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Briefing Notes Summary

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Sri Lanka – July to December 2022

01 January 2023

11 July 2022

Tens of thousands demonstrate in Colombo, President announces resignation

On 09.07.22, hundreds of Sri Lankans stormed the palace of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa during protests against the economic crisis which were joined by tens of thousands in Colombo. Videos were livestreamed on social media showing protesters moving through the premises of the residence and jumping into the pool. Security forces initially tried to stop the protesters with warning shots, water cannons and tear gas. However, the crowd managed to break through the barriers and enter the presidential office, whereupon the security forces withdrew. According to a spokesperson, the president had been taken to safety beforehand. Already on the day before, the government had imposed an indefinite curfew as many more protests had been announced, but yielding to pressure from various civil society groups and Buddhist monks it had been cancelled. The situation in Colombo on 09.07.22 was described as chaotic. Although the protests were largely peaceful, there were isolated incidents of violence. According to media reports, over 50 people were injured (as of 09.07.22). The island state is currently experiencing its worst economic crisis in decades. Protests have been taking place for months, fuel and medicines are in short supply and inflation recently rose to 54.6%. The island state is more than 50 billion USD in debt. The demonstrators hold the president responsible for the crisis. So far, the government has not been able to present a concept for solving the debt crisis. In response to the mass protests, Rajapaksa finally announced his resignation on the evening of 09.07.22, effective 13.07.22. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe also agreed to resign after protesters had set his residence on fire.

18 July 2022

Current political developments

On 13.07.22, ahead of his planned resignation, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his wife fled to the Maldives in a military plane and travelled on to Singapore the following day. Since then, the unpopular Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has been acting as caretaker president and was sworn in as such on 15.07.22. On the night before, Rajapaksa's letter of resignation was first received by email and then sent by post from Singapore. Parliament is due to elect a new president on 20.07.22. According to reports, Dulas Alahapperuma, a long-time MP from the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), and Anura Kumara Disanayake, representing the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party, are also standing for election besides Wickremesinghe (United National Party, UNP) and opposition leader Sajith Premadasa (Samagi Jana Balawegaya, SJB). After the previous troubled weekend (cf. BN of 11.07.22) and the resignation announcements of the president and the prime minister, at least four ministers resigned from their posts. On 13.07.22, protesters managed to storm Wickremesinghe's office, undeterred by the security forces' use of tear gas. They consider him an ally of the Rajapaksas and are demanding his resignation as well. Around 42 people were injured. A state of emergency was declared throughout the country. On 14.07.22, a

spokesperson for the protesters announced that they would withdraw from the occupied buildings but would continue the protest in front of the president's office.

25 July 2022

Wickremesinghe new president

On 20.07.22, Parliament elected Ranil Wickremesinghe, who had been acting President until then, as the new President with 134 out of 219 valid votes. He was sworn into office on 21.07.22. He is to lead the country until the end of Gotabaya Rajapaksa's remaining term in November 2024. He prevailed over Dulas Alahapperuma, long-time MP of the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), and Anura Kumara Disanayake, representative of the left-leaning Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party. Opposition leader Sajith Premadasa (Samagi Jana Balawegaya, SJB) had earlier withdrawn his candidature in favour of Alahapperuma. On 22.07.22, Dinesh Gunawardena, a long-time member of the SLPP, was sworn in as Prime Minister and 17 others as ministers. According to observers, it is questionable whether this will calm the protests. Wickremesinghe and Gunawardena are considered to be Rajapaksa's supporters and representatives of the old elites and thus of the system against which the protests are directed. However, the new president is considered one of the most experienced politicians in the country and has negotiated with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) several times in the past.

Protest camp cleared by security forces

On the night of 22.07.22, hundreds of security forces forcibly cleared the main protest camp of demonstrators in front of the President's office in Colombo. The nine people that had been arrested were later released on bail. Several people were reportedly injured. The UN and representatives of several Western countries expressed concern about the violent crackdown on protesters. Just a few days earlier, protesters celebrated the 100-day protest at the Galle Face Green in Colombo, which brought about the resignation of former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (cf. BN of 18.07.22). On 24.07.22, the President's Office announced that peaceful protests against the government were still possible in Colombo.

01 August 2022

State of emergency extended, several arrests

On 27.07.22, parliament extended the state of emergency imposed in mid-July 2022 for another month. Since 26.07.22, several key figures of the protest movement have reportedly been arrested. They are accused of using violence and damaging public property. Several hundred others have also been identified by the police, but have not been arrested. In the course of the protest movement against the government, protesters had occupied several government buildings in the past weeks and set fire to the residence of the new president Ranil Wickremesinghe (former prime minister) (cf. BN of 11.07.22 and 18.07.22). Ex-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is reportedly still staying in Singapore on a visitor's visa. His brothers Mahinda and Basil are still prevented from leaving the country by a Supreme Court order.

08 August 2022

Repression of government critics increases

In a series of arrests (cf. BN of 01.08.22), Joseph Stalin, president of the Sri Lanka Teacher's Union and leader of the protests against the now resigned Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was arrested on 03.08.22 for holding an outlawed protest on 28.05.22. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the government has been using the Emergency Ordinance, in force since 13.07.22, to harass and arbitrarily arrest people demanding political reforms and that the government take responsibility for the economic crisis. Since the new president and former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe took office on 21.07.22, the military and police have been using intimidation, including threats of violence and surveillance, against peaceful dissidents, media workers and lawyers. During the eviction of the main protest camp on 22.07.22 (cf. BN of 25.07.22), security forces also attacked and beat at least three journalists. They also injured about 50 other people. According to HRW, the Emergency Ordinance was accompanied by new penal provisions, including a minimum sentence of 20 years imprisonment for damage to property and trespassing. In addition, causing "discontent" and spreading "rumours" can be punished as

misdeemeanours and public gatherings can be banned more easily. People charged under the Emergency Ordinance cannot be released on bail.

29 August 2022

New UN report on the general supply situation

The economic crisis continues. The inflation rate is high (60 % at the end of July 2022), prices for food and raw materials continue to rise, fuel remains scarce and power cuts persist. However, the price of rice has stabilised in the meantime. According to a recent report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on 19.08.22, around 5.7 million people in the country are currently in need of humanitarian assistance, 4.9 million of whom are considered food insecure. Meanwhile, the current harvest season has begun in some districts. However, due to the shortage of fertiliser and fuel, yields are expected to drop significantly. To alleviate the situation, the government has introduced fuel subsidies for mechanised harvesting. Fuel rationing has also achieved a stabilization of the general transport situation, the report says. It further states that since the economic crisis worsened, incidents of neglect, sexual assault and physical abuse of children have increased significantly.

05 September 2022

Gotabaya Rajapaksa returns to Sri Lanka

According to several reports, former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa returned on 02.09.22 after several weeks in exile. He had fled the country in mid-July 2022 in the wake of protests that included the storming of his residence, and had tendered his resignation from Singapore. Shortly afterwards, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who had been acting as prime minister until then, was elected president by parliament (cf. BN of 11.07.22, 18.07.22 and 25.07.22). Critical voices in the country accuse the political elite of corruption and nepotism. They hold the Rajapaksa family responsible for the severe economic crisis and demand legal action.

Economic crisis: Negotiations with the International Monetary Fund

At the end of August, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) held out the prospect of financial aid of USD 2.9 billion for the country. However, this was tied to conditions such as reforms and an agreement with creditors on debt restructuring.

12 September 2022

ai-Bericht zu Vorgehen der Sicherheitskräfte gegen Demonstrierende

In einem am 08.09.22 veröffentlichten Bericht kritisiert Amnesty International (ai) das Vorgehen der sri-lankischen Regierung gegen Protestteilnehmende in den vergangenen Monaten. So habe die Regierung, wie bereits häufiger in der Vergangenheit, Militär bei Demonstrationen eingesetzt. In einigen Fällen sei es zu missbräuchlicher und unverhältnismäßiger Gewalt gegen Demonstrierende gekommen, u.a. mit dem Einsatz scharfer Munition im April 2022 in Rambukkana und im Juli 2022 in Colombo. Bei verschiedenen Protesten sei es zudem zum unverhältnismäßigen Einsatz von Tränengas und Wasserwerfern gegen friedliche Demonstrierende gekommen. Zudem seien Sicherheitskräfte nicht eingeschritten, als regierungskritische Demonstrierende im Mai 2022 von Unterstützenden der Regierung angegriffen wurden. U.a. im Juli 2022 sei es darüber hinaus zu Übergriffen durch Sicherheitskräfte auf Medienschaffende gekommen und das Protestlager „GotaGoGama“ in Colombo sei gewaltsam durch Sicherheitskräfte geräumt worden. Unter Bezugnahme auf Zahlen einer Beobachtungsstelle der Zivilgesellschaft führt ai aus, dass seit der Übernahme der Präsidentschaft durch Ranil Wickremesinghe 143 Personen in Zusammenhang mit den Protesten festgenommen worden seien (Stand: 28.08.22). Einige der Verhaftungen sollen gegen die Vorschriften für ordentliche Verfahren verstoßen. Weiter wird kritisiert, dass die Bezeichnung von Protestteilnehmenden als „Terroristen“ und „Faschisten“ durch den Präsidenten und Parlamentsmitglieder Versuche darstellten, die Protestbewegung zu dämonisieren. Drei Protestteilnehmende, darunter eine Führungsfigur, wurden Mitte August 2022 unter dem umstrittenen Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) festgenommen.

26 September 2022

Security forces disperse Colombo protest

According to reports, on 24.09.22, several hundred students demonstrated in Colombo demanding the release of arrested protesters. The day before, the president had declared the city centre a high-security zone and banned protests around key government institutions, including the presidential palace and parliament. Police reportedly used tear gas and water cannons. Several people were taken into custody.

Meanwhile, the economic situation remains tense. The inflation rate rose to 70.2 % in August. Food prices went up by 84.6 % against the previous year.

24 October 2022

Constitutional amendments to limit the president's power

On 21.10.22 179 MPs of the governing coalition and the opposition approved a constitutional amendment to limit the president's power. The two-thirds majority of the total of 225 parliamentary seats which was required for the constitutional amendment was thus attained. This was a core objective of the demonstrators who have been calling for political reforms and a solution to the economic crisis for some months now. The constitutional amendment provides for presidential powers to be transferred to a constitutional council comprising both MPs and individuals from outside of politics. The council is also to propose suitable candidates for government offices to the president in future. Sri Lanka is currently experiencing an economic crisis. For months now, the population has been suffering shortages of vital imported goods combined with a steep rise in inflation. President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was sworn into office in July 2022, spoke out in favour of political reforms after his predecessor, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, had fled abroad. Wickremesinghe has secured a provisional agreement on a four-year aid programme with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

21 November 2022

Call for release of two demonstrators

Amnesty International (ai) is calling for the release of two protest leaders who were arrested in the wake of the anti-government demonstrations which took place in the island state from the beginning of 2022. The two students have been in custody for more than 90 days, since August 2022, on the basis of the controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

28 November 2022

Economic crisis

According to information released by the UN in November 2022, 28 % of the population are affected by food insecurity and the poverty rate has doubled. While the fuel shortages which accompanied the mass protests in Sri Lanka at the beginning of 2022 have become less severe, the inflation rate for food stood at over 85 % in October 2022. A shortage of foreign exchange means that many goods, including vital drugs, cannot be imported on an adequate scale. Human Rights Watch (HRW) has appealed to the government to respect human rights, alluding to its tough action against peaceful protests. The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) has been invoked repeatedly to arrest people critical of the government (cf. BN of 21.11.22).