

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

17 February 2020

Afghanistan

Suicide bombing in Kabul

On 11.02.20, a suicide bomber blew himself up near the Marshal Fahim Military Academy, killing at least six people (four soldiers and two civilians) in what was the first major assault in the Afghan capital since November 2019. At least another twelve persons, including five civilians, were injured. The Taliban has not yet claimed responsibility for the attack.

Agreement to “reduce violence”

On 15.02.20, it became known that the U.S. and the Taliban had reached an agreement to “reduce violence”, which is to apply from 17.02.20. In the deal, the Taliban have agreed to refrain from carrying out suicide bombings and missile attacks and to stop using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on roads. The agreement is to hold for one week and, if successful, will lead to a formal ceasefire and further peace negotiations. As far as can be seen, there have been no reports of such any such attacks being carried out since 15.02.20. Nevertheless, military clashes erupted and attacks were carried out against security forces (e.g. a police officer and his bodyguard were shot dead in Kandahar province, a military base was attacked in Kunduz province, a military helicopter was shot down in Nimroz according to Taliban sources, and security forces discovered and defused an explosive device on the Pule Khumri Highway in Baghlan).

Spread of diseases associated with the dropping of U.S. bombs

Afghan medical experts report that diseases associated with the dropping of U.S. bombs have spread throughout the whole of Afghanistan since the NATO invasion in late 2001. The diseases are said to be mainly skin diseases though there is also evidence that the eyes and internal organs may be impacted. In the district of Achin in the eastern province of Nangarhar in particular where the “mother of all bombs” was dropped in 2017, locals say they have been affected by mysterious illnesses. More than 7,000 air strikes were carried out in 2019, both by the U.S. and the Afghan Air Force.

Sexual assaults go unpunished

Two recent cases in Afghanistan highlight the failure of authorities to prosecute sexual assault implicating powerful people, Human Rights Watch has said. Examples include the assaults on hundreds of boys in Logar by teachers, officials and others, as well as accusations by female players for the Afghan national football team of repeated sexual assaults by officials in recent years. In none of the cases were any of the higher-ranking persons involved called to account. In the case of the boys from Logar, members of an Afghan human rights group who made the events public were instead threatened and arrested. Two of the activists left Afghanistan after they were released. Some of the victims are said to have been killed by their families or others. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) also concludes in a report of November 2019 that violence against women, including sexual violence, has increased.

Cameroon

Massacre in Ntumbo village

On 16.02.20, James Nunan, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, announced that up to 22 villagers, including 14 children, had been killed by armed men in the village of Ntumbo, Northwest Region on 14.02.20. It is not yet clear whether the massacre was committed by Cameroonian security forces or by armed separatists fighting for the secession of the two English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions.

Cameroon/Nigeria

Flight movement to Nigeria

On 13.02.20, UNHCR reported that within the last 14 days almost 8,000 people have fled the two Cameroonian Northwest and Southwest Regions to the two adjoining Nigerian states of Taraba and Cross River. They fled the ongoing violent clashes between armed separatists and security forces in the run-up to the parliamentary and municipal elections held in Cameroon on 09.02.20. This has brought the number of Cameroonian refugees in Nigeria to almost 60,000. According to UN estimates, there are more than 679,000 internally displaced persons in Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest Regions.

China

Covid-19 continues to spread

The WHO has named the respiratory disease caused by a coronavirus (official name now Sars-CoV-2) Covid-19 (COrona VIRus Disease). The latter continues to spread. To date, 70,548 infections have been officially confirmed in China and 1,770 people have died. More than 700 cases have been confirmed so far outside the People's Republic.

Hong Kong: protests

The number of protests died down in the wake of the district council elections held in November 2019, which were successful for the democracy movement and reflected the impression that the coronavirus was spreading. After the first infections were reported in Hong Kong on 22.01.20, planned demonstrations were cancelled. Occasionally smaller spontaneous protests were held. The protest movement is looking for other ways of resistance. The number of newly formed trade unions is growing. According to official figures, 27 trade unions had been established by early February 2020 (2019: 23; 2018: 13). New trade unions and democracy advocacy groups supported a strike by healthcare workers in early February 2020. They criticised the lack of official measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus and demanded, among other things, the closure of the borders with the rest of China. In addition, protest is being reflected in purchasing behaviour: companies and shops are being labelled yellow (supporting the democracy movement) or blue (pro-government) and purchasing behaviour is being aligned accordingly.

By mid-January 2020, 7,019 people had been arrested in connection with the protests, 1,092 of whom were charged. 38 persons were sentenced, twelve of them to prison sentences of up to 14 months.

On 15.02.20 and 16.02.20, demonstrations were held in various parts of the city against the establishment of quarantine centres for the control of Covid-19. In some cases, violent clashes erupted with the police.

Eritrea/Ethiopia

TPLF blamed for instability in Ethiopia

Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki has accused the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) of creating hurdles to resolve the unsettled border issue with neighbouring Ethiopia. Calling the TPLF the "failed political group" in Tigray, he blamed the organisation for blocking the peace plan. Isaias was referring to the disputed lands in Badme town and surrounding areas that are currently administered by the Tigray state of Ethiopia (1998-2000). Ethiopia did not accept the ruling by an independent commission that awarded the disputed area

to Eritrea until Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared in mid-2018 that he intended to withdraw Ethiopian troops from the occupied territories. This has not yet been implemented, as the TPLF is preventing the withdrawal of the military.

Since the collapse of the socialist military dictatorship in May 1991, Ethiopia has been ruled by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), an ethno-regional party alliance in which the TPLF had claimed leadership and brought central positions of the power apparatus and the economy under its control, which gradually ended when Prime Minister Abiy took office in April 2018.

Isaias made it clear that he still considers the TPLF to be a threat to Eritrea, which is trying to divide the population along ethnic lines. With the continued construction of refugee camps, he said the TPLF and the UNHCR are jointly responsible for ensuring that young people continue to leave the country, thereby contributing to Eritrea's brain drain.

Observers also consider these statements to be the reason for the Eritrean government's hesitation to reform the national service, in particular to limit the duration of national service once again to the 18 months provided for by the proclamation. In addition, it should be borne in mind that the entire national economy is based on the national service and that rigorous demobilisation would lead, among other things, to high unemployment. The Eritrean leadership also fears social unrest in this respect.

Reference to Ethiopia's domestic problems

According to the president, Ethiopia has faced unfolding ethnic clashes, instability and social unrest, leaving the nation at a crossroads, which Eritrea is closely following and preparing to respond accordingly. He further commented that the forthcoming Ethiopian elections should be postponed due to the political crisis in the country.

Ethiopia is due to hold parliamentary elections in September 2020, the first in which Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who has been in power since April 2018, will face the Ethiopian electorate.

Ethiopia

Law against hate speech and disinformation

Ethiopia's Parliament has passed a controversial law against hate speech and disinformation. The government's goal is to curb hate speech and disinformation in the media and on social media. The new law permits fines of up to 100,000 Ethiopian birr (EUR 2,900) and imprisonment for up to five years for anyone who shares or creates social media posts that are deemed to result in violence or disturbance of public order. Human rights activists say that the law violates the constitutional guarantee of free speech and feel it could be used to silence critics, as the terms for "hate speech" and "disinformation" are vague.

However, the government considers the law to be necessary, as it holds the media partly responsible for the growing ethnic violence in the country. Tensions are expected to rise in the run-up to the landmark elections scheduled for 29.08.20.

India

Result of the elections in New Delhi

The Common Man Party (Aam-Aadmi-Party, (AAP)) won 62 of 70 seats in the Delhi Legislative Assembly election (cf. BN of 10.02.20). The AAP, led by Arvind Kejriwal, is committed to fighting corruption. During the election campaign, it focused on local issues such as improving education and health care, subsidies for water and electricity for socially disadvantaged citizens, and security for women. The remaining eight seats were allocated to the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The Congress Party (INC) did not win any seats.

Iran

Iran court upholds long prison sentences for anti-hijab women activists

According to their lawyer, a Tehran Court of Appeal sentenced two young Iranian women and their mother to a total of over 31 years in prison on 05.02.20. According to Iranian law, the highest sentence must be served if several convictions are handed down at the same time. For this reason, the three women must each serve five and a half years in prison for association and collusion against national security, encouraging prostitution by defying the veiling laws, and disseminating propaganda against the state.

The women had dropped their headscarves in Tehran underground while offering flowers to other women on 08.03.19 on the occasion of the International Women's Day.

Dissemination of "Non-Islamic symbols"

The public prosecutor's office of the city of Ghom has threatened to impose strict punishments for the dissemination of anti-cultural symbols such as Valentine's Day. The prosecution authorities would thus be responding to the demands of concerned families, the news agency ISNA reported on 13.02.20. Valentine's Day is rejected by the Shiite regime as a symbol of Western lifestyle and an example of cultural invasion. According to the news agency, businesses that fail to comply with relevant orders face a ban on trading for at least six months.

Prison sentence for judge in Kahrizak trial

According to reports issued by the news portal Hamshahrionline on 10.02.20 (Hamshahri, which means "Fellow Citizen" in English, is an Iranian daily newspaper), the judge Ali Akbar Heidarifard has been sentenced to 18 months in prison. He had protestors of the Green Movement arrested during the riots which followed the controversial 2009 presidential elections and sent to the Kahrizak prison (on the southern outskirts of the city of Rey, 15 km south of the outskirts of Tehran which was closed at the instruction of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on 28.07.09). Heidarifard was also sentenced to 15 years in prison in another trial on charges of corruption and the use of firearms. At least four detainees in the camp succumbed to their injuries. They had been severely mistreated along with several hundred other protesters during the riots at the camp. In addition to Heidarifard, another judge, Hassan Zareh Dehnavi, and the then Tehran prosecutor, Said Mortasawi, were also charged. He was considered Heidarifard's "right-hand man". Mortasawi was acquitted. Heidarifard, Mortasawi and Zare Dehnavi are no longer permitted to serve as judges.

Qud leadership confirms Syria deployment

An official report issued by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Pasdaran) confirms for the first time the active role the Iranian Quds brigades ("Jerusalem Brigades", elite special unit of the Pasdaran for extraterritorial operations) already played in supporting Syria's President Bashar al-Assad during the political protests of 2011. Up to now, Iran had justified its military presence in Syria (military advisors only) with the fight against ISIS. There are currently no troops on the ground.

Iraq

Thousands of women take to the streets to march for their rights

On 13.02.20, thousands of women took part in a march on the streets of Baghdad and other cities in southern Iraq to express their solidarity with the anti-government demonstrations. The women also called for gender equality. Iraqi women have been actively involved in the movement since the protests began.

Iraq/Syria

Number of refugees at Bardarash Camp

According to the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (JCC) of the Kurdistan Regional Government, 20,790 refugees from Syria have been accommodated mainly at Bardarash Camp since 14.10.19.

Kosovo

New government commences work

The democratically legitimised change of government in Kosovo sends out an important signal for the Western Balkans region. The new coalition government under Albin Kurti was confirmed by parliament on 03.02.20 (cf. BN of 10.02.20). Observers hope this will herald the dawn of a new political era.

A positive signal was the withdrawal of the doubling of ministerial salaries, which the previous government had put into effect at the beginning of 2018.

Prime Minister Albin Kurti made his first trip abroad to neighbouring Albania on 11.02.20. An important topic of the talks with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama was the expansion and deepening of bilateral cooperation.

Lebanon

Syrian refugees face extreme hardship as blizzards hit region

Syrian refugees in the Bekaa plain and in Aarsal face extreme hardship as blizzards and rain sweep across the region. In June 2019, Syrian refugees were ordered to tear down dwellings made of solid walls, meaning that many now live in makeshift tents (see BN of 17.06.19). According to reports, heating oil and food in particular are becoming scarce. The deteriorating economic situation is also affecting the Syrian population in Lebanon. Since Lebanese banks have imposed restrictions on cash withdrawals, it has been difficult for many Syrian refugees to receive financial support.

Libya

Use of cluster bombs by LNA

Human Rights Watch (HRW) announced on 13.02.20 that they found remnants of two RBK-250 PTAB 2.5M cluster bombs during a site visit where Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) had carried out an attack in early December 2019. These are 250 kg cluster bombs originally produced by the Soviet Union.

Fighting in Tripoli

On 13.02.20, several missile attacks were carried out, among others on Mitiga Airport, which temporarily suspended all air traffic. There are also reports of civilian casualties, for instance in the Hayy Dimashq area in the south of the city.

Mali

Attack on a village in Mopti region

On 14.02.20, an armed attack was carried out on the village of Ogossagou in central Mali. According to the government, at least 31 people were killed in the attack. Initial reports claim at least 21 persons were killed and several persons were reported missing. So far, nothing is known about the perpetrators. In March 2019, an armed attack was carried out on the village of Ogossagou, in which more than 150 civilians were killed.

Nigeria

AI: army reportedly burned down three villages and took villagers to a camp

In a report published on 14.02.20, Amnesty International (AI) accuses the security forces of burning down villages and forcibly displacing the population in response to increasing attacks by Boko Haram in Borno State, particularly along the important road linking Maiduguri (capital of Maiduguri State) and Damaturu (capital of Yobe State). On 03.01.20, the two villages of Bucharti and Matiri were reportedly burned down by soldiers and more than 400 men, women and children were taken on trucks to a camp for internally displaced persons. The following day, the neighbouring village of Ngariri was also burned to the ground. Since the younger population had fled, it was mainly older men and women who had been brought to a camp. Six men

from the above-mentioned villages were also arbitrarily detained and beaten before they were released on 30.01.20.

Islamists kill civilians near Maiduguri

On 09.02.20, suspected militants of the terrorist organisation Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) (the offshoot of Boko Haram that has declared its loyalty to ISIS) attacked the village of Auno, located about 25 km west of Borno State's capital Maiduguri. The militants killed at least 30 people who were caught in a roadblock in Auno on their way to Maiduguri when security forces near Auno closed the road in the evening as they do every evening. Most of the victims were travellers who burned to death while sleeping in their (18) vehicles during an overnight stop. In addition, the militants reportedly hijacked three buses in which an unknown number of women and children were reportedly travelling.

North Macedonia

Parliament ratifies NATO Accession Protocol

According to recent media reports, the Parliament unanimously ratified the NATO Accession Protocol at a formal sitting on 11.02.20. The Accession Protocol, signed in February 2019 at NATO headquarters in Brussels, has thus been ratified by all states except Spain which has yet to signal its approval. With the ratification by the Parliament in Madrid scheduled for March 2020, Northern Macedonia has moved a step closer to becoming the military alliance's 30th member.

Pakistan/India

Prison sentence for leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba

On 12.02.20, an anti-terrorism court in Pakistan sentenced hardline Islamist cleric Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, leader of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorist organisation to 11 years in jail for financing terrorist operations. The man is accused of masterminding the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks that killed 161 people. Saeed has been wanted by India for years and has been designated a global terrorist by both the UN and the U.S. Saeed is also the official leader of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), a charity organisation that emerged from the LeT. Saeed's conviction comes a week before the Paris-based FATF discusses Pakistan's progress in curbing terror financing.

Russian Federation

Protests against planned constitutional reform

On 15.02.20, Tagesschau.de reported, without dating the events, that fresh demonstrations had taken place in protest against the constitutional reform announced by President Vladimir Putin, which aims to restructure the political organisation of the State Council, parliament, government and president and which critics see as giving Putin scope to maintain his power. According to the organisers, 3,000 people turned out in Moscow, while the police put the figure at 300. A civil rights organisation said that other protest meetings had taken place in St. Petersburg, Arkhangelsk and Ulan-Ude. According to this source, several people were arrested in St. Petersburg.

Men sentenced to prison for membership of terrorist group

On 10.02.20, a Penza city court sentenced seven men to prison terms of between six and eighteen years for membership of a terrorist organisation and for possession of prohibited weapons and explosives. Three of the men were also charged with attempting to sell illegal drugs. According to investigators, the men planned attacks aimed at destabilising public order during the presidential election and the football World Cup that took place in the country in 2018. Human rights groups criticised the trial as having been engineered by abusing anti-terrorism laws on the basis of statements made against the men by torture victims. The men denied the charge of being members of the anti-fascist group known as Set, meaning Network, even though they shared the group's views. According to Amnesty International, the trial was designed to silence the men politically.

Somalia

Men executed for rape

Two men were executed in Bosaso, Puntland on 11.02.20 for the gang rape and murder of a twelve-year-old girl. The execution of a third man has reportedly been delayed. The girl, Aisha Ilyes Aden, had been abducted at a market in Galkayo in February 2019. Her body was found near her home the following morning. The incident triggered public outrage and demonstrations. The trial was the first in Somalia in which DNA was used to identify the perpetrators. However, convictions in cases of violence against women are still rare in Somalia.

Syria

Large parts of Aleppo back under government control

Syrian state media reported on 16.02.20 that the rebels had been driven almost completely out of the northwestern province. Activists said that Syrian regime forces had captured the towns of Anadan and Haritan with the aid of Russian air strikes and Iranian-backed militias. They reported that the rebels had had to abandon a total of 13 villages and small towns in the west of the province. The territorial gains also serve to secure the provincial capital Aleppo, which, although it has been under government control for some time, has repeatedly been exposed to bombardment from nearby rebel-held areas.

The Turkish-occupied areas in northern Aleppo and a smaller strip of land that can still be counted as being under the control of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have not been affected by the government offensive.

Northwest: large-scale refugee movements

A UN report published on 13.02.20 stated that more than 140,000 people had been displaced in the preceding three days alone. It said that since 01.12.19, when the last government offensive against the remaining rebel-held area in and around Idlib began, the number of displaced persons had been estimated at over 800,000, at least 60% of these being children.

550,000 of the 800,000 displaced persons are reported to have moved to other towns and villages within Idlib province. The remaining 250,000 have reportedly fled to the Turkish-occupied northern part of Aleppo province. Almost three million people are currently reported to be living in the northern border area of Idlib. The UN warns of an imminent humanitarian disaster.

Attack in Tal Abyad

According to Turkish state media reports, several civilians were killed in a car bomb explosion in Turkish-occupied northeastern Syria on 16.02.20. The Turkish Defence Ministry blamed the Kurdish YPG militia for the attack and confirmed that two people had been killed and five injured. Two suspects were captured, and it was reported that a second attack was already being prepared.

Qamishli: clash between US military and government troops

On 12.02.20, one person was killed in a rare confrontation between Syrian government troops and the US military in SDF-controlled areas. The Pentagon confirmed the incident, in which Syrian pro-government forces refused to let the Americans pass at a checkpoint. A number of local residents probably took advantage of the situation to attack the convoy. The incident reportedly led to an exchange of fire in which an unidentified Syrian was killed. The Russian Defence Ministry stated that it was only the arrival of a Russian patrol that eventually enabled the situation to be de-escalated, a statement which the Americans immediately rejected.

The security situation in northeastern Syria has become much more confused since the announcement of the U.S. withdrawal. In addition to the remaining 500 or so US military personnel, Syrian central government and Russian security forces have since been patrolling a number of predetermined areas of the region. Recently, there have been reports that agreements reached on the partitioning of these areas are increasingly being broken.

Turkey

Aslı Erdoğan acquitted

The criminal proceedings in Turkey that have been ongoing for almost three years ended with an acquittal on 14.02.20 for the Turkish novelist Aslı Erdoğan, who has been living in exile in Germany for more than two years. The judges in Istanbul found her and two other defendants not guilty of membership of a terrorist organisation and undermining national unity. The court also dropped the charges spreading terrorist propaganda. Erdoğan wrote columns for the pro-Kurdish newspaper Özgür Gündem, which was closed down after the attempted coup in July 2016 on charges of links to the banned Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK). Several employees, including Aslı Erdoğan, were arrested and charged with supporting terrorism.

Venezuela

Possible arrest of Guaidó

On 14.02.20, Nicolas Maduro announced that the arrest of his rival Juan Guaidó would come and that the authorities had not detained him because the courts had not ordered it. Since Venezuela's judiciary cannot be seen as independent, this is internationally viewed as a threat against Guaidó and the organised opposition.

Guaidó returns from a trip abroad

After a three-week trip abroad to Washington, Brussels and Davos, Juan Guaidó, who was elected interim president by parliament in 2019, was able to re-enter the country without any difficulty despite the travel ban imposed on him. At the airport, he was greeted by a throng of cheering supporters, however, fighting broke out between his followers and Maduro's supporters. For Guaidó's uncle Juan José Márque, the situation was different: officials detained him at the airport, accusing him of trying to smuggle "dangerous materials", including explosives, into Venezuela. The case is unclear as there have been repeated accounts and reports of repressive measures against relatives and close associates of opposition members in recent months.

Yemen

Many killed in airstrikes

On 15.02.20, 31 civilians were reportedly killed and 12 others injured during air strikes in Al-Hayjah in the district of Al-Maslub in the governorate of Al-Jawf. The air strikes came hours after a coalition-led fighter plane crashed in the area. The Houthi rebels claimed to have shot down the plane, but Saudi Arabia denies this. Since mid-January 2020, armed conflict has escalated in several districts of the Marib, Al-Jawf and Sanaa governorates. At least 4,700 families have been displaced, according to the UN.