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Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

21 October 2019

Afghanistan

UNAMA quarterly report on civilian casualties

According to the quarterly report of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the number of civilians killed in the third quarter represented a 42 % increase in comparison to the corresponding period last year. This is the highest number of casualties in a single quarter since systematic records began in 2009. Following a drop in the number of casualties in the first half of 2019, the sharp rise to over 4,000 casualties in the third quarter was largely attributable to an increase in military skirmishes during the talks between the USA and the Taliban. In all, 8,239 civilian casualties were documented in the first nine months of the year (2,563 killed and 5,676 injured). The figure for the same period in 2018 stood at 8,240. As such, the overall level remains the same. The most severely affected provinces were Kabul (1,491 casualties), Nangarhar (824), Helmand (563), Ghazni (547) and Faryab (530). 42 % were victims of bomb attacks, 29 % fell victim to ground fighting. The Taliban were responsible for 46 % of the casualties, IS for 29 %.

There have also been numerous incidents in connection with the presidential elections this year. In the period from the beginning of voter registration on 09.06.19 to two days after the end of voting on 30.09.19, UNAMA documented 458 civilian casualties. 277 civilian casualties were documented on election day, 28.09.19, alone. More than one third of all victims were children and 80 % of casualties were caused by the Taliban. 15 abductions and 91 cases of civilians being subjected to intimidation and threats were also recorded in connection with the elections.

The Independent Electoral Commission has postponed by one week the announcement of a provisional election result, which was originally planned for 19.10.19.

Attacks

At least two police officers died in a bomb attack outside a police station in Lagham province (East Afghanistan) on 16.10.19. At least 26 people were injured, including 20 schoolchildren. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, alleging that dozens of members of the security forces had been injured. On the same day, two civilians from Herat province were abducted by Taliban on the Herat-Kandahar highway and killed.

More than 70 civilians were killed and 60 injured when two bombs exploded in a mosque in Haska-Meena (Nangarhar province) on 17.10.19. No-one has claimed responsibility for the attack. On its website, the Taliban accused IS of being behind the attack.

More civilians, including four children, were killed when two mines laid by Taliban exploded in Herat province.

Algeria

Further Protestant churches closed

Three new Protestant churches were recently closed because they lacked required permits, bringing the total number of closures since the beginning of the year to at least seven. Christians in Algeria have since begun peaceful protests, calling for the closures to stop and freedom of worship to be guaranteed.

Balkans

Start of EU accession talks postponed again

Despite a recommendation from the EU Commission, the European Council decided on 18.10.19 to defer the commencement of EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The EU Commission confirmed back in 2018 that the two countries had carried out all the necessary reforms. The member states have nevertheless postponed their decision on the matter for a third time. France is particularly opposed to the two countries being admitted into the EU, as are the Netherlands and Denmark. These opponents argue that the reform of the judicial and administrative systems in the two candidate countries has not yet gone far enough. France is additionally questioning the enlargement process per se. The decision has come in for criticism from various quarters, including Germany, on the grounds that it leads to a loss of influence and credibility for the EU. It is also claimed that the decision serves to strengthen anti-European forces. EU Commission President Juncker spoke of a historic mistake.

Political crisis in North Macedonia

The failure to open EU accession talks has plunged North Macedonia into a political crisis. Prime minister spoke of “a great injustice” and a “historic mistake”, and announced fresh elections for April 2020. North Macedonia in particular has invested substantial political capital in the prospect of accession negotiations and carried out considerable reforms. In the face of opposition from the nationalist opposition, Zaev has pushed through the change of the country’s name and made western integration a central tenet of his prime ministership. He is now under great pressure from the nationalist opposition. It is to be feared that the rejection from Brussels will provide the nationalist opposition with fresh impetus.

Disappointment in Albania

Albania’s prime minister, Edi Rama, also expressed disappointment, while emphasizing that Albania would continue to pursue the aim of EU membership. He said the next step would be to continue the country’s judicial and electoral reforms.

China

Hong Kong: Protests, US bill

The police prohibited a demonstration against the current ban on face coverings, which was planned for 20.10.19, citing security concerns. Tens of thousands of people nevertheless demonstrated peacefully on this date. Demonstrators who were willing to resort to violence later blocked roads, threw incendiaries and went on the rampage in shops and entrances to underground railway stations. The police intervened with tear gas and truncheons.

On 14.10.19 tens of thousands of people demonstrated peacefully in Hong Kong, calling for the adoption into law of a bill drawn up by the US House of Representatives to protect human rights and democracy in Hong Kong. The bill provides for economic sanctions against China, should it undermine Hong Kong’s autonomy. It also stipulates annual reports on the extent to which China respects civil rights and the rule of law in Hong Kong. The US House of Representatives passed the bill with a large majority on 15.10.19. It must now be ratified by the Senate before president Donald Trump can sign it into law. China’s government protested sharply against the bill on 16.10.19.

Hong Kong: Government policy statement

Chief Executive Carrie Lam was forced to interrupt her government policy statement before the Hong Kong parliament twice in the face of heckling by pro-democracy MPs. The statement was eventually broadcast by video. Among other things, Lam stated that over 1,100 people had been injured in the more than 400 protest rallies over the past four months, and that more than 2,200 people had been arrested.

Hong Kong: Activist, demonstrator attacked

A supporter of the protest movement was seriously injured in a knife attack on 19.10.19. The police arrested a person in connection with the incident on the same day. Jimmy Sham, activist and co-organiser of

demonstrations by the protest movement, was attacked by a hit squad wielding hammers on 16.10.19. He was taken to hospital with injuries.

Ethiopia

At least 16 people killed by unknown attackers in the Afar region

At least 16 civilians were killed and 34 injured in an attack by a previously unknown group of armed men. The incident occurred on 12.10.19 in Obno, a small village in the Afambo district of the Afar region, in the north-east of the country. The attackers reportedly wore the uniform of Somalian special units and militias of the Issa tribe in Djibouti. Ten attackers were allegedly killed in retaliation.

Iran

Dissident arrested abroad

The Revolutionary Guard (Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami) reported on 14.10.19 that Ruhollah Zam, an Iranian dissident living in Paris who is a founder of a channel critical of the Iranian regime on the Telegram messenger service, has been arrested. Iranian agents allegedly lured Zam to Iran in a complicated secret service operation. He is accused of collaborating with hostile secret services. The 46 year-old journalist was arrested in the wake of the contentious presidential elections in 2009 and fled to France following his release. In 2015 Zam founded the Amadnews channel on Telegram, which was later renamed “Seday-e Mardom” (the people’s voice). In December 2017 Zam played an important role in coverage of the protests against the Iranian government. His channel frequently carries reports about corruption in the country. “Seday-e Mardom” has hundreds of thousands of followers in Iran. Some time ago, Iranian state TV broadcast a documentary about Zam which portrayed him as a traitor to the state.

Suicide rate on the rise due to lack of prospects

According to a report by the Iranian health ministry, the number of suicides has risen from 94 to 125 persons per 100,000 head of population in the past four years. The corresponding figure in western countries stands at 11.5 persons. The report also states that 75 % of suicide cases were aged between 15 and 34. Experts consider financial hardship, lack of job prospects and stress to be the main reasons. They also note a growing incidence of depression, mental and behavioural disorders among young people, which they relate to severe social restrictions and the high rate of divorce.

Lebanon

Mass protests against the government

Hundreds of thousands of people protested against the government for the fourth day in succession on 20.10.19. They called for the entire Lebanese leadership to step down and for fresh elections. In Beirut the protesters assembled outside the government palace, and protests also took place in other parts of the country. The protests were sparked by the announcement of a new tax which is to be paid by every user of messenger services such as WhatsApp. The government was quick to abandon its plans, but the protests continued. According to the Lebanese news agency Ani, the police arrested dozens of demonstrators on 19.10.19. The government intends to respond to the mass protests with a series of reforms. A government representative announced on 20.10.19 that the most important parties had expressed their backing for Hariri’s reform package at the weekend, approving among other things the waiving of new taxes and the privatisation of large companies. It is reportedly also planned to cut the salaries of current and former government officials by 50 per cent. The reform measures are to come before the cabinet on 21.10.19.

Lebanon is grappling with an economic and financial crisis. Its national debt stands at around 77 billion euros, which corresponds to around 150 per cent of its gross domestic product, constituting one of the highest debt ratios worldwide. Many Lebanese accuse their country’s politicians of corruption in particular, while also criticising pollution and poor education.

Mali

50 jihadists killed and 36 soldiers freed

According to information from the Malian army, 50 jihadists were killed, 30 injured and 36 of its own soldiers were freed in a military operation on 18.10.19. The military action was a response to the attacks on two military bases on 30.09.19 in which 38 soldiers were killed and 60 abducted (cf. BN of 07.10.19).

Morocco

Journalist released from prison

The journalist Hajar Raissouni, who had received a one-year prison sentence on 30.09.19 for illegal abortion and an extra-marital sexual relationship, was released from prison on 16.10.19 after being pardoned by King Mohammed VI. Her fiancé and her gynaecologist, who had also received prison sentences, were similarly released. The measures had led to protests in Morocco and sparked debates about personal rights and the freedom of the press.

Mozambique

Renamo calling for elections to be declared null and void

The presidential, parliamentary and provincial parliamentary elections took place on 15.10.19. With some 39 % of votes counted (as per 19.10.19), the incumbent president, Felipe Nyusi of the governing Frelimo party, is in the lead with around 69 % of the vote, ahead of his main rival, Osuffo Momade from the largest opposition party, Renamo, on 26 %. Frelimo is also in the lead in the parliamentary elections and in nine out of ten provinces. Renamo's secretary-general, Andre Magibire, stated at a press conference on 19.10.19 that the results of the elections to date did not reflect the will of the people and spoke of unacceptable fraud on a massive scale. He said that Frelimo was clearly showing that it did not want peace, adding that the party intended to decide on its next steps on 21.10.19. Following a 15-year civil war which ended in 1992 and which had since flared up again on various occasions, Frelimo and Renamo signed a final peace treaty in August 2019. Against this background, the elections serve to indicate how robust peace is in the country. The EU's delegation of election observers in Mozambique criticised the election process on 17.10.19, stating that the campaign period was marked by violence, violations of fundamental rights and doubts about the quality of the electoral register. On election day itself, relatively few incidents occurred, the observers noted.

Nigeria

Serious abuse of pupils at Islamic schools

The police announced on 19.10.19 that it had freed 147 abused pupils (including at least 22 girls) in a raid on an Islamic school ("Almajiri") in the town of Rigasa, in the northern federal state of Kaduna. This was the fourth in a series of raids since 26.09.19 in which the police has freed more than 1,000 pupils from Islamic schools in the northern federal states of Kaduna and Katsina. At the religious schools the pupils had been beaten, chained to walls and sexually abused. In northern Nigeria in particular, which has a majority Muslim population, millions of boys and girls attend private Islamic schools.

Pakistan/India

Kashmir: Exchanges of fire along the demarcation line

Exchanges of fire continue to occur at the demarcation line between the Indian and Pakistani parts of Kashmir. Pakistan is accusing India of deliberately targeting civilians in the de facto border region, alleging that inhabitants are regularly killed or injured along the demarcation line. On 19./20.10.19 Pakistan launched a retaliatory attack in which nine Indian soldiers were killed and two Indian bunkers were destroyed along the demarcation line. On the Pakistani side, one soldier and three civilians died. Several people were injured.

Somalia

Hostilities

Al-Shabaab attacked AMISOM troops near Baidoa on 16.10.19, killing four Ethiopian AMISOM soldiers.

On 15.10.19 Al-Shabaab reportedly took the village of El-Gelow (approx. 30 km from Mogadishu) in the Middle Shabelle region, after the troops of the Somali National Army (SNA) had withdrawn from the village.

On 13.10.19 SNA forces killed eleven Al-Shabaab members in the village of Reydab, outside the town of Bardhere in the Gedo region, while Al-Shabaab was demanding taxes in the form of cattle from the local population.

Attacks

On 13.10.19 the deputy governor of the Middle Shabelle region, Mohamed Sugal, and his son were killed in Jowhar, Middle Shabelle region. Al-Shabaab is suspected of being behind the assassination.

Al-Shabaab reportedly killed three civilians and injured three others in Mogadishu on 16.10.19.

Journalist detained

The journalist Abdiazis Hassan was detained in Jowhar, Middle Shabelle region, on 14.10.19. He was reporting on a protest in the wake of a police raid in which hundreds of people, including children, were arrested. The police action followed a hand grenade attack.

Al-Shabaab defector killed

A defector from Al-Shabaab was reportedly killed in Kismayo on 13.10.19. The victim allegedly left Al-Shabaab a year ago.

Sudan

Commission of inquiry set up

On 20.10.19 the Sudanese prime minister, Abdalla Hamdok, appointed a commission to investigate the violent action by the security forces against the sit-in protest on 03.06.19 which claimed over 100 lives (cf. BN of 17.06.19). According to the state news agency, SUNA, the commission is to be invested with extensive powers to summon witnesses and will have access to official documents, security reports and medical records. The trade union federation Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) welcomed the appointment of the commission.

Syria

Turkish military operation

On 17.10.19, Turkey reached an agreement with the USA on a five-day ceasefire with the aim of enabling the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces militia (SDF) to withdraw its fighters from the security zone proclaimed by Turkey. A fragile truce has since ensued, with isolated fighting continuing to occur.

By 18.10.19, troops of Syria's Assad-led government had taken control of territory including the towns of Manbij, Kobani, Ayn Issa, Qamishli and Hasakah. The advance by the Turkish army and its allied Syrian-Arab militias focused on the central northern area of the Kurds' autonomous region. Between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn they pushed forward as far as the M4 highway in some areas.

The UN organisation for the prohibition of chemical weapons (OPCW) stated on 18.10.19 that it would be investigating claims that Turkey and its allies had used white phosphorous against the civilian population.

On 20.10.19 the SDF leadership confirmed its complete withdrawal from the border town of Ras al-Ayn.

Syria/Iraq

Refugee movements

According to aid organisations and media reports, more than 200,000 have left their homes since the launch of the Turkish offensive in north-eastern Syria. By 17.10.19, some 2,400 had fled across the border into Iraq, where some are seeking shelter in refugee camps. An entry permit is required in order to cross the border legally. Syrians who have recently fled to Iraq report that units of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) are preventing Kurdish refugees from crossing the border. The YPG's ideological convictions dictate that the historical Kurdish territories in Syria must not be lost as a result of the looming demographic changes.

According to various reports, smugglers are said to be demanding between 500 and 1,500 US dollars to smuggle people into Iraq illegally. The people are reportedly fleeing not only in the face of the Turkish advance and the associated militias, which include Islamist and criminal elements, but also due to their fear of falling under the control of the Syrian government in Damascus, which poses a threat of compulsory military service being reintroduced for the population in the north-east of the country for the first time since 2012.

Togo

Activist released

President Faure Gnassingbé pardoned the imprisoned leader of the "En aucun cas" (Under No Circumstances) movement, Folly Satchivi, on 16.10.19. He was arrested on 22.08.18 and sentenced on 16.01.19 to three years' imprisonment, including one year on probation. He had been planning to hold a press conference in Lomé on the political situation in Togo. A court of appeal had already reduced his sentence on 10.10.19 to 28 months, including six months on probation.

Tunisia

Tunisia elects new president

The independent constitutional expert Kais Saied won the run-off against media entrepreneur Nabil Karoui on 13.10.19, taking 72.71 per cent of the vote. The Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) organised both ballots in the presidential election without any incidents. Some 7 million people were eligible to vote. Turnout in the second ballot of the presidential election stood at 56 per cent. Polls reveal that young Tunisians and academics in particular voted for 61 year-old Saied. The country is grappling with severe economic problems. Youth unemployment is particularly high. Almost one in three graduates is unable to find a suitable job. Political newcomer Kaies Saied is regarded as incorruptible and politically inexperienced. He is promising Tunisians to fight corruption, to carry out a rigorous overhaul of the constitution and the electoral system and to establish greater democracy at local level. Saied is also known for his highly conservative views on social issues.

Ukraine

Protests in Kiev against troop withdrawal

Thousands of demonstrators, predominantly with nationalist leanings, protested in Kiev on 14.10.19 against the Ukrainian president's efforts to negotiate with Russia. They marched through the city bearing torches, singing the national anthem and shouting slogans aimed at president Zelenskyy, such as "No to capitulation" and "Ukraine first". The 14th of October traditionally marks the Day of the Defender in Ukraine, when nationalist forces, including many veterans of the Eastern Ukraine conflict and supporters of the extreme right-wing Svoboda party, take to the streets. Zelenskyy is aiming to enter into talks with Russia brokered by western countries on a resolution to the Ukraine conflict. At issue are a possible withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from the eastern part of the country, which is held by pro-Russian rebels, and greater autonomy for the eastern parts of the country.

Venezuela

Political prisoners released

In keeping with its previously announced intentions, the Maduro government released a number of political prisoners on 17.10.2019. In all, 24 political prisoners belonging to various opposition parties were released. These were not limited to those parties which had broken rank with the Opposition Bloc and negotiated with Maduro's government independently of Guaidó.

Central bank figures on monetary trends

The Venezuelan central bank has released figures on inflation in the country. The figures were kept under wraps for many years. Since 2019 they have been published again, at irregular intervals. The central bank put inflation (more accurately: consumer prices) in September at 52.2 %, while stating that the corresponding figure for the year to date stands at over 4,000 %. International estimates are much higher.

Yemen

Saudi-Arabian forces take control of Aden

Saudi-Arabian forces allegedly took over control of the city of Aden on 14.10.19, replacing the troops who are loyal to the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The STC, which is supported by the UAE, had controlled Aden since August. The UAE has reportedly also withdrawn some of its troops from the governorate of Taizz and handed over control of the governorate of Shabwah to pro-government forces. Meanwhile, the Yemeni government and the STC are attempting to reach an agreement that will end the conflict between the two parties. This agreement reportedly guarantees the STC posts in the government cabinet and aims to place the forces loyal to the STC under the command of the Yemeni government.

Hostilities

Fighting between various parties was reported last week, including in the governorates of Saadah, Hajjah, Al-Bayda and Ad-Dhali.