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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

22 April 2024

Afghanistan

Governance and persecution situation: media closures and corporal punishment

On 16.04.24, the Taliban government closed the private TV stations NoorTV and BaryaTV until further notice for violating Islamic principles in their reporting. NoorTV is owned by Salahuddin Rabbani, the son of former Afghan president Burhānuddin Rabbāni; he had been foreign minister and is the leader of the Islamist party Jamiat-e Islami; BaryaTV is owned by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who is the leader of the Islamist party Hezb-e Islami. After the change of power, Hekmatyar had initially moved closer to the Taliban but recently publicly expressed his displeasure with their policies. As a result, the Taliban forced Hekmatyar to leave his house in Kabul in March 2024, which the old government had made available to him as part of a contract. On 16.04.24, the Taliban finally banned Hekmatyar from organising public events or receiving people at his home.

On 17.04.24, a journalist was apparently arrested by the Taliban in Ghazni province for reporting for Radio Azadi/Radio Free Europe (RFE). RFE reports on Afghanistan from Prague and was banned by the Taliban in 2021 immediately after the takeover.

On 17.04.24, a person was flogged for theft by the Taliban in Maidan Wardak province. The day before, a person was flogged for adultery in Zabul province (Shahjoy district).¹

Security situation

On 21.04.24, a bomb attack by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) in West Kabul (PD 3) on a minivan carrying ethnic Hazara killed the driver and injured three people.²

Humanitarian situation

According to reports dated 17.04.24, heavy rainfall and flash floods killed around 70 people and injured 56 in 20 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Thousands of families were apparently displaced from their homes, around 2,000 livestock died, and 2,600 houses and 1,950 hectares of agricultural land were destroyed. The Taliban have issued new storm warnings for the coming days.³

Benin

Three people killed in border attack

On 16.04.24, unidentified individuals attacked a border post in northern Benin, killing three people and wounding another person. This is according to media reports based on information from the mayor of the town of Malanville in north-eastern Alibori department. As for the course of the incident, it is known that three people on a motorbike arrived at the border post and opened fire. Two of the fatalities were civilians, the third was a soldier; another soldier was injured. No information was given on the motive of the attackers. The security situation in the north of

the country is considered to be under threat from Islamist groups and other actors. Benin's defence and security forces are conducting offensive operations against armed groups there (cf. BN of 13.11. and 18.12.23, 29.01.24).⁴

Burkina Faso

Diplomats expelled

In a note sent to the French embassy in Ouagadougou on 18.04.24, the Burkinabe foreign ministry expelled three French diplomats from the country, accusing them of subversive activities. Reportedly, two political counsellors of the French embassy in Ouagadougou are among those expelled. They have apparently been given 48 hours to leave the country. The details of their suspected anti-government activities have not been disclosed. Media reports say that their expulsion is linked to a meeting with members of civil society organisations.

The military government of Burkina Faso had ordered the withdrawal of French troops in January 2023 and banned the French broadcasters France 24, Radio France International (RFI), and Jeune Afrique from broadcasting in the time period from December 2022 to the end of September 2023. On 01.04. and 02.04.23, the government had expelled the correspondents of the French daily newspapers Libération and Le Monde (cf. BN of 30.01., 03.04. and 09.10.23).⁵

Demands for dissolution of the military government

On 04.04.24, the civil society organisation Front pour la défense de la République (FDR) was founded in Burkina Faso, which criticises the current military government under Captain Ibrahim Traoré and demands its dissolution, a return to constitutional order and free elections. The organisation also insists on the immediate release of all people forcibly recruited, abducted, or detained under Traoré's command (cf. BN of 13.11.23). The journalist and spokesperson for the FDR, Inoussa Ouédraogo, reportedly made these demands on 04.04.24 in a video that was distributed via social networks. Ouédraogo added that Traoré had also failed to honour his commitments, particularly in the area of security. According to a media report, the FDR was founded in Côte d'Ivoire, with former political figures apparently contributing to its formation. For security reasons, the members of the FDR are anonymous. Following the publication of the video, supporters of Traoré apparently organised a smear campaign on social networks against Ouédraogo.⁶

Several members of jihadist groups killed

Between 15.04. and 17.04.24, members of the 8th Battalion d'Intervention Rapide (BIR) of the Burkinabe military killed several members of jihadist groups in the village of Guinbila, Centre-Nord region, and in the area of Sablogo, Koulpélogo, Centre-Est region. Media report of violent clashes lasting several hours. Success stories of this kind are not uncommon in Burkina Faso (cf. BN of 21.08., 28.08. and 11.09.23).⁷

China

Hong Kong: European citizen sentenced under national security law

On 11.04.24, the Portuguese national John Joseph became the first EU citizen to be sentenced under the national security law passed in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in 2020. Joseph, who is the leader of the little-known group Hong Kong Independence Party, had published 42 posts on six online platforms between 01.07.20 and 01.11.22, calling, among other things, for foreign intervention in Hong Kong. He last resided in the UK, holds a Hong Kong ID card as well as Portuguese nationality; he was arrested while visiting relatives in Hong Kong. After 16 months in custody prior to the trial, he has now been sentenced to five years' imprisonment for inciting secession, which is the minimum sentence for serious offences against the security act. On 23.03.24, another security law ("Article 23") came into force in Hong Kong, which includes life imprisonment for the offences of high treason and rebellion against the state as well as long-term prison sentences for the possession of publications calling for an independent Hong Kong. The new act also includes the offences of espionage, destructive activities that endanger national security, and external interference.⁸

Colombia

Homicides of social leaders

According to a count by the NGO Indepaz, the lawyer Jaime Alonso Vásquez was the 43rd social leader to be killed in Cúcuta in Norte de Santander this year on 14.04.24. Vásquez had repeatedly publicly denounced corruption in local, state institutions, and by elected officials. The public prosecutor general's office has informed that the first arrest in this case was made on 19.04.24.⁹

Paz Total: Factions led by Iván Mordisco withdraw from the negotiations

The government has reported new problems in the negotiations with the ex-FARC group Estado Mayor Central (EMC). Parts of the group under the command of Iván Mordisco have withdrawn from the negotiations; the talks are currently frozen. However, El País reports that chief negotiator Camilo González Posso has confirmed the continuation of negotiations with other blocs and fronts involved, which are active in the Catatumbo, Magdalena Medio, Meta, Caquetá and Putumayo areas of operation. Hence, the units that are still negotiating represent around half of the EMC's armed structures.¹⁰

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Ituri and North Kivu: Increasing attacks by ADF rebels

Since the beginning of April 2024, the authorities have recorded several attacks with civilian casualties in the provinces of Ituri and North Kivu, which are suspected to be caused by rebels from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) group. The media reported an attack near the town of Beni (North Kivu) on 12.04.24 that killed at least ten civilians. The attackers apparently fired on people working in the fields. A total of around 40 civilians have been killed around the town of Beni since the beginning of April.

The media also reported around ten deaths in the Irumu (Ituri) territory in February 2024 as a result of a violent attack by ADF rebels. Around 30 further civilians died in two attacks in the territory of Djugu (Ituri) on 06.04. and 14.04.24; these attacks were presumably caused by another rebel group.

The UN has reported that since the beginning of 2024, a total of almost 200 people have been killed in the two regions. The rebel group ADF originates from neighbouring Uganda and has also established itself in eastern DR Congo. The group has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and frequently carries out attacks that further destabilise a region where many militant groups are active.¹¹

Soldier sentenced to death

On 15.04.24, a court found a soldier guilty of the murder of three civilians and sentenced him to death. This is the first judgement of this kind since the moratorium on the death penalty was lifted (cf. BN of 25.03.24). The execution of the judgement can still be prevented by an appeal procedure.¹²

Ecuador

Security situation: homicides of local mandate holders; referendum on security policy

After the mayor of San Vicente, Brigitte García, was shot dead in an armed attack at the end of March 2024, another local politician, José Sánchez, was killed in the province of Azuay on 17.04.24. Last year, at least 30 attacks were carried out on local elected officials. The Association of Municipalities of Ecuador (AME) has stated that last year, 45 mayors applied for protection from the Ecuadorian authorities. AME criticises the length of the procedure and the long waiting list for a corresponding risk analysis, among other things. In the annual negative ranking Homicide Round-up in Latin America published by the organisation Insight Crime, Ecuador took first place in 2023 with a rate of 44.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, ahead of Honduras (31.1), Venezuela (26.8) and Colombia (25.7). Compared to the last year, the number of homicides in Ecuador has risen by almost 75 percent to over 8,000 cases. This is one of the reasons why on 21.04.24, President Noboa held a referendum with a total of eleven questions, most of them related to security issues. According to initial counts, questions such as the joint deployment of military and police in patrols without a state of emergency or the extradition of Ecuadorian citizens under certain

conditions received the necessary majority. A decision on the corresponding legislative reforms will then be made in parliament once the count is complete.¹³

Georgia

Massive protests against controversial bill

Thousands of pro-European demonstrators have been rallying in the capital Tbilisi since 08.04.24 against a planned law to control foreign influence. In the week starting 15.04.24, protesters and police clashed outside the parliament, where the draft law was debated in the first of three readings and finally passed on 17.04.24. Local media report that around 20,000 protesters gathered, most of them peacefully, but security forces used pepper spray and other items against them. Several people were injured in the incident, among them one police officer. Also, over a dozen arrests were made. The criticised bill, which appears to mirror the Russian "law on foreign agents" requires NGOs that receive 20 percent or more of their funding from abroad to disclose these financial sources. The Georgian government claims to ensure greater transparency and control more closely the extent of foreign influence. Many civil society and democracy promotion projects in Georgia are financed by the West, including funds from the EU and the USA. EU Council President Charles Michel has recalled that Georgia was granted EU candidate country status in December 2023 and that this law is not compatible with the status. In 2023, the Georgian leadership withdrew a corresponding bill following massive protests.¹⁴

Iran

Suspected attack by Israel

Following the major attack on Israel by Iran on 14.04.24 (cf. BN of 15.04.24), media report that Israel launched an airstrike against Iran 19.04.24, targeting an airbase and the air defence system of a nuclear facility near the central Iranian city of Isfahan.

US media have quoted unnamed US officials who said Israel carried out the attack. The New York Times cited anonymous Israeli officials who confirmed that Israel had carried out the attack. The Iranian state television agency IRNA said that air defence measures were taken in several Iranian provinces on 19.04.24 after drones were spotted in Iranian airspace, and that the nuclear facility near Isfahan was safe and undamaged. According to an Iranian army commander, the explosions heard in the Isfahan area on 19.04.24 were caused by the air defence system that attacked and hit the three drones. Iranian foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian told NBC News that the drones were launched inside Iran and flew a few hundred metres before being shot down.

Two US officials told CBS News that Israel hit Iran with a missile, but they did not say where or how the missile hit. In addition, according to anonymous US officials, missiles were fired into Iran and hit their target from Israeli warplanes over Iraqi airspace. Analysis of satellite images by experts revealed that an S-300 air defence system was hit at the 8th Shekari airbase, around 20 km north-east of Isfahan. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the USA was not involved in any offensive operation in Iran. According to Italian foreign minister Antonio Tajani, the USA told the G7 members that it had only been informed by Israel shortly before the attack.

On 19.04.24, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stated that no damage was done to Iranian nuclear facilities. Israel has not officially claimed responsibility for the attack.¹⁵

Security forces target women

Media report that several women and girls who since 13.04.24 have been arrested by the vice squad during headscarf checks (cf. BN of 15.04.24) have complained about violence during arrest, including physical assault and sexual harassment.

A 17-year-old girl told the online magazine Iran International that when she was arrested in Daneshjoo Park in Tehran, the vice squad pulled her by the hair, hit her right arm and thigh with a baton and hurled sexual insults at her. In custody, the young woman encountered more than fifty women and girls, most of whom were in their early 20s or teenage years.

Other detainees reported that male officers beat them in the vice squad van taking them to a detention centre. According to media reports, a 19-year-old woman who refused to unlock her phone for the officers at the detention

centre was abused by the officers with a stun gun to her stomach and genitals. She was also insulted with sexually harassing swear words. A few hours after their arrests, the two women were released from prison after providing their personal details, home addresses, telephone numbers, fingerprints, and signatures. Iranian journalist Dina Ghalibaf was arrested in her flat in Tehran on 16.04.24 after she had described her recent encounter with the police in an article on X. On 15.04.24 she was abused by the police with a stun gun and sexually assaulted because she was not wearing the obligatory hijab. Aida Shakarami, whose sister Nika had died in the nationwide protests in 2022 after the death of Jina Mahsa Amini, was arrested on 17.04.24 because she was not wearing a headscarf. Another woman told BBC News Farsi that during her arrest, police officers beat her so badly that medical doctors said she suffered a kidney rupture. Numerous women and girls reported on social media about the violent assaults by the police and vice squad.

Media report that in the week starting 13.04.24, hundreds of women across the country, in particular in Tehran, were arrested because they did not comply with the hijab requirements. On 21.04.24, the commander of Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) troops, Hassan Hassanzadeh, announced the establishment of a new authority to enforce the strict dress code for women and stated that the members of the force have been trained to enforce the hijab requirements in public places in a stricter manner.¹⁶

Iraq

Young woman killed by her own family

On 17.04.24, Kurdish TikTok user Fairouz Azad was apparently killed by her own relatives. Her mother stated that her biological father, her brother, and some cousins of her broke into the flat where Fairouz, her mother and her stepfather lived, and shot Fairouz while she was sleeping. In November 2023, she had apparently been raped by two men and then pushed from a balcony on the fifth floor. She survived the assault with several fractures.

Her brother has since been arrested. He has claimed that he was provoked by the social media coverage of his sister's rape.

So-called "honour killings" are frequent throughout Iraq, including in the Kurdish autonomous region. In most cases, the violence is directed against women, who are seen as the bearers of family honour. After rape, women regularly become victims of so-called "honour killings" by their own families, as rape is seen as a "loss of honour".¹⁷

Türkiye-PKK conflict

On 17.04.24, the Mawat district in Sulaymaniyah province was attacked twice with drones, apparently with one person injured. The PKK holds Türkiye responsible for the attacks. Türkiye has not yet commented on the incidents.

On 18.04.24, a man was killed in a suspected Turkish airstrike in Sidakan district (Erbil province). The victim was a Peshmerga soldier who was not on duty at the time of the incident. Local politicians and the PKK hold Türkiye responsible for the incident, but the latter has not yet commented on the incident.

Since 2019, Türkiye has been carrying out regular airstrikes on PKK positions in northern Iraq, causing damage to civilian infrastructure and occasionally resulting in civilian casualties. On 18.04.24, the Turkish defence ministry announced that the military operation in northern Iraq, which has been ongoing since 2022, will end in summer 2024. According to the ministry, smaller operations against the PKK will continue after this date.¹⁸

Mali

Military government bans activities of political parties and media coverage

On 10.04.24, Mali's military government issued a decree banning the activities of political parties and associations until further notice. This decree is intended to maintain public order, a government spokesperson stated.

On 11.04.24, the junta announced an extension of the ban to include the media and prohibited the press from reporting on the activities of political parties and associations. The supreme communications authority said that the decree applies to all media, including television, radio, online and print newspapers. Journalists' associations, representatives of civil society, NGOs and opposition parties are outraged by the measures. International associations criticise Mali's military government and call for the suppression of the opposition to be lifted.

When it took power in 2021, Mali's current junta had promised to hand over power to a civilian government by 26.03.24. In September 2023, however, the promised elections were postponed to an indetermined date for technical reasons. Since the expiry of the deadline the end of March 2024, over 20 political parties have expressed their concern and, in a joint declaration, called for the restoration of the constitutional order.¹⁹

Myanmar

Security situation

Four people were killed and twelve others injured in a rocket attack by a local resistance group on two military academies in Pyin Oo Lwin (Mandalay region) on 14.04.24. According to military reports, the rockets also hit a hospital, a monastery, and a hotel.

Since 12.04.24, air strikes and artillery fire by the Myanmar military on the community of Buthidaung (Rakhine State) have killed 25 civilians, all of them ethnic Rohingya, and forced thousands of people to flee. The local office and pharmacy of the aid organisation Doctors Without Borders and hundreds of homes were destroyed in the operation. Media report that the military is coordinating its attacks in Rakhine with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (AA), which has been classified as a terrorist group since 2017, in order to push back the Arakan Army (AA), which is fighting for the ethnic Rakhine. The AA currently controls eight out of 16 communities in the state.

In Myeik (Tanintharyi region), around 50 junta soldiers surrendered after an attack launched by the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) on the military junta's infantry battalion 103 on 16.04.24. This was the first victory of an ethnic army in Tanintharyi.

In Monywa (Sagaing region), around 5,000 people fled armed raids by the military on 17.04.24. Also on 17.04.24, the junta released 3,303 people from the country's overcrowded prisons on the occasion of the Myanmar New Year, among them 101 political prisoners, some of whom were re-arrested on the same day. Currently, 20,349 of 26,545 people who had been arrested in connection with the military coup in 2021 are still in prison (as of 19.04.24). During a protest in a prison in Myitkyina (Kachin state) on 18.04.24, security forces shot dead four prisoners and injured twelve others.

In Hsihseng (Shan State), ongoing fighting between troops of the military junta and the Pa-O National Liberation Army (PNLA) triggered further refugee movements (cf. BN of 15.04.24) after the PNLA forced residents of Hsihseng to return to their homes under threat of fines.

On 20.04.24, fighting between the military and the KNLA in Myawaddy (Kayah State) displaced around 3,000 civilians.²⁰

Nigeria

Six months in prison for "misuse of the national currency"

Media report that on 12.04.24, a Nigerian court sentenced transgender woman Okuneye Idris Olanrewaju, better known by her stage name Bobrisky, to six months in prison for throwing banknotes of the local currency, the Naira, into the air at public events, with videos of this going viral on social media. This custom, known as "spraying", is peculiar to weddings and other large celebrations. Nigerian courts consider it a criminal offence, especially as the notes that fall to the ground might be stepped on. As a rule, however, no prosecution takes place. What is special about the Bobrisky case is not only that she was brought to court at all, but also that she was sentenced to the maximum prison sentence of six months. Media report that Bobrisky is expected to serve this sentence in a prison for male inmates. However, an appeal against the judgement is possible.

Human rights activists criticise the guilty verdict and denounce the selective enforcement of laws. Many see the harsh judgement in connection with Bobrisky's nationwide popularity on social media as a successful transgender person. In public opinion in Nigeria, LGBTIQ issues are considered a taboo subject. NGOs criticise laws against transgender and homosexuality.

On 14.04.24, a representative of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) stated in connection with the announcement regarding the prosecution in another spraying case that decisive action is currently being taken against the abuse of the Naira and that 24 people have already been convicted.²¹

Southwest: Concerns about a strengthening of secessionist aspirations

Media report that on 13.04.24, around 20 secessionists attempted to seize the government secretariat of Oyo State in Ibadan with the aim of taking by force more state institutions. Security forces from the south-west, consisting of the military, police and the Amotekun organisation (cf. BN of 25.03.24), successfully fended off the attackers. On 17.04.24, a court in Ibadan ordered 29 suspects to be remanded in custody, i.e. more people than were arrested immediately after the incident. The violent incident has fuelled fears of a strengthening of secessionist tendencies in south-west Nigeria.²²

Inflation at record high

Inflation reached a 28-year high in March, rising to of 33.2 percent year-on-year. This is according to media reports based on official data from the national bureau of statistics. The high inflation is being driven by rising food and energy costs. Interest rate hikes have not been able to halt the trend. In the area of energy costs, the abolition of fuel subsidies in 2023 is seen as a price driver (cf. BN of 29.01. and 04.03.24).²³

Pakistan

Attack on customs officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Police reports say that on 18.04.24, unidentified individuals shot dead five customs officers in D. I. Khan district. Two civilians who happened to be present at the time of the attack were also killed in the incident.²⁴

Attempted attack on Japanese workers in Karachi

On 19.04.24, Japanese workers at an automobile factory in Karachi (Sindh province) survived an attempted assassination. The main perpetrator was killed when his explosive waistcoat detonated. A suspected accomplice was shot dead by security personnel. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

In the past, there have been repeated attacks on foreign nationals, particularly those of Chinese origin, who are working for projects financed by China.²⁵

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

Gaza Strip: Current developments; humanitarian situation

On 22.04.24, the Hamas-led health ministry stated that at least 34,097 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip since the start of the war. In addition, more than 76,980 people have reportedly been wounded. The ministry does not officially distinguish between combatants and civilians.

According to Israeli figures, more than 13,000 militia members and Hamas fighters have been killed. None of the figures can be independently verified.

In addition, the Israeli military has informed that a total of 259 military personnel have been killed and 1,582 others wounded since the start of the ground offensive up to 19.04.24. The Israeli authorities estimate that 133 hostages or their remains are still being held in the Gaza Strip.

Fighting in the Gaza Strip is continuing, including airstrikes carried out by Israel. At least nine people were reportedly killed in one of the attacks launched on targets in Rafah on 20.04.24. According to the administration of the hospital that received the victims, six children were among those killed. Further airstrikes the following night apparently raised the death toll to 22. According to the Hamas-led health ministry, 18 of the dead were children.

On 14.04.24, WFP relief supplies were brought in via the Erez border crossing for the first time in six months, enabling some bakeries in the north and in central Gaza to resume work.²⁶

East Jerusalem: Israeli court orders eviction of Palestinian family in Sheikh Jarrah

On 15.04.24, an Israeli court ordered the eviction of a Palestinian family from their home in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah. The family claims to have lived there for decades. However, the Israeli district court now ruled that the premises are Jewish property that was stolen after the first Arab-Israeli war and that the Palestinian family therefore has no right to it.

The case was brought to the court by Nahalat Shimon Ltd, a settler organisation that has for years been involved in the eviction of Palestinian families from the neighbourhood. The organisation has based its case on a new law

intended to enable Jewish Israelis to reclaim property that had been in Jewish ownership before the state of Israel was founded. The Palestinian family says that they have been living in the house since 1955. During this time (until 1967), East Jerusalem was under Jordanian control. In similar proceedings, the supreme court had suspended the forced eviction of four families from Sheikh Jarrah in March 2022 (cf. BN of 07.03.22). The family concerned in the new case has announced to take legal action against the order.²⁷

West Bank: Numerous dead in armed clashes

The Palestinian health ministry stated that on 19.04. and 20.04.24, at least 14 people were killed in two days of fighting between the Israeli military and armed groups in the Nur Shams refugee camp in the town of Tulkarem. The Tulkarem Brigade was apparently involved in the fighting. The Islamic Jihad in Palestine (PIJ) group stated that three of those killed were members of its organisation. A Palestinian aged 15 or 16 was reportedly among the dead. Various media have reported different ages.

According to the Israeli military, 14 gunmen were killed and eight suspects arrested in the incident. The Palestinian news agency WAFA stated that the internet in the town was temporarily switched off. Several residential buildings in the densely built camp were damaged in the fighting.

On 20.04.24, the Palestinian driver of an ambulance was reportedly shot in the chest near the village of Sawiyya while on a mission to treat wounded victims of an attack by Israeli settlers on a Palestinian village. It was not initially clear who fired the fatal shot.

On 21.04.24, two Palestinians were reportedly killed when they attempted to attack Israeli military personnel with a knife at a checkpoint near Hebron. According to the Israeli military, one of the two also shot at the soldiers with a firearm. In a separate incident on 20.04.24, a Palestinian woman was killed after she attacked Israeli military personnel with a knife near the Beka'ot settlement.

The Palestinian health ministry has stated that since October 2023, at least 469 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli troops in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.²⁸

Republic of Moldova

Gagauzia

The pro-Russian head of government of the autonomous region of Gagauzia, Evgeniya Guțul, has repeatedly opposed the pro-European government of the Republic of Moldova. She rejects the judicial reform initiated by the government in Chisinau after the Gagauz regional parliament voted against the reform on 19.04.24, which would have meant the closure of an appeals court in the region. The Gagauz side is also demanding a higher special status for the Russian language.

Already on 08.04.24, governor Guțul signed an agreement in Moscow with the Russian Promsvjazzbank that will allow Russian MIR bank cards, the Russian alternative to Visa and Mastercard cards, to be used in Gagauzia. So far, the Moldovan National Bank has not commented on the project. MIR cards are already being used in the Russian-backed separatist region of Transnistria to offer pension subsidies and other social support services in order to secure the loyalty of the regional population. According to Evgeniya Guțul, the agreement will allow Gagauzia to overcome an "economic blockade" imposed by the government in Chisinau. Guțul had already visited Moscow in March 2024 and asked President Vladimir Putin for assistance with the alleged persecution of Russian-speaking people in Gagauzia. According to Moldovan President Maia Sandu, Guțul's regular visits to the Kremlin and her requests for assistance from Russia show her support for the Russian invasion of neighbouring Ukraine.²⁹

Russian Federation

War against Ukraine: prison sentences for attempts to join pro-Ukrainian units

On 10.04.24, three men were sentenced to prison terms for planning to join pro-Ukrainian units. Vsevolod Kulikov was handed down a nine-year prison term from a military court for attempted high treason and attempted arson, as did Vyacheslav Kuznetsov, who was found guilty of attempted high treason alone. Both men were accused of having pursued plans to join the Freedom of Russia Legion. In addition, a court sentenced Magomed Magomedov to nine years in prison for attempting to join the Russian Volunteer Corps. The corps had claimed responsibility for

several attacks on Russian military facilities in the Belgorod region. Both of the above-mentioned units are fighting with the Ukrainian military to liberate Ukraine from occupation by Russian troops. In 2023, almost 100 treason investigations were opened in the Russian Federation.³⁰

Sudan

Ongoing battles

Although the international community has openly and directly addressed the conflict in Sudan through several channels and called for a ceasefire and peace talks (cf. BN of 15.04.24), fighting continued between the Sudanese army (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) militia, as well as between their respective allies. In mid-April 2024, fighting and attacks broke out across the country, with the SAF bombing targets in the regions of South Darfur, North Darfur, El Gezira (also Al Jazirah, Al Jazeera, Al Jazira) and Sennar, while RSF units attacked, looted, and partially captured several villages in North Darfur and Kordofan. Also, a military base in North Kordofan was attacked and looted by the RSF.

Media report that the military intelligence service is acting more frequently and more openly than before. On 16.04.24, Sudan's military intelligence service detained and beat in custody 24 employees of the French NGO Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED) in Singa, the capital of the Sennar region. While four employees who do not hold Sudanese citizenship were released on the same day, other employees who are Sudanese nationals are still detained. Further reports say that in the state of White Nile, three leaders of the National Umma Party (NUP) are in the custody of the military intelligence service, as is a lawyer and activist in El Gezira.³¹

Syria

South: Israeli airstrikes on military targets; fighting between armed groups in Jasim

Media report that at least two military air defence sites in southern Syria were hit as part of the Israeli retaliatory strikes on Iran on 18.04.24.

In the town of Jasim, located in the Dar'a governorate in southern Syria, local armed groups clashed after one group allegedly kidnapped a member of the other and the latter responded with a retaliatory kidnapping. After a third faction intervened, several days of fighting broke out in residential areas with the use of medium to heavy weapons. Following an intervention by the Central Committee in Dar'a, the 8th Brigade and local dignitaries, the parties to the conflict signed a ceasefire agreement on 19.04.24. Troops from the 8th Brigade and the Central Committee had reportedly marched into Jasim to separate the fighting parties.

One party to the conflict has stated that two fighters were killed and numerous homes were damaged. A report published by Enab Baladi said that the armed groups are following tribal structures, with groups in the north and west of the town loyal to the al-Halqi family, while factions in the south of the town belong to the al-Jalm family. Fighting between armed factions, which are often made up of influential families and some of which are linked to the government's secret services, is not uncommon in Dar'a governorate and has occurred repeatedly in recent years. According to reports by Enab Baladi, the last clash occurred in the village of al-Sanamayn on 07.04.24, apparently leaving 19 people dead, among them children.³²

Northeast: Amnesty International denounces inhumane conditions in detention centres

According to a report published by Amnesty International (AI) on 17.04.24, an estimated 56,000 people, among them around 30,000 children, are still in detention after being placed in camps following the final battles with the IS. According to the report, they are systematically subjected to rights violations and live in inhumane conditions in the camps of al-Hol and al-Roj in north-east Syria, as well as in various detention centres. The majority of detainees in the camps are being held arbitrarily and indefinitely without being brought to trial. AI also recorded recurring incidents of torture and ill-treatment in the camps and facilities. In addition to suspected (former) IS supporters, the detainees appear to include victims of IS, among them Yazidi women and forcibly recruited child soldiers. Although the administration of the camps is under the control of the Kurdish-dominated de facto government of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), AI accuses the US and other

members of the anti-IS coalition of sharing a high degree of responsibility, as not enough had been done to prevent or remedy these circumstances.³³

22 dead in IS attack

In an attack on members of a pro-government militia on 19.04.24 near al-Sukhna in Homs governorate, 22 people were killed, most or all of them militia members, as was reported by various sources. Gunmen opened fire on a bus carrying members of the al-Quds Brigade, a pro-government militia primarily made up of Palestinian members and rumoured to be supported by Russia. Al-Sukhna was an IS stronghold in the past. Initially, no one has claimed responsibility for the attack. However, several media outlets report that IS was behind the assault.³⁴

Togo

New constitution finally adopted

In a final reading held on 19.04.24, the Togolese national assembly adopted a new constitution, which will replace the presidential system with a parliamentary one. The new constitution abolishes direct suffrage for the President of the Republic and introduces the office of the president of the council of ministers, who will henceforth be in charge of government affairs. Those in favour of President Faure Gnassingbé argue that the amendments curtail the presidential powers by transforming the presidency into a representative role. The opposition, on the other hand, claims that the constitutional reform removes the limits of Gnassingbé's term of office. For the opposition, it is clear that this "institutional coup d'état" is aimed at keeping the regime in power and providing a new post for Gnassingbé in the role of chairman of the council of ministers after the end of his possible terms in office in 2031. In order to come into force, the new constitution must be promulgated by the head of state.

The constitutional amendment comes against the backdrop of an already tense political climate ahead of the planned parliamentary and regional elections scheduled for 29.04.24. During the current election campaign, the opposition alliance Dynamique pour la Majorité du Peuple (DMP) on 20.04.24 called for widespread protests against the new constitution alongside other opposition parties and civil society organisations. The opposition had already planned a three-day protest against the new legislation and the suppression of opposition activities for 11.04.24, which the government banned on 10.04.24 on the grounds of "disturbing public order".³⁵

Türkiye

Supreme Court cancels disciplinary sanctions for political activities on campus

Media report that the Constitutional Court (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasa Mahkemesi) annulled the article of the Higher Education Act providing for disciplinary sanctions for distributing leaflets and hanging posters or banners at universities and organising meetings without permission.

The Republican People's Party (CHP) had applied to the Constitutional Court for the repeal of some articles of Law No. 7437 on the amendment of the higher education system, which had been passed by the Turkish Grand National Assembly on 02.02.23. In his assessment of 22.04.24, the Supreme Court annulled individual articles of the new law.

The provision on distributing flyers, hanging banners or posters without authorisation within a higher education institution, which is to be applied in accordance with Article 54 of the Higher Education Act for cases requiring disciplinary punishment in the form of a reprimand, was declared unconstitutional and annulled. In its reasoning, the court pointed out that the formal existence of a legal regulation is not sufficient to restrict freedom of expression, but that legal regulations must be specific and foreseeable such as not to allow for arbitrary rulings.

Also the sanction of organising assemblies in closed or open spaces of higher education institutions without permission from the authorities, which provided for a suspension from the institution of one week to one month, was declared unconstitutional. The decision emphasised that this provision restricted the right of university students to organise assemblies and demonstrations.

The decision emphasised that the previous sanctions were not compatible with the requirements of a democratic social order.³⁶

Earthquake of magnitude 5.6 in Tokat and Yozgat provinces

Media report that the provinces of Tokat and Yozgat were hit by a magnitude 5.6 earthquake, damaging several houses, barns, and mosques in Tokat and the nearby province of Yozgat. The earthquake occurred on 18.04.24 in the town of Sulusaray in Artova district, northern Tokat province.

The tremors damaged 191 houses, 84 barns, seven mosques and a bakery in 30 villages in three different districts. After the 5.6-magnitude quake, three aftershocks with magnitudes of 4.0 to 4.4 were recorded in Tokat province. The mayor of Sulusaray city stated that relief workers were able to reach all villages in the district. The governor of Tokat province informed that there were no deaths or injuries. In some villages, the Turkish Red Crescent has set up tents for the residents of damaged houses.

In February 2023, parts of southern Türkiye and Syria had been hit by a magnitude 7.8 earthquake, which had killed more than 53,000 people in Türkiye. To this day, over half a million people are still living in emergency shelters.³⁷

Council of Europe calls on Türkiye to release political prisoners

Media report that in its annual report, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, which monitors the enforcement of judgements by the European Court Human Rights (ECHR), has called on Türkiye to reform its criminal and anti-terrorism laws and release political prisoners. The committee emphasised that Türkiye continues to struggle with issues of freedom of expression and assembly, the independence of the judiciary, detention without clear justification and domestic violence.

The committee also referred to the entrepreneur Osman Kavala, who has been in detention since 2017 and was handed down a life sentence in 2022. In its ruling of December 2019, the ECHR had stated that Kavala's imprisonment was arbitrary and politically motivated. Türkiye's failure to implement the 2019 ruling prompted the Committee to initiate infringement proceedings in February 2022.

In addition to the Kavala case, the committee also referred to the detention of the two politicians Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. Despite previous ECHR rulings, which had found violations of their rights through the waiver of parliamentary immunity and unjustified detention, both politicians remain in detention. The committee called for their immediate release.

The committee also examined Türkiye's handling of the right to freedom of expression, particularly with regard to criminal proceedings against journalists. The committee urged on Türkiye to clearly stipulate in its laws that the exercise of freedom of expression should not constitute a criminal offence.

The monitoring report also addressed structural problems within the Turkish judiciary and referred to the ECHR ruling of September 2023 regarding the teacher Yüksel Yalçınkaya. In this case, the ECHR had ruled that the conviction for terrorism offences based on the accused's use of the ByLock messaging app was unlawful and called on the Turkish authorities to find an alternative solution to the problem, which the ECHR referred to as systemic. ByLock is at the centre of proceedings involving thousands of people accused of being close to the Gülen movement and whose cases are pending before national courts or the ECHR.³⁸

Ukraine

Civilian casualties and missing persons

Media reports dated 15.04.24 say that six people died in Russian rocket attacks on the town of Siversk (Donetsk region). On 17.04.24, at least 18 people were killed and 77 injured as a result of Russian missile strikes in the city centre of Chernihiv. On 19.04.24, the authorities informed that Russian attacks on the cities of Dnipro and Synelnykove (Dnipropetrovsk region) have claimed the lives of two and six people, respectively. Media reports of 21.04.24 reported a further fatality in the Dnipropetrovsk region and two deaths in Vovchansk (Kharkiv region) following Russian shelling.

Ukrainian Human Rights Commissioner Dmytro Lubinez stated on 16.04.24 that at least 37,000 children, civilians and military personnel have been missing in Ukraine since 24.02.22. The figure includes around 1,700 people who have been identified by Ukraine and the Red Cross as "illegally detained" by Russia. Lubinez also assumes that around 20,000 children have been abducted to Russia. Given that Russia has occupied one fifth of Ukrainian territory, it is difficult to determine the exact number of missing persons.³⁹

Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant

On 18.04.24, the Russian management of the Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant reported another incident involving a combat drone. A situation report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) observers stationed on site said that they were informed of a drone attack and also heard an explosion, but were not allowed to visit the site of the suspected incident. Just a few days earlier, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi had stated that three drone attacks since 07.04.24 had brought the world "dangerously close to a nuclear accident".⁴⁰

War events and new mobilisation law

President Zelensky has confirmed media reports from 17.04.24 that the Ukrainian military attacked the Russian airbase Dzhankoy in Crimea and destroyed Russian equipment and combat infrastructure. On 21.04.24, Ukrainian naval spokesman Dmytro Pletanchuk stated that the Russian salvage ship "Kommuna" in the port of Sevastopol was disabled by a drone attack. According to Ukrainian military sources, the Russian armed forces have expanded the use of warfare agents such as tear gas, which is illegal under the International Chemical Weapons Convention, in order to clear trenches. Ukrainian commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrskiy has stated that the Russian military leadership has given the order to take the strategically important small town of Chasiv Yar, located west of Bakhmut, by the symbolic public holiday on 09.05.24. There is no corresponding statement from the Kremlin. On 16.04.24, President Zelensky signed the new mobilisation law, which is intended to counteract the shortage of personnel in the Ukrainian armed forces. The law is due to come into force one month after signing.⁴¹

Venezuela

Amnesty International warns of intensified political repression; further arrests

Amnesty International has recently warned of rising numbers of arbitrary arrests and an increase in stigmatisation and defamation campaigns in the context of the recent intensification of political repression. On 15.04.24, journalist Carlos Julio Rojas was arrested in connection with an alleged attempted attack on President Maduro. In addition to the attempted attack, he is also accused of terrorism and conspiracy, among other things. Rojas has been an activist for many years and has repeatedly protested publicly about poor public services.⁴²

Military dissident Ojeda kidnapped and killed in Chile

Already on 21.02.24, military dissident Ronald Ojeda, who had been living in Chile as a recognised refugee since 2017 after escaping from a Venezuelan prison, was kidnapped there by several people and found dead a few days later. On 12.04.24, the lead public prosecutor in the case, Héctor Barros, stated in an interview that, based on initial investigations, the public prosecutor's office currently assumes that the crime was ordered from Venezuela and that a political background could not be ruled out given the victim's profile. One Venezuelan citizen has already been arrested, the office added. Recently, the public prosecutor's office has requested the extradition of two suspected Tren de Aragua members from Venezuela and submitted a request for inter-institutional cooperation. In contrast to other kidnappings by the transnational organisation Tren de Aragua, however, there had been no ransom demand in this case.⁴³

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