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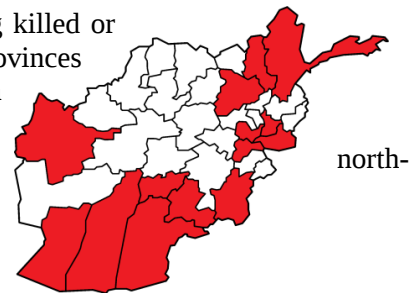
Briefing Notes

16 January 2017

Afghanistan

Armed conflicts

Armed conflicts, attacks and bombings in which civilians are also being killed or wounded continue unabated. According to press reports, the following provinces were affected in the past week: Nimruz, Helmand, Zabul, Uruzgan (southern Afghanistan), Nangarhar (eastern Afghanistan), Paktika (south-eastern Afghanistan), Logar (central Afghanistan), Badakhshan, Takhar (north-eastern Afghanistan) and Kapisa (central Afghanistan).



Suicide bombings and attacks

On 10 January 2017, two explosions in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, one a suicide bomb, the other a car bomb, killed at least 30 people and wounded up to 80 persons. The Taliban issued a statement claiming responsibility for the attacks which took place at around 5 pm local time in Darulaman Street close to the city's Parliament. Many of the victims were parliament staff who were on their way home from work. Ministries and the American University are located closeby. Eleven persons were killed and eight persons were wounded in an explosion at the home of the governor of Kandahar province (southern Afghanistan) in the evening hours of 10 January 2017. The victims include Afghan government representatives and five diplomats of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), including the governor of Kandahar province (southern Afghanistan) and the Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates. It is not yet known who carried out the attack. The Taliban have denied any involvement in the bombing. Security forces suspect that the members of the Haqqani network are behind the attack. An Afghan Telecom Company employee was killed and one other person was wounded in an attack launched by the Taliban in Herat (western Afghanistan) on 10 January 2017 (the Taliban continue to destroy radio masts in order to bring down communications services). Seven civilians were killed and six were wounded in a suicide bombing in Lashkargah, the capital of Helmand province (southern Afghanistan), close to a security forces barracks.

On 11 January 2017, two women were killed when a roadside bomb exploded in Farah province (western Afghanistan). One police officer and eleven students were killed in bomb blasts carried out in the Kot district of Nangarhar (eastern Afghanistan).

On 14 January 2017, ISIS militants set 65 civilian homes on fire in the Kot district of Nangarhar (eastern Afghanistan).

On 15 January 2017, seven civilians were killed in a bombing in Nangarhar province (Pachiragam district). Thirteen teachers were abducted by ISIS militants in the Haska Mena district.

A government employee was wounded in a blast in Baghlan (north-eastern Afghanistan) on 16 January 2017.

Multiple attacks carried out on journalists in 2016

According to information provided by an organisation that advocates the freedom of the press in Afghanistan, 14 reporters and media employees were killed in 2016. 420 attacks were carried out against journalists in 2016, 320 of which were perpetrated by the Taliban.

Turkey

Constitutional reform

Turkey's Parliament approved a total of 18 articles forming part of the envisaged constitutional reform for a presidential system, garnering three-fifths of a majority of the 330 deputies in the 550-seat assembly. However, the articles will need to achieve the same majority in a second round of voting. In principle, this will require votes from the opposition as the ruling AK party only has 316 of the 550 votes needed. The constitutional package will need a three-fifths majority following a debate lasting around two weeks before it can be put to a referendum in the spring. Fistfights erupted between members of the AK party and members of the opposition when voting took place on 12 January 2017.

Prison sentence for member of the HDP party

Nursel Aydogan from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) was sentenced to four and a half years in prison by the High Penal Court in Diyarbakir on 13 January 2017, on charges of committing crimes on behalf of a terrorist organisation. The Court based its decision on her attendance at the funeral of a PKK guerrilla six years ago. Aydogan's lawyer said he will appeal the decision.

This is the second time since the parliamentary immunity of HDP members was lifted in May 2016 that a court has handed down a prison sentence to HDP members. In November 2016, the co-leader Figen Yüksekdağ was sentenced to ten months in prison on charges of spreading terrorist propaganda, although the sentence is not yet legally binding.

Syria

Damascus

According to media reports, the military airbase near Damascus was hit by several missiles in the early hours of 13 January 2017 that were reportedly fired by Israeli combat jets, wounding at least four persons. Israel has not issued any statement to date. The Syrian government claims this is the third such military offence that is being attributed to Israel.

On 12 January 2017, at least seven persons were killed when a man blew himself up near a sports club in Damascus according to a report issued by the state-owned news Sana. The pro-opposition monitoring group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the bombing was carried out in the vicinity of military bases and secret service buildings.

Iraq

Kurdish Autonomous Territories

On 11 January 2017, the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and PDK (Kurdistan Democratic Party) announced their intention to set up a committee that would negotiate a Kurdish independence referendum and define the border between Iraq and Kurdistan with the government of Iraq. The negotiations will also include compensation and the right of return for Kurds who were displaced by Saddam Hussein as part of the "arabisation" of Iraq.

Hussein Koro, the head of a government office for Yezidi affairs, said in a press statement on 12 January 2017 that 75 percent of the Yezidi women and children abducted by ISIS have meanwhile been liberated from ISIS.

Operation by allied forces against ISIS in Mosul

The operation by allied forces against ISIS in Mosul is progressing; several districts were retaken over the course of the past week, with forces reaching the banks of the Tigris River on 9 January 2017. The death toll includes many civilians. Since the operation was launched, 130,000 civilians have reportedly fled the city. Both sides, ISIS in particular, are being accused of committing war crimes and of violating human rights.

Kirkuk region

Reports are circulating according to which Shia militia are preventing Sunni Arabs who had fled ISIS to Kirkuk from returning to the Salah ad-Din region where peace has been, by and large, restored.

On 13 January 2017, ISIS burned a family of five persons (a mother and four children) alive in front of a group of civilians for leaving the land of caliphate, southwest of Kirkuk.

Baghdad

On 10 January 2017, Iraq's prime minister Haider al-Abadi repeatedly urged the Turkish units in northern Iraq to withdraw. This was accompanied by threats from leading members of the Popular Mobilisation Forces that force would be used, if necessary.

On 11 January 2017, the Central Criminal Court in Baghdad handed down sentences ranging from 15 years imprisonment to the death penalty to a total of 58 Shia militias on charges of murder and illegal possession of arms.

ISIS has carried out several bombings, above all in Sadr City, prompting rallies on 10 and 11 January, with protestors calling for better security precautions.

Iran/USA

Warning shots fire by US Navy in the Persian Gulf

The crew of the guided-missile destroyer USS Mahan fired three warning shots to ward off Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy fast inshore attack craft (FIAC) coming at the ship at high speed in the Persian Gulf. A spokesperson for the US Department of Defence said four armed attack boats came at the "USS Mahan" destroyer at a high rate of speed on 15 January 2017.

Bahrain

Unrest following Shia executions

Three Shia Muslim police officers convicted of killing members of the majority Shia population were executed by gunshot on 15 January 2017. The death sentences on Sunday were the first to be carried out in Bahrain since 2010.

Libya

Benghazi

Clashes have erupted repeatedly in the city between Islamists (above all Ansar al-Sharia) and troops that are loyal to the Libyan Commander Khalifa Haftar, for reasons that are still unexplained.

On 11 January 2017, the Russian Army flew Khalifa Haftar to a visit on the Russian aircraft cruiser Kuznetsov which was returning from an operation in Syria. Haftar controls a large section of Libya's former National Army and is opposed to the unity government that has the support of the UN and the EU.

Morocco

Burka ban imposed

The BBC has reported, citing Moroccan media as the source, that the import, sale and production of the burka which fully conceals the body and the face has been banned in the country which has a large Muslim population. The kingdom's government has not officially confirmed the ban yet. According to a high-ranking official at the Ministry of the interior, this is a security measure aimed at criminals who hide behind the burka when they commit crimes. The Al yaoum 24 news site said: "certain extremists use the burka to carry out terrorist attacks." It is unclear whether the ban extends to wearing the burka in public places. Letters announcing the ban were sent out to market vendors earlier this week, with businessmen given just 48 hours to get rid of their stock.

Relatively few Muslim women in Morocco wear the burka. Religious women generally opt for the hijab, a headscarf, or the niqab, which leaves the eyes visible, combined with a full-length garment.

Gambia

ECOWAS prepares for military operation

Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari and other delegates of Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS) travelled to Banjul, the capital of Gambia, on 13 January 2017 in a bid to convince President Yahya Jammeh to ensure the peaceful transition of power. Buhari had made an offer of asylum subject to the peaceful transition of power. However, the talks were unsuccessful a spokesperson of the President-elect of Gambia Adama Barrow said in a statement. Yahya Jammeh's mandate ended on 18 January 2017 and the African Union resolved on 13 January 2017 to no longer recognise Jammeh as President from 19 January 2017 onwards, warning him of serious consequences if his actions led to political turmoil or had negative humanitarian implications such as the loss of innocent lives or the destruction of property. A decision on Jammeh's petition against the outcome of the election will not be taken for several months owing to a shortage of judges. Jammeh intends to remain in office until a decision is handed down. Lawmakers are objecting to Jammeh remaining in office. Information Minister Sheriff Bojang, has defected from the regime of dictator Yahya Jammeh. Twelve ambassadors who had backed the President-elect have been dismissed. While troops patrolled the streets in the capital Banjul, shops remained closed and a large number of Gambians fled to neighbouring Senegal. Western missions are urging their citizens to leave the country.

Ethiopia

Bombing of hotel

A bomb thrown into Entasal Hotel in Gondar (Ethiopia's restive northern Amhara region) has killed one government employee and injured 19 persons. Officials suspect anti-peace elements were behind the attack. Clashes between security forces and protestors backing the opposition have repeatedly erupted in the region in the past few months.

The unrest began in November 2015 following the announcement of new building projects in the capital Addis Ababa. The rural population, the ethnic groups of the Oromo and Amhara in particular, which account for around 100 million of the population, feel increasingly excluded from political and economic power. The government had declared a national state of emergency in early October 2016. According to government sources, around 22,000 persons have since been arrested, just under 10,000 have been released.

Nigeria

Boko Haram: suicide attacks in north-eastern Nigeria

On 11 December 2016, two women blew themselves up in Maiduguri (the capital of Borno state) close to a Monday morning market, killing one person and wounding eighteen.

In the evening hours of 8 January 2017, three suicide bombers blew themselves up close to Garage Muna district close to a military checkpoint in Maiduguri, killing one civilian. Two women also blew themselves up in the Kaleri district of Maiduguri the same night, killing two civilians.

The suicide bombings are being attributed to the Islamist terrorist organisation Boko Haram.

Cameroon

Opposition rallies claim casualties

A rally organised by the opposition took place in the city of Bamenda (capital of the North-Western Region of Cameroon) during the morning hours of 8 December 2016 to prevent an assembly of the ruling political party Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) in the city. Violent clashes erupted between

security forces and protestors wielding stones, sticks and machetes. At least four protestors were shot dead by security forces.

The country has 10 semi-autonomous administrative regions - eight are Francophone and two are Anglophone. English-speakers have long complained that they face discrimination compared to their Francophone compatriots. In October 2016, lawyers in the English-speaking regions where English civil law applies declared a strike in protest against the appointment of Francophone judges trained in French law. On 21 November 2016, teachers in the English-speaking regions joined the strike to protest against the appointment of Francophone teachers. At least 100 persons were arrested in late November 2016 at rallies held in the English-speaking regions.

Côte d'Ivoire

Mutiny terminated

The government and troops involved in a mutiny have reached agreement, ending the conflict over bonus payments. A government representative said the soldiers had been promised a special bonus of EUR 7,500 each. The money is to be paid over a period of several months. The troops had originally demanded twice this amount. The soldiers' average pay is around EUR 150 per month.

The mutiny began a week ago in Bouaké and spread to other army bases (cf. BN of 9 January 2017). When rogue soldiers kidnapped the Minister of Defence and detained him for several hours, it was feared that a military coup could take place. There were no casualties.

The fact that the government resigned at almost the same time is in no way associated with the mutiny. The government resigned following the parliamentary election held in December 2016. The President will appoint a new head of government following a constituent session of Parliament.

FYROM Macedonia

VMRO-DPMNE looking for coalition partner

After the conservative VMRO-DPMNE (the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) (cf. BN of 9 January 2017) party achieved a narrow victory in the election, President Gjorge Ivanov instructed the party chairperson and former prime minister Nikola Gruevski to form a government. If it fails to establish a stable government majority within 20 days, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) will form a government.

An initial attempt to reach agreement with the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration party (DUI) (the former coalition partner) failed because of its insistence that Albanian be declared an equal, second language. So far, all other parties have refused to cooperate with Gruevski.

Kosovo

Launch of statutory health insurance deferred once again

According to recent reports, the launch of the statutory health insurance has been deferred at short notice from 1 January 2017 to 1 July 2017 (cf. BN of 9 January 2017).

Serbia

Transit refugees hit by harsh winter conditions

According to the latest estimates, there are currently around 7,200 transit migrants in Serbia who are facing extremely harsh winter weather conditions. Temperatures have plummeted to minus 28 degrees in many

parts of Serbia. Approx. 5,800 persons remain in the almost 16 state-run refugee facilities most of which extremely overcrowded – albeit under frequently very difficult hygiene conditions. Up to 2,000 persons are reportedly stranded in Belgrade or are seeking shelter in abandoned buildings. One hundred and fifty persons are camping outdoors. Hungary is only allowing 35 refugees max., and sometimes a mere 20 refugees, into the country each day. By contrast, relief organisations are providing refugees with blankets and a hot meal. They are accusing the Serbian government of failing to provide adequate accommodation for the refugees and of preventing relief organisation from implementing relevant measures. The municipal authorities have begun providing heated accommodation for refugees.

Montenegro

Journalist released 15 months after being taken into pre-trial detention

The journalist Jovo Martinovic who researched criminal networks (trafficking in organs) was released after spending 15 months in pre-trial detention. He has been accused of participating in a drug trafficking ring. Martinovic was only allowed to inspect his file after spending one year in prison. Numerous international organisations such as the OSCE, Reporters Without Borders and EU Embassies have voiced their objections to the lengthy pre-trial detention. Human rights activists and members of the opposition see it as an attempt to silence one of the country's leading investigative journalists.

The freedom of the press and the plight of journalists have been heavily criticised for quite some time. Montenegro is ranked 106th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2016 World Press Freedom Index. According to Human Rights Watch, a total of 25 attacks have been carried out on journalists since August 2015. In eight cases, media work has been obstructed by the arbitrary arrests of journalists. It is also criticised that none of the perpetrators have been identified.

Vietnam

Detained activities deported

The well-known blogger and activist Dang Xuan Dieu was released early from prison on 12 January 2017 and was deported to France. Dieu was one of a number of mainly Catholic activists who were arrested in 2011 inter alia on charges of ties with the outlawed Viet Tan organisation (Vietnam Reform Party which has its registered office in the USA) that aims to establish democracy. Dieu and 13 other persons were sentenced to between three and 13 years in prison on charges of attempting to overthrow the government. Two of the persons charged remain in custody. Vietnam's government officially declared Viet Tan a terrorist organisation for the first time in October 2016.