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Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

25 November 2019

Afghanistan

Exchange of prisoners

Last week, the Taliban freed two foreign professors from the American University in Kabul whom they had held since 2016. They were released in the southern province of Zabul. In return, the Afghan government transferred three high-ranking members of the Taliban, including Anas Haqqani, the younger brother of the leader of the Haqqani network, to Doha (Qatar), where the Taliban have a liaison office (cf. BN of 18.11.19).

Presidential elections

The results of the elections held on 28.09.19 are still outstanding. Following initial reports from the Independent Election Commission (IEC) that 2.7 million votes were cast (out of a total electorate of 9.7 million), the figure was revised on 02.11.19 to only 1.8 million votes. According to a statement on 12.11.2019, there were also difficulties with the transmission of biometric data and server problems. The closure of a number of provincial offices of the IEC at the behest of certain candidates allegedly led to further delays. In view of the discrepancies and confusion in the elections, observers fear a similar situation to in 2014, when president Ghani and CEO Abdullah both declared themselves winners. It is expected to be neck and neck between these two candidates once again. This time, it is likely that neither will achieve an absolute majority, necessitating a second ballot. This will probably be scheduled for the spring of 2020.

Attacks on healthcare facilities

The World Health Organization (WHO) has reported that numerous attacks on healthcare facilities have taken place once again in 2019 (as per 17.11.19). Six facilities have been destroyed, 25 damaged, 193 closed and 34 reopened. 18 medical personnel have been killed, 28 injured and 25 arrested. Seven have since been released. 23 of the country's 34 provinces have been affected, with the highest number of incidents occurring in Nangarhar.

Albania

Judicial reform

In its 2019 Report on Albania, the European Commission concludes that the judicial reform process which is underway in Albania has led to improvements, but that much remains to be done.

The aim of the reform process, which was launched in 2014, is to ensure the independence of judges and public prosecutors and to dismantle the links which exist between the judicial system, politicians and criminal organisations.

The Commission's report welcomes the establishment of institutions to enable self-government of the judiciary and the continuation of the judicial evaluation process.

One example of this process is the ongoing vetting of all judges and public prosecutors, checking individual qualifications and possible links to organised crime. Of the judges and public prosecutors evaluated to date, around half have been confirmed as fit for office.

A specific point of criticism raised with regard to the judicial reform process is the growing backlog of pending cases, which the report alleges to have doubled since 2015, to a current tally of 28,863.

Algeria

Further demonstrations

22.11.19 saw demonstrations held in the streets of Algiers and other cities throughout the country for the 40th time, with ever more people taking part in the protests in recent weeks. They are calling for a free Algeria and free elections, an end to government by members of the old elite and to interference by the military, and they reject a military state. They want the presidential election to be postponed until new candidates without links to the old elite are found. Army chief Gaid is insisting on 12.12.19 as the date for the election, in order to lead the country out of its current crisis. Dozens of people have reportedly been detained since the election campaign got underway on 17.11.19, some receiving 18-month prison sentences. Human rights organisations report that 29 people were arrested on 20.11.19 and more than 80 people on 21.11.19 during night-time demonstrations against the election date.

Bolivia

Preparing the ground for a new beginning

Following on from the senate, the house of representatives has also approved a bill which declares the result of the presidential election in October 2019 null and void. The bill prohibits all politicians who have held office continuously throughout the past two legislative periods from running for the same post again. This means that former president Evo Morales cannot run for presidential office again. The self-appointed interim president, Jeanine Áñez, rejected amnesty for Morales.

More than 30 people have died to date in violent protests by supporters of the former head of state which have been a regular occurrence since Morales resigned on 10.11.19 and fled into exile (cf. BN of 11./18.11.19).

China

Xinjiang: Internal documents on camps

Confidential documents of the Communist Party of China from 2017 and 2018 which have been leaked to investigative journalists describe how the persecution and internment of Uighurs in particular in re-education camps in Xinjiang was organised. The papers, known as the “China Cables”, provide instructions on how life is to be organised at the camps and on strict surveillance of the Uighurs both in the camps and outside. They essentially confirm reports by observers and former camp inmates, and refute the official Chinese version which claims the camps are merely vocational training establishments.

Hong Kong: Democratic camp dominates local elections

Initial results indicate that the democratic camp won at least 278 of the 452 district councillor’s posts which were contested in the local elections on 24.11.19 and took control of at least twelve out of 18 district councils. Turnout stood at an unprecedented 71.2 %. More than 1,000 candidates contested the seats. The district councils attend to local administrative matters and have barely no influence on Hong Kong politics. Against the background of the protests which have been going on for months now, the elections nevertheless provide a general indication of public opinion. To date, all 18 councils have been controlled by forces loyal to Beijing.

Hong Kong: Protests

Police have surrounded the Polytechnic University, which has been occupied by students since 18.11.19 (see BN of 18.11.19). Students attempting to flee were detained. Around 800 people who cooperated with the police left the university peacefully by 19.11.19. These included 300 minors, who the police released after taking their details. The others were also detained. Several dozens people remain barricaded in the cordoned-off university.

Hong Kong: People’s Republic claims sovereignty over constitution

On 19.11.19 Jian Tiewei, spokesman of the committee on legal affairs of the National People’s Congress, described the lifting of the ban on face coverings by a Hong Kong court on 18.11.19 (cf. BN of 18.11.19) as

unlawful. He stated that only the Standing Committee of the parliament of the People's Republic could decide whether a law was in accordance with Hong Kong's constitution.

Colombia

Demonstrations, general strike

According to official information, some 200,000 people followed the call of unions, students, opposition figures and various organisations for a general strike and protests against the policies of the right-wing conservative government led by Iván Duque on 22.11.19. Critical issues targeted in the demonstrations criticism included corruption, planned economic and social reforms, violence against social activists and inadequate implementation of the peace agreement with the rebel organisation Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). In addition to the capital, Bogotá, demonstrations also took place in Medellín, Cali, Cartagena, Barranquilla, Buenaventura and other cities, leading in some instances to violent clashes with security forces. In Bogotá, demonstrators set fire to barricades, destroyed bus stops and attacked shops. The police responded with water canon and tear gas. A night-time curfew was imposed in Cali on 22.11.19 and in Bogotá on 23.11.19. At least three people died in the protests and many were injured. 230 arrests were made in Bogotá alone.

DR Congo

ADF rebels kill civilians

According to information from the military, rebels of the Islamist Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) killed at least seven civilians outside the city of Beni in the eastern province of North Kivu in the night from 19. to 20.11.19. In addition, two soldiers were wounded and several people are missing. The rebels attacked the village of Mavete in the Beni region on the same night, killing twelve residents. They also set a church on fire and abducted several villagers. The attacks are seen as reprisals for the offensive launched by the army on 30.10.19 with the aim of driving the ADF - an Islamist group originating from Uganda - out of the woodland close to the Ugandan border. At least 70 people have reportedly been killed by the rebels to date.

Ethiopia

Sidama vote for their own regional state

In a referendum held on 20.11.19, the Sidama ethnic group in the south of Ethiopia voted by a large majority in favour of founding its own regional state. The electoral commission announced that around 98.5 % of voters were for greater autonomy. Sidama will thus become the tenth partially autonomous state in the country. The ballot went off peacefully - in contrast to July 2019, when the government's announcement that it intended to postpone the referendum for five months led to clashes between security forces and Sidama activists which claimed at least 17 lives.

Background

The Sidama make up around 4 % of Ethiopia's total population (approx. 109 million). They are the largest ethnic group in the multi-ethnic regional state Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), however, and have been calling for independence for some years now. The area of around 10,000 square kilometres which they inhabit is roughly equivalent in size to Kosovo or Lebanon. In establishing regional independence, the Sidama seek first and foremost to achieve political representation, to regain control of natural resources and to strengthen their cultural identity.

Ethiopia is divided up into nine regional states and two independent cities, with the corresponding borders based on ethnicity, language and settlement areas. While the right to autonomy is enshrined in the federal constitution, it has only become a realistic proposition as a result of the reform policies of prime minister Abiy Ahmed, who has been in office since April 2018. This has led to growing ethnic nationalism, however which has given rise to violent conflicts and seen people displaced from their homes. Critics of the referendum fear

the break-up of Ethiopia, should other ethnic groups follow the Sidama's example. In the SNNPR region alone, at least ten groups are seeking to hold referendums on autonomy. Similar demands are also emerging in the regions in Amhara and Tigray.

Georgia

Injuries and arrests at demonstrations

The initially peaceful demonstrations in the capital, Tbilisi, on 16./17.11.19 escalated into clashes with the deployed security forces. The police used water canons. According to official reports on 18.11.19, at least two demonstrators and two members of the security forces were injured. The police made 37 arrests. Demonstrations have been ongoing in Georgia for ten days now, because a promised reform of the electoral system has failed to be passed by parliament. Under the reform, the parliamentary election scheduled for the autumn of 2020 was to be based entirely on proportional representation. To date, a complicated electoral system combining direct and proportional representation has been in place. In the demonstrators' view, this has placed the opposition parties at a disadvantage and helped the ruling Georgian Dream party to achieve absolute majorities in parliamentary elections.

Guinea-Bissau

Presidential election

On 24.11.19 around 700,000 eligible voters were called upon to cast their votes. Twelve candidates ran for the presidential office, with incumbent president José Mario Vaz standing for a second term. In the election campaign, both he and his strongest election rival, Domingos Simoes Pereira from the PAIGC independence party, promised to take a stand against the all-powerful corrupt elite and to support the impoverished people. Despite the comparatively peaceful election campaigning, observers fear violence may erupt after the announcement of the election results. The first results are expected at the beginning of this week. A second ballot, planned for 29.12.19, is likely.

India

National register of citizens on the horizon?

Interior minister Amit Shah stated on 20.11.19 that India is intending to introduce a national register of citizens (NRC). Critics fear disadvantages for all non-Hindu religious minorities, particularly Muslims. They see their fears confirmed by the recently published list of citizens in the north-eastern state of Assam, which leaves out almost two million Muslim Bengalis, rendering them to all intents and purposes stateless (cf. BN of 02.09.19).

Iran

Protests and unrest peter out

Rationing and rising petrol prices led to initially peaceful protests in mid-November, which escalated into violent clashes between demonstrators and police following heavy-handed action by the security forces. According to an ai bulletin on 12.11.19, the protests have petered out as a result of the extremely tough action taken against demonstrators first and foremost by the pasdaran and its affiliated Basij force. The fact that the internet was shut down in response to the unrest throughout the country was a further contributory factor. Experts see this blocking of the internet as part of the regime's so-called policy of silence, aimed at avoiding further tension in the country. A spokesman for the national security council told the Isna news agency on 20.11.19 that the internet would not be made available again until security had been fully restored throughout the country.

Pasdarans declare protests over

According to the Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami, the government has regained complete control in Iran. A Revolutionary Guards spokesman stated that the unrest and protests against higher petrol prices had been ended thanks to timely action by the police and the pasdaran. "The leaders have already been identified and arrested in the cities, and this was one factor which has brought the unrest to an end," said pasdaran spokesman Ramesan Sharif. According to Iranian media, most of those arrested are allegedly supporters of the Shah's family. As such, some of them face the death sentence.

Protests leave more than 100 dead

According to ai, the nationwide protests in Iran against higher petrol prices claimed at least 106 lives in 21 cities. ai's assessment is at odds with the figures published by the state-controlled media, which put the death toll since 15.11.19 at four demonstrators, four members of the pasdaran and two policemen. Around 1,000 people have reportedly been arrested. According to a report in the "Kejhan" ("Universe") newspaper, several leaders of the protests face the death penalty. The newspaper reported on 19.11.19 that rather than protesting against the rising price and rationing of petrol, the leaders concerned were intent on sabotage and destruction. Kejhan is the mouthpiece of the ultra-conservatives in Iran.

Well-known dissident re-arrested

Workers' activist Sepideh Gholian, who was only recently released from custody on bail, was arrested once again on 16.11.19 for taking part in one of the latest protests against the government. The 23 year-old student was initially arrested on 18.11.18 during a workers' protest against outstanding pay in the province of Khuzestan. She was forced by torture to make a confession on state TV. She was subsequently sentenced to 18 years in prison, but was temporarily released on bail at the beginning of November 2018.

Kurdish singer charged with homosexuality

According to reports from the Kurdistan Human Rights Network and Iran News Wire, Mohsen Lorestani, a prominent Kurdish singer from Kermanshah, has been publicly charged before a court in Teheran with spreading "corruption on earth" ("Mofzed bil Arz" - based on Art. 183 to 196 of the Iranian penal code) on account of his sexual orientation. The prosecution's main allegation reportedly centres on the publication of immoral content on social media.

Iraq

Demonstrations continue

Protests against the political leadership have been ongoing for weeks now. People are demonstrating above all in Baghdad and in the south of the country. The demonstrations are aimed in particular at corruption and the poor economic situation. The demonstrators are calling for the government to step down and for a new political system. More than 320 people have been killed and thousands injured since the beginning of the protests. Human rights organisations accuse the security forces of taking excessively tough action against the protests. The latest press reports refer to renewed clashes in Baghdad and other provinces in the south. The security forces have allegedly used tear gas and live ammunition. Live ammunition and tear gas have reportedly also been used in Nasiriyah, in the southern province of Dhi Qar, to break up a crowd of people who had occupied three bridges in the city. At least three people were killed and more than 50 injured. Another press report puts the number of people injured at over 70. Protests in the provinces of Kerbala, Najaf, Qadissiyah, Wassit, Maysan and Basra have also resulted in deaths and injuries.

Security incidents unrelated to the protests

Security incidents unrelated to the protests also continue to occur, particularly in the provinces of Ninive, Salahaddin, Babil, Kirkuk and Diyla.

Operations by Iraqi security forces against IS

One IS fighter was killed and materials such as fuel and equipment were destroyed in a security operation against IS on 19.11.19.

Six IS fighters were killed in a security operation against IS fighters in Ninive province on 23.11.19. Guns, grenades and other items of equipment were also seized.

Syrian refugees

IOM reports that a total of 16,827 people crossed the border into Iraq between 14.10.19 and 24.11.19. All new arrivals are currently being bussed to the Bardarash camp in Ninive province. The refugees are being sheltered at the camps in Bardarash, Domiz and Gawilan.

Lebanon

Demonstrators prevent parliamentary session

Roads were blocked around the government building in Beirut on 19.11.19. Demonstrators prevented parliamentarians from entering the building, forcing a session of parliament to be postponed. This was the first planned session for two months. A contentious bill for an amnesty law was among the topics on the agenda. No new government has been formed since prime minister Saad Hariri resigned on 29.10.19 (see BN of 04.11.19).

Clashes between Hezbollah supporters and demonstrators

Demonstrators blocked main roads and bridges in Beirut and the surrounding area on 25.11.19. This gave rise to clashes between demonstrators and supporters of Hezbollah and Amal. Security forces formed a blockade to separate the two groups and deployed tear gas.

The protests which have been occurring since 17.10.19 have gone off largely peacefully. There are nevertheless occasional clashes between demonstrators and supporters of Hezbollah and Amal (cf. BN of 28.10.19).

Arrests during protests

Five juveniles, including three minors, were detained briefly in Beirut on 23.11.19. They are charged with having torn down a poster of the Free Patriotic Movement party. The juveniles were reportedly released after a few hours.

The committee of lawyers to defend demonstrators has announced that some 300 arrests (including twelve minors) took place in connection with the demonstrations between 17.10.19 and 18.11.19. It reports that 19 people remain in custody, while the others have been released. The committee has further documented 76 cases of violence against demonstrators to date by state security forces and suspected supporters of the ruling parties.

Libya

Women's police station closed until further notice

In Benghazi, the only police station staffed solely by women has been closed until further notice and the personnel have been detained for questioning. It is suspected that one of the policewomen leaked a video of an interrogation on social media in which a woman confesses to having planned and carried out a crime which involved a woman being kidnapped, raped and killed. In her confession, she incriminates several members of the police.

Reactions to the Berlin process

The conference on Libya in Berlin has prompted various comments from key political figures, for the most part of a negative nature. A spokesman for Khalifa Haftar, Ahmed al-Mismari, stated that the results are not binding and the solution is to be found by military rather than political means. In Abdulrahman Sewehli, a member of the presidential council, and thus nominally one of the highest-ranking members of the Government of National Accord (LNA), stated that there could be no solution which included a role for Khalifa Haftar.

Mali

Attack on military patrol

30 soldiers were reportedly killed, 29 injured and 17 jihadists were killed in an attack by suspected jihadists on a military patrol on 18.11.19. The attack took place in Tabankort in the north-east of the Gao region at the border with Niger during a military operation conducted together with the Nigerian army. This is the third major attack on Malian forces in the space of two months.

Pakistan

Ex-prime minister Sharif leaves the country

One month after being released from prison on bail for health reasons, ex-prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who was sentenced to seven years imprisonment for corruption last year, has left the country bound for London, where he is to undergo medical treatment. He arrived on 20.11.19 and was met by members of his family.

Mobilisation campaign for women

On 24.11.19 the Women on Wheels initiative began in the city of Karachi (Sindh province) in southern Pakistan, aimed at improving everyday mobility for women. Subsidised motorcycles and traffic safety training are on offer. There are also opportunities for networking between women participating in the initiative. This campaign has previously been launched in larger cities of Punjab province (Lahore, Multan, Faisalabad, Sargodha and Rawalpindi).

Syria

Fighting in Idlib

Opposition activists report that at least 15 civilians were killed when Syrian government troops bombed a camp for displaced persons in Qah, close to the Turkish border, on 20.11.19. Six people were killed in air raids on the city of Maaret al-Numan, further to the south.

According to Syrian state media, opposition forces fired rockets at Aleppo on the following day. Several districts of the city were allegedly hit, killing at least seven civilians. The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has documented at least six fatalities.

On 24.11.19 the Syrian government army announced that it had taken the village of Mushayrifah. Six government troops and nine rebel fighters reportedly died in the fighting.

Attack in Tal Abyad

A car bomb exploded in Tal Abyad on 23.11.19. The town is occupied by the Turkish military and allied militias. At least ten people died and 25 were injured. While residents and the occupying forces held the Kurdish YPG militia responsible for the attack, a spokesman for the Kurd-dominated SDF stated that responsibility lay with “mercenaries supported by Turkey”, claiming that the militias were staging attacks with the aim of driving out the remaining Kurdish population.

Pay increases for state employees

The Syrian president issued a decree on 21.11.19 providing for a pay increase equivalent to 27 US dollars per month for civilian and military state employees. Retired state employees are also to receive an additional monthly payment in the order of 23 US dollars.

The value of the Syrian currency has plunged once again in recent months, in the face of the sanctions imposed by the West and a decline in transfers from Syrians living abroad.

Israeli air raids on Iranian targets

The Israeli military confirmed that it had flown a series of air raids against Iranian units near Damascus on 20.11.19. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights documented 21 people killed, five of whom reportedly belonged to the Syrian armed forces, while most of the others were from elite Iranian units or militias associated with Iran. Two civilians allegedly also died in the attacks.

The Israeli attacks were followed by a rocket attack from Syria on 19.11.19, which was intercepted by Israel's "Iron Dome", however.

Turkey

Cooperative lawyer arrested

According to media reports on 20.11.19, the Turkish authorities arrested a Turkish lawyer on suspicion of spying on 17.09.19. His work had included duties as a so-called cooperative lawyer for the German embassy in Ankara. The lawyer was tasked with collecting information in Turkey on behalf of the German federal foreign office, in connection with asylum processes of Turkish nationals in Germany. He checked whether legal action was pending in Turkey against the persons concerned or whether they were the subjects of any arrest warrants, for example. The German government considers this to represent common international practice and the federal foreign office insists that such work is indisputably legitimate, in view of which the spying charges are incomprehensible. The lawyer reportedly also carried out investigations for Norway and the Netherlands in connection with asylum processes. In connection with the lawyer's arrest, it is suspected that the Turkish authorities seized information and files on around 50 Turkish nationals who have applied for asylum in Germany.

Arrests among the Turkish armed forces

Manhunts and arrests continue, more than three years after the attempted coup. According to the state new agency, Anadolu, the public prosecutor's office currently has 133 alleged terrorist suspects on its wanted list. The suspects are for the most part former and current members of the military, including five colonels. The security forces reportedly arrested 101 people on 19.11.19. According to Anadolu, raids have been carried out in 45 provinces and the manhunt continues. The public prosecutor's office accuses the wanted suspects of having links to the Gülen movement.

Western Balkans

Debate on EU accession process continues

The EU remains at odds over the question of whether the Western Balkan countries should join the EU. A ministerial meeting on 19.11.19 also failed to produce any progress on the issue. Following France's blocking of a decision by the EU's heads of state and government in favour of beginning accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019 (cf. BN of 21.10.19), a French "non-paper" which came to light ahead of the ministerial meeting provided for further turmoil. The document concerned envisages departures from the accession process as it has applied to date. Rather than consisting of 35 chapters in no stipulated order, the process is to take place in seven consecutive steps, for example.

The reactions from other member states were for the most part critical in tone. "You can't change the rules of a game in progress," stated David McAllister, chair of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee. It is feared that Albania and North Macedonia will have to wait still longer for accession negotiations to begin. The rejection in October 2019 sparked a political crisis in North Macedonia. Head of government Zoran Zaev has announced that new elections are to be held in 2020.

Yemen

Houthi rebels seize three foreign ships off Yemeni coast

On 20.11.19 Houthi rebels released three ships and their crew of 16 which they had seized shortly before. The Houthis apprehended the ships, which are registered in South Korea and Saudi Arabia, off the coast in the Red Sea at the weekend and took them to the port of Saleef, because they had entered Yemeni territorial waters without prior announcement. It was later claimed that the merchant vessels had inadvertently wandered off course in bad weather. Representatives of Saudi Arabia had referred to the rebels' action as an act of terrorism.

Zimbabwe

MDC rally broken up by use of force

Although hundreds of police officers blocked the approaches to the Harare headquarters of the largest opposition party - the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) - supporters of the party managed to assemble at the headquarters to hear an address by the party leader, Chamisa, on 20.11.19. A few minutes after Chamisa had entered the party building, the police broke up the congregation, using batons and tear gas. Several people were injured. The police has banned MDC rallies on various occasions this year, on the grounds that the events could take on violent forms.

Charges against pastor Evan Mawarire dropped

On 20.11.19 the public prosecutor's office dropped its charges of subversion against the democracy activist and pastor Evan Mawarire. He was arrested in January 2019 after encouraging the people on social media to take part in a general strike called by the trade union congress in protest at petrol price increases. He was released on bail on 30.01.19.