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Group 22 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

12 February 2018

Egypt

Anti-terror operation in the north of the Sinai peninsula

According to a statement issued by the Egyptian Army on 11 February 2018, 16 extremists were killed by troops during an anti-terror operation in northern Sinai, four suspects were arrested and more than 60 hideouts, an explosives-making laboratory, pickup vehicles and motorbikes were destroyed. Wilayat Sinai is operating in the north of the Sinai Peninsula as an affiliate of ISIS.

Bangladesh

Opposition leader receives jail sentence

On 8 February 2018, Khaleda Zia, leader of the opposition and chairperson of the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party), was sentenced to five years in prison on charges of corruption. Tarique Rahman, her son and vice-chairperson of the BNP, and four accused BNP members were sentenced to ten years in prison. They were convicted of misappropriating foreign donations worth around EUR 203,000 for an orphans charity between 2001 and 2006. Khaleda Zia's lawyers have said they will appeal the sentence. It is unclear whether Khaleda Zia will be permitted to stand in the elections in December 2018 as candidates who have received a prison sentence of more than two years can be excluded from elections for five years.

FYROM Macedonia

Hope of agreement being reached in the naming conflict with Greece

Macedonia is considering adding to its current name in the naming dispute (cf. BN of 15 January 2018). This was emphasised by Prime Minister of Macedonia Zoran Zaev on 7 February 2018. Several names have been proposed at talks brokered by the UN, namely "Republic of New Macedonia", "Republic of North Macedonia", "Republic of Upper Macedonia", "Republic of Vardar Macedonia" und "Republic of Macedonia (Skopje)". A coordinated solution is to be found by both parties by 20 March 2018. Macedonia made an initial concession by changing the name of the airport as well as the name of the motorway to Skopje. Both had previously borne the symbolic names "Alexander the Great" which were controversial from the Greek perspective.

However, the people of Greece could prevent agreement from being reached. Surveys reveal that around 70 percent of the Greek people are opposed to a compromise involving any name containing the word "Macedonia". On 4 February 2018, tens of thousand of Greeks took the streets to protest against a compromise being reached.

Iraq

Mass executions by Kurds

According to the human rights organisation Human Rights Watch (HRW), evidence suggests that between 28 August and 3 September 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government's Asayish security forces carried out mass executions of alleged ISIS fighters in their custody, claiming Kurdish security forces had been involved in the fight against ISIS.

Security situation

Although ISIS have been driven out of the area, ISIS militants continue to carry out attacks. The number of incidents has remained more or less steady since the beginning of the year.

According to UNAMI, 115 civilians were killed and 250 civilians were wounded in terrorist attacks, other violence and armed conflicts in January 2018.

International conference on the reconstruction of Iraq

According to the dpa news agency, a three-day conference on the reconstruction of Iraq will begin in Kuwait on 12 February 2018. Representatives of donor countries, non-governmental organisations and companies are expected to attend. The government of Iraq has said it is hoping the donor countries will pledge a total of EUR 100 billion in support.

Iran

Human Rights Watch criticises the execution of minors

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has criticised the execution of Amirhossein Pourjafar, Ali Kazemi and Mahboubeh Mofidi in January 2018. Pourjafar, aged 18, was executed for the rape and murder of a three-year-old girl two years ago. Kazemi was sentenced to death for fatally stabbing a man in a street fight aged 15. Mofidi was executed over the murder of her husband at the age of 17, some four years after they were married.

Iran has been in the line of fire for many years over the execution of minors. HRW has called for Iran to stop executing child offenders with immediate effect and to abolish the death sentence. According to Amnesty International, Iran is one of the last countries in the world not to exclude minors from the death penalty.

Protests by Gonabadi dervishes

In recent days, dozens of supporters of the Gonabadi dervishes (Nematollahi order, Iranian Sufi community) have been protesting against road blockades set up by security forces around the home of their religious leader Dr. Nour Ali Tabandeh in Tehran. They are demanding a return to peace and normality. The Gonabadi dervishes consider themselves to be Shia Muslims, though they do not follow the religious leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, but have their own religious leader. Many of their supporters are currently in prison.

They are occasionally the victims of acts of violence and are sometimes stigmatised in the media as devil worshippers. The dervishes are sometimes discriminated against because of their faith and ethnicity as many of them are ethnic Kurds or Arabs.

Yemen

Tens of thousands displaced by violence

Surging violence across Yemen has resulted in the displacement of more than 85,000 people since 1 December 2017, more than 70 percent from the Hodeidah and Tai'z governorates (on the western coast of Yemen), according to a statement issued by UNHCR on 9 February 2018. The UN agency also said it was observing a spike in new displacements from the border governorates of Jawf and Hajjah, and Shabwa.

In Yemen, Houthi rebels are fighting with Iranian support against the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi that is backed by a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia. A separatist movement is also fighting against the government in southern Yemen.

According to UNHCR, Yemen is in the throes of the worst humanitarian crisis the world has seen. More than 22 million people, i.e. two-thirds of the population, are now in need of humanitarian assistance.

Nigeria

Boko Haram: 13 hostages freed

On 10 February 2018, presidential spokesman Garba Shehu announced that the Islamist terror organisation Boko Haram had released 13 hostages following negotiations brokered by the International Committee of the

Red Cross (ICRC). Ten of the hostages released are police officers who were abducted in a Boko Haram raid on a military and police convoy last year on the Damboa road near Maiduguri. The other three hostages are lecturers at the Geological Institute of Maiduguri University who were conducting oil prospect evaluations in the Lake Chad area in July 2017. They have been taken to Abuja.

Cameroon

Anglophone crisis: three more troops killed

According to military spokesman Colonel Didier Badjeck, three police officers were killed in Kembong village (Anglophone Southwest Region) on 11 February 2018, the country's national holiday youth holiday. This brings the number of security officers killed since 1 October 2017 up to 26, according to official reports. 1 October 2018 is the day on which separatists of both English-speaking regions symbolically declared an independent state of Ambazonia. Cho Ayaba, the leader of the militant separatist organisation Ambazonian Defence Force (ADF) has claimed responsibility for the attacks. Cameroon's President Paul Biya responded harshly to the declaration of independence and ordered homes to be searched in the English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions and for travel restrictions to be imposed. Villagers told Reuters news agency on 2 February 2018 that homes had been burnt to the ground and villagers had been shot dead in Bole village (Southwest Region). The Army has refuted these allegations.

Mali

Five killed and 18 wounded in landmine explosion

Five civilians were killed and another 18 wounded in central Mali when their passenger vehicle struck a landmine on 9 February 2018. The explosion occurred on the road between the towns of Dera and Konna in the Mopti region, where Islamist militants have recently stepped up attacks on civilian and military targets, according to Governor Sidi Alassane Toure. Several persons were recently killed and wounded in a similar incident in the region.

Morocco

Another miner dies in accident

Another accident occurred at an abandoned coal pit in Jerada region (north-eastern Morocco). Three men were buried under a shaft when it collapsed but two were rescued. After two brothers died in a coal pit in late December 2017 in the region, people took to the streets to protest against their plight and in a bid to gain support from the government for the region. It responded with the promise to build a coal-fired power plant in the region and to create up to 500 jobs. After the latest accident, Prime Minister Saad-Eddine El Othmani visited the region on 10 February 2018, meeting with local representatives of politics, business and NGOs to discuss the economic situation in the Jerada region, among other things.

Somalia

Death penalty for terrorists

A military court sentenced an al-Shabaab militant to the death penalty who had been found guilty of planning the truck blast in Mogadishu in October 2017 that killed more than 500 persons. Another al-Shabaab militant was sentenced to life in prison. He was convicted of procuring the vehicle used to carry out the attack.

Somaliland: Fatwa against FGM

The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, a breakaway region in north-western Somalia, issued a fatwa, or religious edict, banning female genital mutilation on 6 February 2018 and said those who perform FGM would face punishment, and victims would be eligible for compensation. The World Health Organisation estimates that 98 percent of Somali girls and women between the age of 15 and 49 have undergone female genital mutilation.

Syria

Ongoing violence

According to media reports, more than 100 pro-government troops were killed in a U.S. airstrike last week. The airstrike was carried out in self defence U.S. sources say, adding that the troops supporting the Syrian government had attacked the headquarters of the Syrian Democratic Forces where militants of the anti-ISIS coalition were also staying.

The Turkish Army has continued to carry out airstrikes in northern Syria. According to media reports, arsenals, bunkers and militia positions were destroyed in airstrikes against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in the region of Afrin, causing fatalities on both sides.

At least 200 civilians including children have been killed in a series of Syrian government airstrikes on parts of rebel-held Eastern Ghouta near the capital of Damascus in recent weeks, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has said.

Syrian and Russian jets carried out airstrikes in the rebel-controlled Idlib province in north-western Syria. Sources from Idlib and Eastern Ghouta province have reported the use of chlorine gas in recent weeks. The U.N. fact-finding commission has said it has received numerous reports of chlorine gas attacks on the cities of Sarakeb and Duma and that it is looking into them. The U.N. has also condemned the fact that hospitals in the rebel-held areas remain under siege.

According to media reports, the Israeli Air Force bombarded positions of government troops and of the Iranian Army on 10 February 2018. Israeli sources say the airstrikes were carried out in response to an Iranian drone that entered Israeli air space from Syria. The Syrian Air Defence shot down an Israeli fighter aircraft.

Turkey

HDP Party Convention

An ordinary convention of Turkey's pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in Ankara elected lawmaker Pervin Buldan and a founder of the party, Sezai Temelli, as its new co-leaders on 11 February 2018. According to party sources, 32,000 supporters attended the convention. They have replaced the well-known politician Selahattin Demirtas, who has been in custody for 15 months, as well as the current co-chairperson Serpil Kemalbay as leaders of the party. Neither stood in the election. The HDP's leadership particularly criticised President Erdogan's policies and the military intervention in north-west Syria. The HDP has been under pressure for some time. Following the coup attempt in July 2016, a large number of HDP city mayors, particularly in the south-east of the country, were removed from office. Aside from Demirtas, eight other HDP deputies as well as the former co-chairperson Figen Yüksekdağ are being detained on terror charges. Seven HDP deputies were stripped of their status as members of parliament in 2017.

Critics of the military offensive arrested

Since the start of the Turkish offensive in Syria's north-western region of Afrin, the government has stepped up its crackdown on critics.

In the past two weeks, over 570 people have been detained on charges of spreading terrorist propaganda, in many cases for sharing critical social media comments. The Turkish Interior Ministry has also stated that 24 people have been arrested for participating in protests. Last week, eleven leading members of the Turkish Media Association were also arrested after criticising the military offensive against the Syrian Kurds in a statement. Three have now been released.

On 9 February 2018, the public prosecutor in Ankara issued warrants for the arrest of 17 more individuals, including the co-chairperson of the second largest opposition party, the HDP, Serpil Kemalbay. According to the official news agency Anadolu, they are accused, inter alia, of organising street protests and riots under the guise of criticising the Afrin offensive.

Prison sentences following suicide bombing

Three men who masterminded the attack on German tourists in front of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque in Istanbul in January 2016 were sentenced to life in prison last week for their involvement in the attack. Twelve

persons were killed in the attack. The court deemed it proven that the three defendants, three Syrians, had helped to organise the attack. A fourth defendant, an Iraqi national, was sentenced to several years in prison for membership of ISIS but was released owing to the length of time he had already spent in custody. A total of 26 persons faced charges, all of whom denied their involvement. Several defendants were acquitted, three or four other defendants are reportedly on the run. An international leader of ISIS called Omar Abu Abid who, according to the bill of indictment, is on the run reportedly masterminded the attack.

Vietnam

Prison sentences for members of the Hoa-Hao Church

Five members of the Buddhist Hoa-Hao Church which is not recognised by the government were sentenced to between three and six years in prison by a court in An Giang province on 9 February 2018. Another member received a two-year prison sentence but was released on bail. The defendants had protested against oppression by government agencies with other members of the Hoa-Hao Church in 2017.

Ex-party official sentenced again

A court in Hanoi sentenced the former party official Trinh Xuan Thanh who had been abducted in Berlin and returned to Vietnam in July 2017 to life in prison on 5 February 2018 over corruption. Thanh had also been sentenced to life in prison in another trial on 22 January 2018 (cf. BN of 22 January 2018).

Prison sentences for activists

A court in Nghe An province sentenced the environmental activists Hoang Duc Binh and Nguyen Nam Phong to prison sentences of 14 and two years respectively on 6 February 2018. Binh had organised protests against the way in which the government dealt with the environmental disaster caused by a Taiwanese company in 2016 which affected several coastal provinces.

Western Balkans

EU enlargement: focus on strengthening the rule of law

The European Commission would like to speed up the integration of the six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, FYROM Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia). To this end, it adopted "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans" on 6 February 2018 (cf. BN of 5 February 2018). Focus will be placed on strengthening the areas of the rule of law, fundamental rights and good governance.

Corruption and links with organised crime maintain a strong foothold at all levels of government and administration. The paper says there is a strong entanglement of public and private interests.

All this feeds a sense of impunity and inequality. There is also extensive political interference in and control of the media. In all the countries of the region, parties (and representatives of their business interests) are controlling the administration and in many places the judiciary and the police; the role of secret services is not transparent.

Detailed action plans now need to be developed in order to define the reform objectives exactly and to ensure these goals are accomplished. The track record of the rule of law will be closely monitored and advisory missions will be sent to all countries in the Western Balkans. The EU will appropriate an additional EUR 500 million by 2020.