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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

23 October 2023

Afghanistan

Earthquakes and humanitarian situation

Another earthquake (force 4.1) occurred in Herat province on 19.10.23. The UN estimates that over 21,500 houses have been destroyed and 17,000 severely damaged in the earthquakes in Herat province (cf. BN of 09.10. and 16.10.23). More than 154,000 people are believed to have been affected by the consequences of the earthquakes. Women account for a disproportionately large share of this total, because they were at home when the earthquakes occurred, while many men were at work outside. Both directly affected people and those whose homes have escaped damage are currently staying outside for fear of new earthquakes. In the city of Herat a woman is reported to have died because she had no protection from the cold of the night.

Security situation

On 21.10.23 the minister for energy and water appointed by the Taliban declared in a public speech in Kunduz province that Al Qaeda is not a terrorist organisation, but “brothers” of the Taliban.

Persecution

A man is reported to have died on 17.10.23 after being tortured by the Taliban. He was arrested by the Taliban some six months ago, after having shared a photograph of the National Resistance Front (NRF) on Facebook.

French-Afghan journalist Mortaza Behboudi was released from Taliban custody on 18.10.23. He was arrested in January, shortly after entering the country, and accused of spying.

On 22.10.23 women staged a demonstration in Kabul to demand the release of a number of women’s rights campaigners from Taliban custody.

A woman and a man were subjected to a public flogging in Bamyán province after a Taliban court had found them guilty of adultery.

It is reported that several thousand Afghans are being deported from Pakistan to Afghanistan on a daily basis. All people who are illegally resident in Pakistan are to have left the country by 01.11.23 (cf. BN of 09.10. and 16.10.23). The Taliban are said to have set up camps at the border crossings. A number of aid organisations have repeatedly called on Pakistan not to deport these people, as many of them are waiting for an American visa and/or are subject to persecution by the Taliban.

Argentina

Presidential election goes to a run-off

After the majority of the ballot papers had been counted, it emerged that the incumbent minister for economic affairs, Sergio Massa of the centre-left governing coalition “Unión por la Patria”, had unexpectedly won around 36 % of the vote in the presidential election on 22.10.23. He will contest a run-off on 19.11.23 with Javier Milei, who

was previously considered to be the favourite and who claimed around 30 % of the vote. Milei is the leader of the right-wing populist alliance “La Libertad Avanza”. Former interior minister Patricia Bullrich of the conservative alliance “Juntos por el Cambio” won around 24 % of the vote. According to local media, the turnout stood at 74 %.

Bangladesh

Pressure on opposition growing; further arrests and convictions of BNP members

Ahead of a demonstration by the largest opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which is planned to take place in Dhaka on 18.10.23, more than 200 leading party members and activists are reported to have been arrested. In addition, more than 130 BNP members were sentenced to prison terms in Dhaka on 19.10.23.

The BNP and allied groups have been staging demonstrations ever since the summer of 2022 to demand the resignation of the incumbent prime minister, Sheikh Hasina (Awami League, AL), and to call for the parliamentary elections scheduled for January 2024 to take place under a neutral interim government. Violent clashes with security forces have occurred at a number of these demonstrations (cf. BN of 19.06., 31.07. and 21.08.23). The secretary-general of the governing AL recently rejected the BNP’s demands once again. The BNP leadership refuses to participate in the elections under an AL government. The party has announced another large demonstration in Dhaka on 28.10.23 and the AL is also planning to stage rallies on this date. Security measures in the capital have been stepped up.

The AL under Sheikh Hasina has ruled the country since 2009. The election in 2018 was neither free nor fair and in 2014 the BNP staged a boycott. As in previous elections, the government is increasingly cracking down on the opposition and critical voices by carrying out arrests and instituting legal proceedings. According to the BNP, some 300 leading party members and activists were arrested in the first two weeks of October alone. The party estimates that around half of its five million members are involved in politically motivated legal proceedings. There are instances in which hundreds of cases are ongoing against a single person.

Burkina Faso

Media representatives convicted

On 19.10.23 the Tribunal de grande instance (TGI) Ouaga II convicted two media representatives of slander and aiding and abetting slander. In June 2023, the two individuals concerned published an article in the Burkinabe newspaper Le Reporteur in which they allegedly accused the then minister for economic affairs and the director-generals of the tax and customs authorities of having embezzled approx. XOF 97 billion (approx. EUR 147.8 million as per 23.10.23) from the state. According to reports in the media, the article refers to a transaction which it considers untransparent between the customs authorities and the IAMGOLD Essakane mining company in 2022. The media representatives were ordered to pay a fine of one million XOF (approx. EUR 1,525 as per 23.10.23) and received suspended prison sentences.

Ethiopia

Report on human rights violations in Tigray

On 13.10.23 the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE) published its final report on human rights violations committed during the Tigray conflict. The commission refers to serious breaches of international law which are tantamount to “war crimes and crimes against humanity” and warns that many of these crimes still persist, despite the agreement to end hostilities in November 2022.

The Ethiopian and Eritrean armed forces, the Amhara Special Forces and Fano militias are accused of “large-scale” killings of Tigrayan nationals, including priests and religious leaders. Relatives were reportedly prevented from burying their dead. Rape and other forms of sexual violence were also allegedly widespread. The report further describes lootings of harvested crops and blockades of relief supplies, which it alleges led to a famine. The Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) are named as the main perpetrators. It is claimed that these two organisations also deliberately destroyed health facilities. Large numbers of the Tigrayan population are reported to have been driven from their homes.

Eritrean refugees were reportedly also the targets of attacks and abductions by both the EDF and the Tigrayan armed forces. Tigrayan forces also committed crimes specifically against the civilian population in the regional states of Amhara and Afar, the report concludes.

The Gambia

Reformed national intelligence service; interim judiciary

The Foroyaa news portal has noted in an article that under Adama Barrow's presidency there have been no reports to date of arrests and imprisonments by the national intelligence service. According to Foroyaa, this suggests that the role of the secret service - which was formerly known as the National Intelligence Service (NIA) before being renamed as State Intelligence Services (SIS) in February 2017 - has altered since the change of government. It is generally agreed that the feared NIA committed serious human rights violations under former president Yahya Jammeh, particularly against individuals who were active in cases with a political dimension. A reform of the secret service was announced after the changeover of power. Following its renaming, it was deprived of its executive powers of arrest and restricted to the core tasks of a classic domestic intelligence service. In July 2022 five former members of the NIA, including the agency's director, were sentenced to death for the murder of the youth leader of the opposition United Democratic Party (cf. BN of 18.07.22). This was the sole criminal trial to take place in the country to date in connection with crimes committed under the previous government headed by Jammeh, apart from a death sentence handed down to ex-minister Yankuba Touray, which was upheld by the court of appeal (cf. BN of 19.12.22).

Progress in combating child marriage and gender-specific educational inequality

According to UNICEF's national agency, the share of girls married off as children fell from 46.5 % in 2010 to around 34 % in 2018. It emerges from various reports, however, that gender-based inequalities and harmful cultural practices such as child marriage increased again during the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. BN of 02.08. and 13.09.21). In June 2022 UNICEF stated that a quarter of all girls are married off before reaching the age of 18 and that child marriages continue to be widespread, despite a gradual change in attitudes and increasing rejection of the practice (cf. BN of 20.06.22).

UNICEF has followed in the wake of the UN Population Fund's national agency in reporting progress in the area of education for girls (cf. BN of 11.07.22). The scholarship rate for girls has increased in the primary school sector. Never before have so many girls attended primary school - they account for 53 % of all primary school children in the country.

GSIC issues fatwa against ban on genital mutilation; situation for anti-FGM activists

The Supreme Islamic Council (GSIC) has issued a fatwa - an Islamic legal opinion - calling for the banning of female genital mutilation and its classification as a (criminal) offence to be reconsidered. The GSIC asserts that this practice is not only an old cultural custom. "Sunna" circumcision is legitimate in Islam, validated in the normative sources of Islam and part of the fitra. According to the GSIC, removing "only a small, upper part of the clitoris" constitutes a legitimate practice under Islam. The GSIC "strongly condemned" those organisations and persons who criticise the practice of female genital mutilation and who call for those who practice FGM to face criminal prosecution. The first criminal convictions for genital mutilation and payment of the imposed fines by Islamic religious leaders sparked intense public debate, above all between supporters and opponents of FGM (cf. BN of 11.09.23), and a number of MPs recently called for the practice to be decriminalised (cf. BN of 18.09.23). Accusations stirring up sentiment against anti-FGM activists have recently caused alarm. According to Fatou Baldeh, founder of the Gambian NGO Women in Liberation and Leadership, her team has been driven out of three communities in recent weeks. She says they were accused of questioning their own customs, norms and religion.

Ghana

Flooding after opening of dams leaves thousands homeless

It has been reported in the media that some 27,000 people have lost their homes, their livelihoods and farming land in the wake of floods in the Volta region in the south-east of Ghana. The floodgates of the Akosombo and Kpong

dams in the Eastern Region were opened after heavy rainfall. The responsible Volta River Authority (VRA) reportedly began controlled opening on 15.09.23 and rejects accusations that the water was released too quickly and that it failed to inform the population adequately.

While no casualties are known as yet, the people who have been driven from their homes and are now sheltered in emergency accommodation are in urgent need of assistance. The VRA, the national disaster management organisation and regional authorities are apparently working together to rescue more people and are initiating emergency measures.

While this is not the first time that the dams have been opened after heavy rainfall, the Ghanaian institute for meteorology (GMet) cites this year's unusually heavy rainfall in a number of Sahel countries and in the north-east of Ghana as a possible reason for the disaster.

Guinea

Protest against censorship: Media representatives detained

13 media representatives were detained in Kaloum/Conacry on 16.10.23 after following a call to protest by the Private Press Union of Guinea (SPPG). The protest was directed in particular against the blocking of access to the Guinée Matin news site, which has been in force since August 2023. The security forces reportedly used tear gas to break up the protest. While all 13 detainees were released again on the same evening, criminal investigations have been initiated against them for taking part in an illegal demonstration.

ECOWAS court calls for release of former prime minister

It was reported in the media on 16.10.23 that the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is calling for the release of Ibrahima Kassory Fofana, the last prime minister from the rule of ex-president Alpha Condé. The court's decision also applies to the former defence minister and the former environment minister, according to the lawyers of the parties concerned. The court apparently deems the principle of the presumption of innocence to have been breached. Fofana and other former members of the government were taken into custody on charges such as unlawful enrichment and embezzlement. Their conditional release was subsequently made possible by a corresponding court order, but this was not acted upon (cf. BN of 11.04., 25.04., 07.11. and 06.12.22).

India

Supreme court considers decision on legalisation of same-sex marriage to be within the legislature's sphere of jurisdiction

On 17.10.23 India's supreme court declined to pass a ruling of its own on the legalisation of same-sex marriages, on the grounds that the jurisdiction in this matter lay with the legislature. Activists supporting the rights of LGBTIQ people have filed petitions asserting that the ban on same-sex marriages constitutes a breach of their constitutional rights. It was proposed in the petitions that the terms "husband" and "wife" which are employed in marriage law be replaced with the gender-neutral term "spouse". The Hindu nationalist government and religious leaders argued that only parliament can decide on this amendment to the law. The court also subscribed to this view.

Iran

Human rights lawyer and female journalists sentenced to prison terms

It has been reported in the media that a well-known lawyer has been handed down a one-year prison sentence in Tehran. He has also reportedly been banned from any activities in social media for one year. Among the clients represented by the 73 year-old lawyer were the family of Jina Amini, who died following her arrest in September 2022. It was on the basis of this mandate that he was charged. According to his lawyer, the sentence was imposed on charges of propaganda against the system, and is appealable.

The convicted man has supported political prisoners on various occasions and voiced criticism of the government in interviews with Persian-language media abroad. In his capacity as a lawyer he most recently petitioned for an

independent medical investigation into the cause of Amini's death. Iranian authorities attributed her death to a heart attack and an underlying disease. This is fully disputed by human rights organisations, who assert that there are indications that the woman was mistreated in police custody.

According to reports in the media on 22.10.23, two female journalists who were the first to report on Amini's death have received prison sentences of seven and six years. The two women were held in custody without trial for several months. They were found guilty on charges including collaboration with enemy states, conspiracy and collaboration to commit crimes against national security and propaganda against the system of the Islamic Republic.

Death sentence: several convicts executed

Citing a Kurdish human rights organisation, it has been reported in the media that the death sentences passed on three male prisoners in Lorestan province were executed on 19.10.23. Two of the men were imprisoned at the central prison of the provincial capital, Khorramabad, while the third man was held in the prison of the city of Aligudarz. It has also been reported that ten people were executed at Ghezel Hesar prison in Karaj (Alborz province) on 19.10.23. In all these cases, the death sentences had been handed down on charges of drug trafficking.

According to reports by human rights organisations, approx. 90 % of all death sentences passed in Iran are linked to drug trafficking. At least 305 people have reportedly been executed for drug-related offences between January and October 2023. According to AI, at least 576 death sentences were executed in Iran in 2022.

Confrontations at protests in Zahedan (Sistan and Baluchestan province)

It has been reported in the media that confrontations occurred between Sunni Muslims and security forces in the provincial capital, Zahedan, on 20.10.23. Posts in social networks claim that security forces took action against demonstrators after Friday prayers. It is not possible to verify by reference to independent sources whether force was used. In recent weeks, photographs have been published in social networks which indicate a bolstering of security personnel in various towns and cities in the province. There are isolated reports of brutality against demonstrators. Demonstrations after Friday prayers have been a regular occurrence since law enforcement forces took violent action against protests in October 2022 (cf. BN of 10.10.22 and 09.10.23).

Iraq

Attack on US facilities

The Ain al-Asad (Anbar province), Hareer (Erbil province) and Victory (near Baghdad) military bases, which are used primarily by US troops, have been targeted repeatedly by drone and rocket attacks since 18.10.23. According to information from the US, most of the drones and rockets have been shot down and only minor injuries have occurred to date.

The so-called Islamic Resistance group, comprising Shiite militias with close links to Iran, has claimed responsibility for the attacks, which it says have been carried out because of the USA's support for Israel in the current Gaza conflict.

Makhmour: Clashes between Peshmerga fighters and Iraqi army

After the PKK reported that it had withdrawn from Makhmour refugee camp on 19.10.23 (cf. BN of 09.10. and 16.10.23), armed clashes took place between soldiers of the Iraqi army and Peshmerga fighters on 22.10.23. Fatalities were reported on both sides.

The clashes stem from disputes over who holds jurisdiction in Makhmour, which belongs to the so-called disputed territories, that is, territories to which Baghdad and Erbil both lay claim. The Iraqi army took over the check points which had been left by the PKK, although these are actually located within the Peshmerga's area of jurisdiction.

Lebanon / Israel

Situation at the border with Israel

Lebanese domestic politics is dominated by the situation in Gaza and Hezbollah's response. Large demonstrations are practically a daily occurrence, although they do not generally lead to violent clashes.

Many people who live in the regions bordering with Israel are currently leaving the area as a consequence of border fighting between the Israeli army and Hezbollah. Civilians have also died in this fighting. The Lebanese government's capacity to provide emergency accommodation is very limited on account of the tense overall situation. On the Israeli side, the evacuation plans have been expanded. On 20.10.23 the evacuation of the city of Kiryat Shmona was ordered.

Of the numerous border incidents which have occurred, only those involving fatalities are stated below:

On 17.10.23 the Israeli village Metulla came under fire from the Lebanese side. At least three people were injured, including one civilian. According to Hezbollah, five of their fighters were killed when fire was returned.

According to information from the Lebanese army, a group of journalists came under Israeli fire near to the village of Hula on 20.10.23 and one member of the group died. UNIFIL has confirmed the incident, but reports only one civilian casualty. The survivors were evacuated out of the danger zone by UNIFIL forces.

After a rocket attack was launched against Israeli territory from Lebanon on 21.10.23, return shelling from the Israeli side ensued, resulting in an unclear number of casualties.

On the night of 22.10.23 the Israeli army launched at least two air raids on Hezbollah positions, including one in the Shebaa Farms territory. According to information from the Israeli side, the air raids targeted two Hezbollah cells which were preparing an attack on Israeli territory with rocket launchers and anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM). Other Hezbollah cells were allegedly also hit. No reliable information on casualties is available at the time of going to press.

Independently of these attacks, there are daily exchanges of fire along the border, for the most part involving light arms and manpads (one-man ground-to-air rockets). There have been repeated attempts at infiltration from the Lebanese side.

An international news agency has reported that the escalation between Hezbollah and Israel has claimed at least 22 lives since 07.10.23, including four civilians. At least three people have been killed on the Israeli side.

Liberia

Provisional election results: Run-off between Weah and Boakai

The provisional election results from 99.9 % of the country's 5,890 polling stations show that neither of the two leading candidates in the presidential elections on 10.10.23 has secured more than 50 % of the vote, meaning that neither can be declared the outright winner. President George Weah of the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) won 43.8 % of the vote, while his main rival, Joseph Boakai, former vice-president and the candidate of the opposition Unity Party (UP) claimed a 43.5 % share. According to reports in the media, a run-off will take place on 07.11.23. The election on 10.10.23 was the tightest presidential race in Liberia since the end of the civil war two decades ago. In all, 20 candidates contested the presidential elections. Weah is seeking a second term in presidential office, after having won the last election in 2017 by taking 61.5 % of the vote in a run-off against Boakai, who secured a 38.5 % share. Apart from the economic problems, it is above all corruption and the sluggish pace at which the crimes committed in the two civil wars are being addressed which are a cause of concern for many people. Weah, who has been linked to a number of corruption scandals, promised to set up a much-demanded special court for war crimes, but has so far failed to do so. His rival, Boakai from the Unity Party (UP), is promising new jobs and investment in the infrastructure. According to reports in the media, the chairman of the National Elections Commission (NEC) announced on 18.10.23 that at least eight election workers had been arrested on suspicion of participation in election fraud and taken into police custody. The attempted vote rigging has allegedly been corrected, with no effect on the result of the elections.

Libya

House of Representatives passes national election law

According to reports in the media, on 02.10.23 the majority of the parliament which sits in the east of Libya, the House of Representatives (HoR), voted in favour of the bill to regulate national presidential and parliamentary elections which was drafted by the 6+6 committee.

The law promulgated by the HoR on 05.10.23 was officially presented to the High National Election Commission on 09.10.23. It is unclear to date whether the High State Council (HSC), which acts as a form of senate and advisory body to the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU), will approve the bill. The UN's special envoy and head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Abdoulaye Bathily, has stated that while the current version of the law represents an improvement compared to previous draft bills, politically contentious issues nevertheless remain. These include the obligatory run-off in presidential elections and the validity of parliamentary elections being contingent on the validity of presidential elections.

The 6+6 committee, which comprises six members of the HoR and the HSC respectively, met for the first time in May and June 2023 in the Moroccan city of Bouznika to elaborate a joint draft bill for a national election law. At the end of the two weeks of discussions an agreement on the bill was in place, providing among other things for simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections and the formation of an interim unitary government ahead of the elections for the purpose of carrying out the elections. Joint adoption of the bill by the HoR and the HSC failed to come about, however, due to a number of contentious provisions. In the following months, the committee held further consultations in Tripoli, Benghazi and other Libyan cities in order to revise the bill. The bill was duly finalised at the beginning of October 2023.

Mauritania

AI: Enforced disappearance of activist

According to AI, the activist Youba Siby, who was arrested in Senegal and transferred to Mauritania without due process of law, is the victim of an enforced disappearance. The Mauritanian authorities have reportedly only confirmed his arrest in Senegal on 14.09.23. On 05.10.23 the Mauritanian National Human Rights Commission reported on Siby's incommunicado detention at the central prison in Nouakchott. The activist reportedly has no access to legal counsel and no contact with the outside world. According to AI, the activist has been charged with inciting hate and undermining the morale of the defence forces, on the basis of his posts on social media.

In its most recent annual report for 2022, the US State Department (USDOS) has documented no cases of forced disappearance by or by order of Mauritanian government authorities. The State Department described prison conditions as still tough and life-threatening, and characterised by overcrowding, violence, inadequate sanitary and medical provisions and a shortage of food.

Mozambique

Opposition protests in the wake of local government elections

After the governing Frelimo party won the majority of administrative districts in the local government elections on 11.10.23, the opposition is accusing the government of electoral fraud. The largest opposition party, Renamo, has called for nationwide protests. According to the official election results, Frelimo won 65 out of 66 administrative districts. Renamo and a break-away opposition group, MDM (Movimento Democrático de Moçambique), had previously governed nine administrative districts. Protests by opposition supporters have been taking place since 17.10.23, particularly in the north of the country. There are reports in the media of police brutality against protesters and media representatives (cf. BN of 16.10.23).

Myanmar

Security situation

The village of Gyoe Taung (Sagaing region) was shelled by troops of the military junta on 27.09.23. 18 children who were in a primary school at the time of the attack suffered injuries.

On 28.09.23 two civilians were killed by junta soldiers during a raid in Pale (Sagaing).

Over 1,000 people have fled to China from Muse and Kutkai since 23.07.23 as a result of the continuing fighting between the military and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army in Shan State. On 02.10.23 a businessman was killed in Yangon by members of a guerilla group who accused him of collaborating with the military leadership.

Junta troops stormed villages in the townships of Pale, Salingyi and Yinmarbin (Sagaing) from 04.10. to 06.10.23 and from 12.10. to 15.10.23. Some 55,000 people fled their homes, around 30 people were detained and at least eight of these were killed. At least 29 people were killed, including 11 children, and 57 were injured in a bomb attack on a refugee camp in Laiza (Kachin State) on 09.10.23 which is being attributed to the military. Fighting on the same day between the military and local People's Defence Forces (PDFs) in Kanbalu (Sagaing) took place without any civilian casualties, as did clashes between junta groups and PDFs in Ayadaw (Sagaing) on 15.10.23 and an attack on a military base by the Kachin Independence Army and allied PDFs on Shwegu (Kachin) on 18.10.23.

A child was killed and eight people were injured in attacks by the military on several villages in Pyu township (Bago region) on 10.10.23. Junta troops carried out raids in Yesagyo (Magway region) from 13.10. to 15.10.23. In the course of these raids they destroyed a hospital run by the Civil Disobedience Movement and drove out some 10,000 people.

Freedom of expression:

According to information from the NGO Data for Myanmar, 1,136 people were arrested nationwide between February 2022 and September 2023 for voicing criticism of the military or support for opposition forces in social media. The largest number of arrests took place in Yangon, followed by the Mandalay, Bago, Magway and Ayeyarwady regions. The majority of those arrested had posted contributions or comments on Facebook and many became known to the authorities as a result of a doxing campaign by supporters of the military.

Niger

Alleged escape attempt by toppled president Bazoum thwarted

According to various reports in the media, president Mohamed Bazoum, who has been toppled by the military and held in custody ever since, attempted to escape on the night of 18.10.23. A spokesman for the military junta has stated that the escape attempt was thwarted, however. Bazoum's current whereabouts are unknown. He is allegedly back in the presidential palace. Since the coup at the end of July 2023, Bazoum has been living under house arrest in the presidential palace in the capital, Niamey, with his wife and one of his sons. According to information from his lawyer, he and his family are visited every two days by a doctor, who also brings them food. On 20.10.23 the doctor was allegedly refused access, however. Bazoum's party claims that he has no access to running water or electricity.

Freedom of the press and freedom of speech

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a clampdown on media representatives has been underway since the military coup at the end of July 2023. Attacks on journalists are common and the freedom of the press is being curbed.

According to various reports in the media, Nigerian journalist and blogger Samira Sabou disappeared for several days after being arrested by four unknown men at her mother's home in the capital, Niamey, and taken to an unknown location on 30.09.23. No-one heard anything from her after this incident. In response to a request for information, the local criminal police stated that they had not arrested Sabou, neither did they know anything about her case. Sabou regularly publishes posts on her social media channels. On 13.10.23 it became known that Sabou had been held by the criminal police for eight days, from 30.09. to 07.10.23. Sabou was conditionally released on 11.10.23. She is accused, among other things, of having published information which could disrupt public order.

Nigeria

Zamfara State: Dozens abducted

Abductions and attacks on villages and educational establishments by armed actors described as bandits in order to extort ransom money have recently been taking place with a degree of regularity (cf. BN of 07.08., 28.08. and 09.10.23). A major stir has been caused by recent reports in the media, according to which armed assailants on motorbikes attacked a mountain village in the north-western state of Zamfara on 17.10.23, abducting at least 50 people, including women and children and setting a number of homes on fire. Three people were reportedly killed and seven injured.

As part of operation Hadarin Daji, on 15.10.23 troops of the Nigerian military freed four students of Federal University Gusau (FUGUS) in Zamfara State who had been abducted by armed men from their hostel outside of the campus on 14.10.23. This was the second time within less than 30 days that students of Federal University Gusau had been abducted from their hostels (cf. BN of 25.09. and 09.10.23). According to reports in the media, several people from a community in the Kaura Namoda Local Government Area (LGA) of Zamfara State blocked the motorway from Gusau to Kaura Namoda on 17.10.23 to protest against attacks and kidnappings by actors in the region which the government refers to as terrorists and to demand intervention by the government.

Benue State: Several people killed in attacks attributed to herdsmen

It has been reported in the media that armed actors killed at least eleven people in two different attacks on two communities in the Logo and Gwer-West LGAs in Benue State on 17.10.23. Homes in the villages were reportedly looted and a number of people were injured. It is suspected that the violent actors were armed herdsmen. Local authorities suspect a link to simmering conflicts over land, grazing and water rights between arable farming communities and vagrants who live first and foremost from livestock farming. Ethnic and religious rivalries, particularly in the central region in which the violence occurred, contribute to the complexity of the situation (cf. BN of 30.01., 13.03. and 24.04.23).

Third anniversary of #EndSARS protests

Three years after the protests which continued for several weeks under the #EndSARS banner in the autumn of 2020, at least 15 people who were arrested at the time in Lagos remain in custody. This is revealed in a report published by AI on 20.10.23 in which the individuals concerned are referred to by name and are quoted directly. Most of them reportedly remain in custody without trial. Dozens of people died in the protests against police brutality in Lagos in October 2020 (cf. BN of 26.10.20). The protests went by the name of #EndSARS because one of the demonstrators' key demands was the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). According to AI, more than 40 of the people arrested during the protests were still in custody in October 2022 (cf. BN of 24.10.22). AI disputes claims by government agencies that comprehensive police reforms have since been carried out, noting that Nigerian security forces continue to commit human rights violations which often go unpunished. A court in Lagos State nevertheless sentenced a police officer to death on 09.10.23 for committing a murder in the course of his duties. The verdict is not yet final (cf. BN of 16.10.23).

North Macedonia

Case against former secret service chief dismissed following contentious amendments to the law

Following contentious amendments to the law, recent reports in the media state that on 17.10.23 the criminal court in Skopje dismissed the second-instance retrial of former secret service chief Saso Mijalkov on charges of illegal wiretapping. In 2021 Mijalkov was found guilty in three cases of criminal association, abuse of office and acceptance of a reward for illegal exertion of influence, and the court handed him down a twelve-year prison sentence in the first instance. The offences with which he was charged were reportedly committed in the period from 2008 to 2015 under the then prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, who was ousted in the wake of the wiretapping scandal in 2017, and who is also a cousin of Mijalkov's. It is reported that dismissal of the case became possible after the North Macedonian parliament passed amendments to the criminal code on 06.09.23 and president Stevo Pendarovski duly signed the corresponding decree on 07.09.23, ignoring pleas from NGOs. According to a statement from the president's office, the amendments to the criminal code do not allow any amnesty for such criminal offences; rather, the amending law is now deemed to be in conformity with European law and continues to provide for sanctions against such perpetrators, though with an emphasis on the so-called extended sequestration of assets. Meanwhile, the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption is reported to have criticised the fact that the amendments to the law were not preceded by any public debate. The NGO Coalition for a Fair Trial has pointed out that the amendments to criminal law will give rise to absolute limitation periods for a number of ongoing corruption trials.

Palestinian territories / Israel

Current developments / humanitarian situation

According to reports in the media, areas which were supposed to serve as a safety zone for the Palestinian population have also been hit in Israeli attacks targeting Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli military has stated that more than 100 targets linked to Hamas in this area have been attacked throughout the Gaza Strip, including a tunnel and arms depots.

According to Israel's defence minister, Israel is not aiming to maintain control over the civilian population in Gaza after the war against the militant Hamas organisation. Palestinian militias have also continued their attacks on Israel from the Gaza Strip. The Al-Qassam Brigades - the military wing of Hamas - have claimed responsibility for the twelve direct and indirect fire attacks on 22.10.23. Meanwhile, the number of clashes between Palestinian fighters and Israeli armed forces in the West Bank has roughly halved, to nine confrontations. According to reports in the media, more than 1,400 people have been killed in Israel to date – for the most part civilians who died during the first attack by Hamas on 07.10.23. Referring to information from the health ministry which is run by Hamas, more than 4,600 have been killed to date in Gaza.

It is reported in the media that the humanitarian situation in Gaza is worsening as air strikes by Israel continue. Local hospitals and helpers reportedly lack sufficient capacities to attend to injured people and to recover and identify dead bodies. According to a statement from the Hamas-led interior ministry in Gaza, night-time attacks throughout the Gaza Strip on the night of 22.10.23 caused a large number of further deaths and injuries. The Israeli government had repeated its warning to the people living in the northern part of the Gaza Strip to move for their own safety to the south of the Wadi Gaza, a strip of wetland which runs through the area south of Gaza City.

Senegal

Provisional release for anti-government rapper

Nitt Doff, a prominent rapper who is critical of the government and who was arrested and remanded in custody on 18.01.23, was provisionally released on 16.10.23 and placed under judicial supervision. Several applications for his provisional release had previously been rejected. Doff is charged with spreading fake news, committing honour crimes, making death threats and other criminal offences. In a live video on Facebook he criticised wrongs in the country and spoke particularly severely and disparagingly about the government and the authorities. He subsequently made a public apology for these comments a number of days before his arrest. In some quarters, however, the view is that Doff's severe criticism of president Macky Sall in 2022 is the true reason for his arrest and detention. Most recently, he also publicly lent his support to opposition leader Ousmane Sonko and his party. Doff sympathised for a long time with the Y En A Marre protest movement, which was founded by music and media figures in 2011, and whose leader has recently been taken into custody on several occasions (cf. BN of 16.10.23).

Casamance: New hostilities

According to a report in the media, fighting between the Sengalese army and ATIKA, the armed wing of the rebel Mouvement des Forces démocratiques de la Casamance (MFDC), took place in two villages of Bignona Department (Ziguinchor region) on 14.10.23. Two rebels were reportedly killed and one was arrested. The fighting is said to have prompted civilians to flee the area. No further details are available.

Prison inmates and opposition leader Sonko go on hunger strike; long investigation proceedings

It has been reported in the media that around 180 prisoners, including four minors, have gone on hunger strike in Ziguinchor in protest at being held in custody without trial for several months and at the poor quality of food they receive. The minors and 26 other hunger strikers were arrested in June 2023 in connection with the fatal disturbances which followed Sonko's sentencing to a prison term (cf. BN of 05.06.23). They have announced that they will only end their hunger strike when they are brought before an investigating judge. The coordinator of the NGO Vision citoyenne has expressed his concern at the long duration of these investigation proceedings. There is only one investigating judge in the Ziguinchor region in southern Senegal, resulting in considerable backlogs of cases.

Opposition leader Sonko, who is in a weak state from a previous hunger strike, has announced that he is also resuming his hunger strike in custody. He says he is doing so in solidarity with political prisoners, including those from the ranks of his banned party, Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité (PASTEF), and in protest at his detention, which he describes as politically motivated. Six female PASTEF members who were arrested in June 2023 also recently went on hunger strike at the Liberté 6 prison in Dakar. They have taken this action in solidarity with the political prisoners and in protest at poor prison conditions. The same also applies to Bentaleb Sow, a close confidant of Sonko and member of the opposition movement Front for a Popular, Anti-Imperialist and Pan African Revolution - France Dégage (FRAPP), who was arrested in contentious circumstances in June 2023.

Sierra Leone

APC and government sign agreement to end political crisis; election tainted by violence

The main opposition party, All People's Congress (APC), which does not recognise the election results of 24.06.23, declared as part of an agreement with the government of president Julius Maada Bio on 18.10.23 that it was prepared to end its boycott of parliamentary and local council work, which has been ongoing for several months (cf. BN of 03.07. and 10.07.23). The agreement does not provide for new elections or publication of a breakdown of the election results according to polling stations, such as have been demanded repeatedly by the APC. It has been agreed, among other things, that all persons arrested during civil and election protests are to be released and that all politically motivated judicial proceedings against members of the APC or other parties and their supporters are to be discontinued. The basis for the agreement is provided by proposals from the APC and other parties, which are to be examined by the government. The orderly return of party supporters who have been internally displaced or who have fled the country as a result of political intimidation, violence and harassment has also been agreed.

During her presentation of an EU report on the election, the head of the EU election monitoring mission in Sierra Leone once again mentioned recorded cases of the disproportionate use of force by state security forces and political violence in eight (of a total of 14) districts (cf. BN of 03.07.23). Citing the EU report, one medium has reported that a civil election monitoring group which voiced concerns about the election has been threatened. The group's leaders reportedly found themselves forced to flee the country.

AI: No reappraisal of fatal disturbances in August 2022; numerous unfair trials

AI reports that no truth, justice or redemption has been forthcoming as yet for victims of the fatal protests of August 2022 and their families. The final report published by a government-appointed committee of enquiry in March 2023 recommended training for police forces in the area of human rights, but did not call for an investigation into the disproportionate use of force in the protests. Dozens of people were killed when violence was used to quell the protests of 10.08.22 in Freetown and elsewhere, in which demonstrators vented their anger at sharp rises in the cost of living and also called in some instances for the resignation of president Julius Maada Bio (cf. BN of 03.07.23). According to AI, 515 people were arrested after the protests and charged with various criminal offences – from damage to property and arson through breaches of the law on demonstrations and seditious acts to murder. It emerges from witnesses' testimonies collected by AI that a number of those arrested were denied their right of access to legal counsel until their trials began and were subsequently sentenced to imprisonment without any evidence and on the sole basis of testimonies from the police officers who arrested them.

Sudan

Fighting continues

According to reports in the media, the fighting between the Sudanese army (SAF) and the paramilitary militia Rapid Support Forces (RSF) continues to spread. After largely gaining and maintaining control of Khartoum, the RSF is reportedly moving south towards Gezira State. Further fighting has also been reported in the cities of Nyala and El Obeid. Heavy fighting between SAF and RSF is also continuing in the capital, as the Sudanese army still has control over a number of military bases in the capital. Both SAF and RSF are making widespread use of artillery fire to attack

the territories held by their respective opponents. Residential areas and civilians are frequently also hit in these attacks.

Humanitarian situation

Doctors Without Borders (MSF) reports that no operations are being carried out for the time being at a hospital in the south of the capital, Khartoum. According to MSF, the military has prohibited the delivery of new surgical materials and equipment from an MSF store to hospitals in the south of Khartoum as of 08.09.23. Supplies at the hospitals are now exhausted.

Syria

Southern Syria: Drone attack on US troops

Minor injuries were reported after drone attacks on US troops at the Al-Tanf base in the south-east of Syria on 19.10.23. One drone was intercepted. No-one has been held responsible for the attack as yet. According to reports in the media, US troops in Iraq and Syria are on high alert on account of the war between the Israeli military and Hamas, particularly with regard to activities by Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria.

Damascus / Aleppo: Israeli air strikes stop airline operations once again

According to Syrian state media, the international airports in Damascus and Aleppo were damaged once again and remained inoperative as a result of air raids which are assumed to have been carried out by Israel (cf. BN of 16.10.23). One person was reportedly killed in the attacks.

Türkiye

Anti-Israeli and anti-American disturbances

In the wake of the reported destruction of a hospital in Gaza which has sparked international protests, demonstrations involving thousands of participants also took place in Türkiye on 17.10.23. Violence erupted in some instances - protesters attempted to enter the Israeli embassy in Ankara and the Israeli consulate general in Istanbul, for example. Fireworks were thrown at the consulate building and Israeli flags were burnt. In both cases, security forces prevented the protesters from entering the buildings. According to official information, 60 people were injured in the demonstration in Istanbul, including 43 police officers. Protests also took place in other parts of the country, including outside the US radar station in Kürecik and the US consulate in Adana, where stones and Molotov cocktails were thrown at the building from within the crowd. On 18.10.23 Turkish president Erdoğan declared three days of mourning for the Palestinians who are believed to have died in the hospital in Gaza. Israel has withdrawn its staff from Türkiye for the time being and called on Turkish nationals to leave the country as a matter of urgency.

Tunisia

Historical synagogue set on fire

On 17.10.23 a pro-Palestinian protest in the town of El Hamma against Israel's military attacks in the Gaza Strip is reported to have culminated in several hundred people setting fire to a disused synagogue. The historical Jewish site was reportedly seriously damaged, but no-one was harmed. Although there is no Jewish community in this Tunisian town, the synagogue was a pilgrimage site for people of the Jewish faith.

Ukraine

Civilian war victims; humanitarian and human rights situation

At least ten people were killed in total as a result of Russian attacks on 17.10. and 18.10.23 which hit residential buildings in Zaporizhzhia and the power supply infrastructure in the Kharkiv region, for example. Shelling of the

part of the Kherson region which is held by Ukraine continues. According to local information, one woman was killed and one injured in Beryslav on 20.10.23. Six employees died in an attack on a mail distribution centre in the Kharkiv region on 21.10.23. 17 people were injured, seven of whom are said to still be in a critical condition.

The general staff state that more than one third of the country's land area is contaminated with mines and explosive objects as a result of the war.

According to information from the Ukrainian authorities which has been taken up by the media, cultural assets were stolen, damaged or destroyed on a large scale to the value of several hundred million euros in the course of the invasion by the Russian Federation (RF). More than 600 buildings of cultural significance fell victim to the ransacking. After the city of Kherson was liberated, it emerged that some 16,000 objects were missing from the museum of art. 14 archaeological artefacts which a Russian stole from the occupied territories have reportedly now been recovered.

In connection with the transfer of children from Ukraine to the RF (cf. BN of 16.01., 20.03. and 03.04.23) and to Belarus, which is referred to as unlawful, in recent weeks there have been reports in the media concerning a number of small groups of repatriated children. The parliamentary commissioner for human rights announced on 21.10.23 that three children had recently been repatriated. There are various estimates as to the number of minors illegally taken from Ukraine. A report by the independent UN Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine which was presented on 20.10.23 concludes that the transfer of 31 children to the RF in May 2022 constitutes illegal deportation and thus a war crime.

The commission has reportedly also established cases of severe torture in the occupied territories, particularly on men suspected of collaborating with the Ukrainian army, and cases of rape in conjunction with other forms of violence. The investigations are also reported to have revealed three cases of human rights violations by the Ukrainian authorities against individuals suspected of collaborating with the RF.

Course of the war

The RF is reported to be attacking Ukrainian defensive positions along the front line from Kupiansk to Lyman (Kharkiv, Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts). The commander of the Ukrainian ground forces said on 16.10.23 that the situation there had escalated. According to president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the situation remains particularly difficult in Avdiivka, a city located directly to the north of Donetsk against which the Russian forces have launched a new offensive (cf. BN of 16.10.23), as well as in Marinka, to the west of Donetsk. The Ukrainian army is said to be holding its positions.

Abbot of Monastery of the Caves charged; possible ban on UPC

After being remanded in custody on 14.07.23 (cf. BN of 17.07.23), the abbot of the Kiev Monastery of the Caves, which belongs to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Ukrainian: Ukraïns'ka pravoslavna cerkva; UPC) has now been charged, according to reports in the media. He reportedly stands accused of violating the equality of citizens and of justifying and/or denying the existence of armed aggression against Ukraine.

It is further reported in the media that a bill to ban the UPC received broad approval in parliament in its first reading on 19.10.23. UPC's suspected collaboration with the RF is stated as providing the grounds for the potential ban. The UPC, which declared its independence from the Moscow Patriarchate in May 2022 (cf. BN of 12.12.22), denies the accusations and describes the bill as unconstitutional.

Venezuela

Government and opposition sign election agreement

Government representatives and opposition figures have agreed on guarantees for the presidential elections in the coming year in talks brokered by the Norwegian foreign ministry which were held in Barbados on 17.10.23. Both sides have undertaken to conduct fair election campaigns and to recognise the election result. The election is to take place in the second half of 2024 and is to be overseen by observers from the EU and the UN, among others. These were the first talks between the parties concerned since November 2022.

A number of issues remain unresolved, however, including the release of political prisoners and the lifting of bans preventing a number of opposition candidates from running in the elections, such as Maria Corina Machado, who leads the field in most polls.

Opposition alliance holds preliminary elections

The opposition held preliminary elections on 22.10.23 in order to put up a joint candidate for the presidential elections. With vote counting still in progress, former MP Maria Corina Machado has a clear lead, although the final results have yet to be announced. This is the first preliminary election to be held by the opposition for eleven years. It has not supported a presidential candidate since 2013.

USA eases sanctions against Venezuela

In a joint declaration by the USA, the EU, the United Kingdom and Canada, the agreement was described as a necessary step towards restoring democracy in Venezuela. In the light of the government's concessions to the opposition, the USA additionally announced an easing of the sanctions which were imposed in 2019. Among other things, this means that for the time being Venezuela will be able to produce oil and gas and mine gold without any restrictions and export these commodities to any markets.

Yemen

Houthi drones intercepted by US destroyer

On 19.10.23 a US navy destroyer stationed in the Red Sea intercepted three cruise missiles and a number of drones. According to a US Defense Department spokesman, these had been fired in a northerly direction by the Houthis in Yemen and were probably aimed at Israel.

A few days after the beginning of the current hostilities in Gaza, the leader of the Iran-backed Houthis, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, had threatened rocket and drone attacks, should the USA intervene in the conflict. The Houthis' official motto is "God Is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam".

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