 65 and over. The restrictions on travel within the country have also been removed since 01.06.20. Turkey lifted the ban on entry for German nationals back on 11.06.20. Turkey's land and maritime borders are also open again, with the exception of the land border with Iran.

Face masks are mandatory at marketplaces, in supermarkets and on public transport, and social distancing (three steps) is to be observed. In some cities and regions, wearing a mask is compulsory in all public spaces, e.g. at re-opened hairdressing salons and shopping centres and in restaurants and cafés, which are allowed to open until midnight.

Two weeks after the lockdown measures were eased, the number of new infections recorded is on the rise again. The government is currently examining whether any new protective measures require to be taken. Any such new measures may be restricted to specific regions.

Auxiliary police

Despite strong criticism from the opposition, on 11.06.20 parliament extended the powers of the auxiliary police, who patrol residential areas in particular in the evening and at night. According to the state news agency, Adadolu, these law enforcement personnel, who are also referred to as "wardens" or "night eagles", may now carry and use firearms, stop vehicles, check ID cards and carry out body searches. While awaiting the arrival of the police, for example, they may also undertake measures to prevent protests and marches which represent a public disturbance. They are not allowed to make arrests or question people, however. Similarly to the police and the gendarmerie, they are under the control of the interior ministry. They receive three months' training. According to information from the interior ministry, more than 20,000 auxiliary police officers are currently in service, and this number is to be raised to up to 30,000 in future. A similar institution existed up to 2008. In the wake of the attempted coup of 2016, president Erdoğan announced that the force was to be revived, and it went into service in 2017. The

opposition is concerned at this development, is critical of the extensive powers and accuses the governing AKP party of seeking to form its own militia.

Turkey/Iraq

Attacks on PKK bases

Turkish forces launched a renewed operation against the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq on 17.06.20. The offensive in the region of Haftanin, some 15 kilometres from the border, goes by the name of Tiger Claw and, according to the defence ministry, is being carried out in response to the repeated shelling of Turkish positions by the PKK. The ministry alleges that in recent months the PKK has carried out increasingly frequent attacks targeting Turkish forces, first and foremost the police, from its retreats in northern Iraq. According to the ministry, the ground operation is being supported by combat aircraft and helicopters, artillery and armed and unarmed drones. Turkey already carried out air raids on PKK positions in northern Iraq on 15.06.20. The operation, which saw combat aircraft penetrating over 190 kilometres into Iraqi territory, included targets in the Kandil mountains, where the PKK has its headquarters, and in Sinjar. According to press reports, five civilians were killed in the course of the offensive up to 19.06.20.

Ukraine

Investigation proceedings against former president Poroshenko

More than 20 investigation proceedings have been initiated against former president Petro Poroshenko since he was voted out of office in the spring of 2019. Last week, he was charged with bypassing the mandatory recruitment procedure in appointing a good acquaintance to the position of deputy head of foreign intelligence. He faces a possible prison sentence of up to ten years. Pechersk district court in Kiev had originally intended to rule on a preventive measure on 18.06.20. The ruling was deferred until 01.07.20, however, because the public prosecutor's office is believed to have called for Poroshenko to be remanded in custody for the time being, with the possibility of release on bail to an amount equivalent to EUR 300,000. Poroshenko's fortune is estimated at around 1.4 billion US dollars.

Venezuela

Supreme Court appoints new electoral commission

On 12.06.20 the Supreme Court appointed a new electoral commission. The electoral commission comprises five people, each with two deputies, who are to organise the elections and monitor compliance with electoral law independently of other institutions. The Supreme Court itself is already made up exclusively of Maduro's supporters. The electoral commission is actually supposed to be approved by a two-thirds parliamentary majority. The opposition rejects the appointment of the new commission as unconstitutional. International observers and analysts consequently have strong misgivings as to the legitimacy of forthcoming elections.

Supreme Court dismisses leaders of two opposition parties

On 17.06.20 the Supreme Court declared the leaders of two opposition parties to be dismissed and duly replaced them. The ruling applies to the Primero Justicia (centre-right) and Acción Democrática (social democratic) parties. Primero Justicia is now to be led by José Brito, who was excluded from the party due to corruption charges in 2019. Bernabé Gutiérrez has been installed as the new leader of Acción Democrática. According to the party, it had excluded him for cooperating with the regime.

Together with the appointment of a pro-regime electoral commission, these steps are seen as preparing the way for severely obstructing the opposition in the parliamentary elections which are expected to be held before the year is out. Parliament is the last constitutional institution in which the opposition has a majority. While the last parliamentary election did not come in for any international criticism, some subsequent elections have been subject to severe interference.

Yemen

Air raid allegedly claims civilian lives

According to UN reports, at least twelve civilians, including four children, were killed in a vehicle in the course of an air raid by the Saudi-led coalition in the district of Shaada, administrative district of Saadah, on 15.06.20. The coalition denies that any civilian fatalities occurred, stating that only armed fighters were travelling in the vehicle. According to the UN, more than 800 civilians have died in hostilities in Yemen since the beginning of 2020.

STC separatist group takes control of Sokotra

Following fighting between the southern separatist group Southern Transitional Council (STC) and government forces, the STC took control of the island of Sokotra on 20.06.20. People who opposed the takeover of power by the STC were reportedly arrested, including both members of the military and civilians. The STC is supported by the UAE, which have set up a military base on Sokotra, as the island is of strategic importance owing to its location on an important shipping route.

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