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Briefing Notes

Group 62 - Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

21 September 2020

Afghanistan

Peace Talks

The peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, which began on 12 September 2020 in Doha (Qatar), have so far been moving rather sluggishly. The three major points of contention at the outset of the negotiations are, how to call the war in Afghanistan (Taliban: "Jihad"), the religious-legal basis for agreements (Taliban: Hanafi law) and the Taliban's demand that the US-Taliban agreement be used as a basis for the talks. The latter means that the Taliban do not feel obliged to continue the talks if the US-Taliban agreement is violated.

Attacks, hostilities, civilian victims

According to research by the New York Times, at least 224 pro-government forces and 89 civilians died in September 2020 (as of 17 September 2020) in security-related incidents in various provinces.

According to the Ministry of Defence, the Afghan Air Force killed 30 Taliban fighters in an air raid in Kunduz province on 19 September 2020. The Taliban claim that mainly civilians were killed. The incident could have a negative impact on the talks in Doha.

Albania

Suspected Gülen follower facing deportation to Turkey

According to media reports, the Albanian National Committee on Asylum and Refugees rejected the asylum application of a Turkish national accused of belonging to the Gülen movement in Turkey, in the second instance on 10 September 2020. The committee, which is made up of representatives of the government and of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), cited formal reasons for its decision, which was supported only by the government representatives. The asylum seeker, whose name is mentioned in media reports, had failed to lodge an appeal against the original decision within the deadline, they said. According to an NGO representative of the Committee, it had not been proven that the decision had been duly served; the Albanian Ombudswoman also stated that she had received "misleading" information from the Ministry of the Interior in this regard. Already on 01 January 2020 the government had repatriated a Turkish citizen who was arrested on arrival in Turkey on charges of belonging to the Gülen movement. Representatives of five United Nations organizations had already expressed their concern about both cases in a letter to the government in March 2020.

Armenia

State of emergency lifted

On 11 September 2020, the government lifted the state of emergency declared six months ago, but maintained some restrictions to stem the spread of the coronavirus. The state of emergency will be replaced by a nationwide

quarantine regulation that will remain in force until 11 January 2021. Mouth and nose protection must be worn in all public areas and social distancing and hygiene rules also apply to businesses throughout Armenia. Teaching in schools and universities resumed on 14 September 2020. International flights may also take place again. The new quarantine regulation also authorises the authorities to impose nationwide or local lockdowns and to close the country's borders in the event of a new coronavirus outbreak and in an emergency. Public gatherings may be prohibited or restricted. In recent weeks there has been a steady decline in the number of people infected with the coronavirus. Armenia has so far 45,000 officially confirmed coronavirus cases with over 900 deaths in a total population of around three million people.

Belarus

Arrests during continuing protests in Minsk

On 20 September 2020 tens of thousands of people once again protested against President Alexander Lukashenko in the capital Minsk. Despite threats from the police and the government, they were not deterred for the sixth Sunday in a row. The focus was on the demand for the immediate resignation of the president and for new elections. Hundreds of police and army units were deployed. Independence Square in the centre of Minsk was again closed off and streets were blocked by security forces. Soldiers with assault rifles were posted at the Palace of the Republic. Clashes with security forces erupted already at the beginning of the protests. The pro-opposition portal Nexta posted videos showing policemen of the OMON special units pulling people out of the crowd and taking them away. The human rights organisation Viasna cites more than 150 arrests throughout the country, more than 100 of them in Minsk and about 50 more in other cities where there were also protests, such as in Brest. Among those arrested in Minsk was Oleg Moiseyev, a member of the opposition Coordination Council and confidant of opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.

According to the Ministry of the Interior, 415 people were arrested during the Women's March on 19 September 2020, which has also been taking place regularly on Saturdays in Minsk for several weeks. 385 of the women arrested have allegedly been released meanwhile. Here, too, the security forces in some cases took drastic action against the demonstrating women.

Bolivia

Interim President Áñez renounces candidacy

The Bolivian interim president Jeanine Áñez has withdrawn her candidacy for the presidential election on 18 October 2020. In a televised address, Áñez stated that her decision was intended to contribute to the unity of the conservative camp and thus prevent a victory for the left-wing Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party of former President Evo Morales. Shortly before, the results of a survey had been published according to which Áñez held only fourth place with just under seven percent approval, while MAS candidate Luis Arce was clearly in the lead with 29 percent.

Áñez had temporarily assumed the highest state office when Morales had resigned facing accusations of manipulation in the elections about a year ago followed by mass protests and under pressure from the army (see BN v. 11 November 2019). Originally, the new elections had already been scheduled for May 2020, but were postponed several times due to the COVID-19 pandemic (see BN of 23 March, 08 June, and 27 July 2020).

Cameroon

Court of appeal confirms life imprisonment for separatist leaders

On 17 September 2020, the Court of Appeal of the Centre Region confirmed the life sentences of Julius Ayuk Tabe and nine other leaders of the Anglophone separatists. They had been sentenced to life imprisonment for terrorism and secessionism by a military court in Yaoundé on 20 August 2019. Tabe is the self-proclaimed president of a state, independent of Cameroon, called Ambazonia which the separatists are striving for. It consists of the two largely Anglophone regions South-West and North-West.

Colombia

FARC apologizes to kidnapping victims

According to current media reports, former members of the leadership of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP or only FARC), in a statement of 14 September 2020, described the former abduction practice of the guerrilla organization as a serious mistake that they can only regret. They asked the victims and their families for forgiveness. According to media reports, referencing information from the Colombian Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Centre for Historical Memory), a total of 37,000 people were kidnapped between 1958 and 2016, 8,600 of these abductions are attributed to the FARC-EP. As a result of a peace agreement between the rebel organization and the Colombian government in November 2016, a special justice system was established to deal with the abductions and other practices of the conflict parties. Most recently, the violent deaths of several former FARC-EP members within a short period of time caused a sensation (see BN of 14 September 2020). The Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (INDEPAZ) reported that 43 former guerrillas, who had supported the peace agreement of 2016, have been killed since the beginning of the year.

Eritrea

Release of Christian prisoners

According to the human rights organisation Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), at least 27 members of Evangelical congregations and Pentecostal churches, which are not recognised as religious communities by the government, were released on bail from May Serwa prison near Asmara in early September 2020. A total of 54 Christians are expected to be released, who, according to CSW, have spent up to 16 years in prison without charge or trial. It is suspected that the release might be connected to the spread of the coronavirus in the overcrowded prisons. However, according to the Ministry of Health, there are only 341 cases of COVID-19 and no deaths nationwide.

Ethiopia

TPLF wins regional elections in Tigray

As expected, the ruling Tigray's People Liberation Front (TPLF) won the parliamentary elections in the regional state of Tigray by garnering 189 of the 190 seats. The last member comes from the Baytona Tigray party. The opposition complained of intimidation of its candidates and of repression. In fact, there had been an agreement ahead of the election that the opposition would at any rate be given 38 seats. However, the election commission, pointing out that the TPLF had received 98.2% of the votes, ended up allocating 37 additional seats to the TPLF. The vote was controversial and was considered unconstitutional by the central government headed by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (see BN of 07 September 2020).

Iran

Women's Rights

According to media reports, Iranian women are increasingly speaking out about the sexual violence they experienced by men from higher social positions, in social networks. Since August 2020, the momentum for the campaign has been growing and it has received support from Iranian lawyers, journalists and activists. Accusations are collected and commented on the internet, for example statements by several women accusing a well-known anthropologist of rape and abuse of power.

Human Rights

According to media reports, the lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, who has been imprisoned since June 2018, was transferred to a Tehran hospital greatly weakened by the hunger strike she has been observing for more than 40 days already. The human rights lawyer went on strike on 11 August 2020, according to her own statements for the liberation of political prisoners and to draw attention to their situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most recently, her family

and colleagues were concerned about Sotoudeh's state of health, who had been held in Tehran's Evin prison (see BN of 14 September 2020).

Iraq

Security operation against IS fighters

On 19 September 2020, four IS fighters were killed in a security operation against the IS in Salahaddin province, about 280 km north of Baghdad near the city of Shirqat. Furthermore, several hide-outs were destroyed and weapons, ammunition and other equipment were confiscated.

One member of the security forces was also killed and four others injured during the security operation.

COVID-19 pandemic

According to a statement of the Iraqi Ministry of Health of 20 September 2020, the total number of infections is 319,035, of which 253,591 have recovered. The death toll is 8,555.

In the Kurdistan-Iraq region, the total number of infections is 41,002 (as of 20 September 2020), of which about 26,400 have recovered. The number of deaths caused by the coronavirus is estimated at 1,519.

Ivory Coast

Head of state allowed to run for a third term

Despite massive protests against a possible third term of office for the incumbent President Alassane Ouattara, the Constitutional Court cleared the way for the 78-year-old to run for re-election on 14 September 2020. According to media reports, the court decided at the same time, to the disadvantage of former President Laurent Gbagbo and former rebel leader Guillaume Soro, that candidates convicted of criminal offences may not run in the election scheduled for 31 October 2020. The Constitutional Court allowed only four of the original 44 candidates to run for office. Protests against Ouattara's candidacy for a third term in office had already resulted in deaths and injuries (see BN of 17 August 2020). The court had to deal with Ouattara's candidature because the constitution provides for a maximum of two terms of office for the head of state. In their decision, the constitutional judges confirmed the view of Ouattara's supporters that the counting of terms of office had been restarted by a constitutional amendment in 2016. In early July 2020, the sudden death of Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly had shaken the country politically. As a close confidant of Ouattara, Coulibaly was originally supposed to run as a presidential candidate for the ruling party alliance Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix (RHDP). On 22 August 2020, the alliance then officially selected Ouattara as its candidate for a third term (see BN of 24 August 2020).

Jordan

COVID-19 pandemic

From 17 September 2020, restaurants, mosques, street markets and a large number of schools will be closed for two weeks. Jordan recently reported more than 200 new infections and several deaths. In total, more than 5,300 corona cases and at least 26 deaths related to the virus have been registered.

Lebanon

Continued government crisis after explosion

The deadline set by French President Emmanuel Macron for the formation of a new government by 14 September 2020 has passed without a new government team materializing. Mustapha Adib, the designated Prime Minister, was unable to form a new government. Various media report that especially the insistence of the Shiite parties Hezbollah and AMAL on filling the post of Minister of Finance prevented the formation of a cabinet of experts.

Commentators believe that this is largely due to the influence of Iran, which wants to await the US elections before adjusting its policy accordingly.

Macron identified the rapid formation of a new government as a prerequisite for holding a new donor conference for Lebanon at the end of October 2020. In addition, already pledged aid funds from the 2018 CEDRE conference amounting to 11 billion US dollars were to be released. These had been pledged on the condition of reforms in 2018, but the Lebanese government and parliament professed their inability to implement these reforms, therefore the funds have not yet been paid out. This was one of the triggers for the escalation of Lebanon's economic crisis.

COVID-19 pandemic

Already on 04 August 2020, it was feared that the explosion in the port of Beirut, causing the damage or destruction of about a quarter of a million homes and several hospitals, would exacerbate the COVID-19 pandemic by making the import and distribution of medical supplies more difficult and forcing many Lebanese to live together in cramped and precarious conditions. The increase in new infections since August 2020 confirms these fears. On 20 September 2020 Lebanon registered more than 1,000 new infections for the first time. At the beginning of August 2020, the number of new infections per day had been less than 200.

Morocco

COVID-19 pandemic

After the number of new infections spiked for three days in a row (over 2,500 on 18 and 19 September 2020 and 1,927 on 20 September 2020), the severe restrictions in Casablanca were extended and in the province of Settat a curfew from 10 p.m. as well as the closing of markets, hairdressing and beauty salons was ordered for one week.

Nigeria

State of Kaduna: castration, salpingectomy and execution as punishment for rape

On 16 September 2020, the governor of the north-western state of Kaduna, Nasir Ahmad el-Rufai, twittered that he had signed the law, which provides for a significant increase in the penalties for rape. According to the text of the law attached to the news, a male perpetrator who rapes a child under the age of 14 must be sentenced to surgical castration and death. In this context castration is defined as the surgical removal of a man's testicles. The same sentence is to be imposed for sexual intercourse with a male child under the age of 14. If the victim is older than 14 years, the punishment is surgical castration plus a life sentence. If an adult woman is convicted of raping a child, she is to be punished by removal of both fallopian tubes (bilateral salpingectomy) and death. In rape cases where the victims are under 14 years of age, a medical report must be obtained to support the charge.

North Macedonia

New Deputy Prime Minister in charge of fighting corruption

According to recent media reports, the cabinet of the newly formed government has for the first time created the post of deputy prime minister, whose work focuses on fighting corruption, promoting sustainable development and human resources. Ljupco Nikolovski, a close associate of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, Secretary General of the Social Democratic Party and Minister of Agriculture in the previous cabinet, is the country's first Deputy Prime Minister, thus also responsible for fighting corruption. Nikolovski has told the media that he will lead an uncompromising fight against bribery by increasing transparency, limiting discretion and supporting media freedom. However, political analysts and anti-corruption experts are rather reserved in their assessment of Nikolovski's appointment.

Pakistan

Resurgence of terrorism

The Pakistani Taliban, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), are said to have formed alliances with various rebel groups in the former tribal areas along the Afghan border in recent months. In September 2020, incidents occurred almost daily. The incidents ranged from roadside explosives and sniper attacks to targeted killings of pro-government people. According to the Reuters news agency, rebels have killed at least 40 security forces since March 2020. According to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) Research Center, at least 109 people have been killed in 67 attacks between January and July 2020.

Somalia

New prime minister, elections planned

President Mohamed Abdullahi "Farmajo" Mohamed, has appointed Hussein Roble to succeed Hassan Ali Khairi as prime minister. Khairi was voted out of office in July 2020 after a disagreement with the president about the upcoming elections (see BN of 27 July 2020).

The government originally planned to hold the first presidential election with universal suffrage since 1969 in February 2021. However, these plans have since been discarded. Instead, all states (with the exception of Somaliland) have decided that tribal elders, representatives of civil society and regional government officials from each state will select 101 plenipotentiaries to elect the members of the new parliament. The parliamentarians will in turn elect the president. The planning of the elections starts in November 2020 and Farmajo's term of office is scheduled to end in February 2021.

Violence against women

A 19-year-old woman died after being gang-raped and thrown from the sixth floor of a building in Mogadishu on 11 September 2020. Hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets in the following days demanding a proper investigation of the incident. The police arrested several suspects.

Attacks

Several civilians were killed or wounded by unknown perpetrators on 17 September 2020 in the village of Rage Ele in Middle Shabelle region. It is suspected that this was a revenge killing.

A regional minister from Hirshabelle state was killed by unknown armed perpetrators in Jowhar, Middle Shabelle region, on 17 September 2020.

A landmine explosion killed and wounded several civilians in Hudur, Bakool region on 14 September 2020. It is unclear who is responsible for the attack.

Syria

UN report documents human rights violations throughout the country

On 15 September 2020 the latest report of the UN Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Republic was presented. In its 21st edition since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, the report highlights relevant events in the first half of 2020.

According to the report, there are good reasons to assume that crimes against humanity are committed by the Assad government due to the scale on which it is still committing murders, torture, sexualised violence and arrests. In the Turkish-occupied territories in northern Syria, the so-called Syrian National Army is committing numerous war crimes, the report says. These include torture, rape and hostage-taking. The report accuses the Turkish protecting power of failing to use its influence on the rebel alliance to prevent such acts.

In the areas under control of the Kurdish-led democratic forces of Syria, deteriorating detention conditions in the internment camps for IS fighters and their relatives were observed. In particular, medical care had been scaled down to a rudimentary level because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Idlib: Increase in sporadic fighting

According to activists, the tentative ceasefire that has been in place since March 2020 is being increasingly violated. Sporadic firefighting repeatedly occurs in the region around the last rebel stronghold in the north-west. Allegedly several Russian air raids were flown on the western suburbs of the provincial capital Idlib on 20 September 2020.

Al-Bab: Humanitarian aid worker killed in attack

Armed fighters attacked a vehicle of the Turkish Red Crescent relief organisation on 14 September 2020 killing one of the occupants. Al-Bab has been under control of the Turkish army and its associated militia groups since mid-2017.

Togo

COVID-19 pandemic

The health emergency declared until mid-September 2020, has been extended by six months until March 2021. Togo's national borders will remain closed for passenger traffic. Public events are prohibited, mouth and nose protection must be worn. The airport in Lomé is open for international air traffic.

Turkey

Arrest warrants against suspected Gülen followers

According to a report of the Turkish state news agency Anadolu of 14 September 2020, action was again taken against alleged supporters of the Gülen movement. Arrest warrants had been issued for 47 suspected soldiers, 17 of whom had been arrested, the report said. In addition, arrest warrants had been issued for twelve teachers. Eight of them allegedly used the communication app ByLock, which, according to Turkish authorities, had been used in the past mainly for secret agreements among Gülen supporters.

Can Dündar threatened by expropriation

According to his lawyer in Turkey, the Turkish journalist Can Dündar, who has been living in exile in Germany since 2016, is threatened with expropriation. According to the statement, a court in Istanbul decided on 17 September 2020 that Dündar's entire property in Turkey will be confiscated if he does not return to Turkey within 15 days and face justice there. The former editor-in-chief of the dissident newspaper Cumhuriyet had been charged in Turkey with espionage and membership in a terrorist organization in 2015 after he published documents in his newspaper which were supposed to prove arms deliveries by the Turkish secret service to Islamist jihadists in Syria. He was arrested in November 2015, but released from custody in February 2016 following a ruling by the Constitutional Court, he then went to Germany. He was later sentenced in absentia to five years and ten months imprisonment for betraying state secrets by a court of first instance.

In March 2018, a court of appeal overturned the decision. The proceedings were reopened in April 2019 and an international arrest warrant was issued for Dündar. In June 2019, also Dündar's wife managed to flee to Germany.

Uganda

Southern Sudanese refugees killed

Ten southern Sudanese refugees were killed on 11 September 2020 after a fight broke out between the refugees and the local population in the Madi Okollo district of the Arua region in northern Uganda. 19 people were seriously injured and many are still missing. The houses of the refugees were burnt, looted or destroyed. The attack was triggered by a dispute over a common water well and after locals accused the refugees of killing a local herdsman.

Venezuela

Report of the UNHCR fact-finding mission

On 16 September 2020, the independent commission of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations (UNHCR) announced the core messages of its report on the human rights situation in Venezuela.

The full 411-page report will be published on 27 September 2020. The Commission's conclusion in the report is that, even under the circumstances of an extensive crisis of the state, the actions of the Venezuelan state apparatus and its allied groups have reached a level of permanent, systematic, organized and deliberate human rights violations, ranging from extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances to torture and inhuman treatment, that all in all, these constitute comprehensive and lasting crimes against humanity. In the process, the report said, civil servants and politicians of the ruling Socialists were actively involved in planning and implementation and the government and president were directly and personally responsible.

The report investigated several thousand cases of human rights violations and a total of 48 individual examples were presented in detail. Venezuela's ambassador to the UN immediately rejected the results of the fact-finding mission.

Vietnam

Death sentences, prison sentences in land conflicts

A Hanoi court sentenced two men to death and one other person to life imprisonment on 14 September 2020. 26 other defendants received either long prison sentences or suspended sentences. The convicts were accused of having resisted a police operation in the village of Dong Tam in January 2020. In the course of this operation, the police shot the village head and three policemen died. A conflict has been simmering for years over a planned military airfield on land used by the village of Dong Tam, near Hanoi. Police officers entered the village in January 2020 to enforce the orders which then resulted in violent clashes with the villagers (see BN of 13 January 2020).

In Vietnam, all land is state property to which the state grants rights of use. Conflicts with farmers and others occur time and again when land is rededicated to construction projects and those affected do not receive adequate compensation or see themselves as victims of corruption.

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