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Group 22 - Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

9 February 2015

Afghanistan

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Security situation

Several security incidents were reported once again last week. Nine police officers were killed in a Taliban attack on a checkpoint in southern Kandahar province (Maiwand district) on 2 February 2015. At least two police officers were killed in a suicide bombing carried out by the Taliban in the provincial capital Lashkar Gah (Helmand, southern Afghanistan) on 3 February 2015. In the neighbouring province of Uruzgan, dozens of insurgents attacked a police checkpoint in Charcheno district, killing four police officers and wounding three. On 5 February 2015, At least 18 militants were killed in a gun battle in Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan (Nasjan district close to the border with Pakistan). In addition to these incidents that were covered by the international press, a large number of attacks and bombings were carried out on a daily basis last week; they were only covered in the Afghan press. The provinces hit hardest were Faryab (in the north), Kunar (in the east, where a girl's school and hospital were bombed) and Parwan (central Afghanistan).

Cabinet formation

Afghanistan's Parliament has only approved the appointment of eight ministers so far, the other 17 members were rejected by the Afghan parliament last week. A decision on new candidates will not be taken until March at the earliest.

Rise in the number of voluntary returnees from Pakistan

According to the International Organization for Migration, there was a sharp rise in the number of returnees from Pakistan in January 2015. In the month of January this year, nearly 24,000 Afghans returned to Afghanistan, almost as many as the total number of undocumented Afghans who returned during all of 2014. The returnees are persons who were residing in Pakistan without documents and therefore did not receive any support. In the wake recent incidents, particularly following the bombing of a school in Peshawar, calls for mass deportations of undocumented Afghans have increased from some sections of the population. Currently there are approximately three million Afghans living in Pakistan, of these, more than one million are estimated to be undocumented .

Pakistan

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Death penalty

Following the attack on the school in Peshawar in mid-December 2014, the government of Pakistan lifted the six-year ban on the death penalty for terrorists. 22 persons have been executed in the past six weeks. Terrorists accused of being responsible for bomb blasts have been executed. According to government sources, around 8,000 people are currently in jail awaiting execution, around one-third of them for acts of terrorism.

Christians

According to a press release issued by the Catholic new agency Fides, seven Christians families have been the victims of land grabbing (illegal appropriation of land with the help of forged documents). Seven homes in the administrative district of Kasur were affected.

Further attacks on polio vaccination workers

A police officer who had been guarding a polio vaccination team in Pashtunabad (Balochistan) was killed by gunmen on 4 February 2015. Another attack was carried out in Bahadurpur (Sindh). 69 people have been killed in attacks against polio vaccination teams since December 2012. The Taliban claim the immunisation programme is a cover for spying or sterilisation of Muslims.

Iraq

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Security situation

Daily reports of armed clashes and suicide bombings continue unabated. A suicide attack carried out in Baghdad on 9 February 2015 killed at least 12 people. More than 40 people were wounded. The attack was carried out in the Kadhimiya district which has a large Shia population. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the attack. On 7 February 2015, more than 30 persons were killed and more than 70 were wounded in suicide bombings in Baghdad. The majority of casualties were reportedly Shia Muslims and security officers.

The night-time curfew was lifted in Baghdad on 7 February 2015.

The Islamic State (IS) is said to have killed 48 people on its territory in Iraq since the beginning of the year, the vast majority in the city of Mosul (Nineveh province) and in the suburbs surrounding Mosul.

Peshmerga soldiers killed

According to official Kurdish sources, close to 1,000 Peshmerga troops have lost their lives fighting against ISIS and more than 4,500 were injured between 10 June 2014 and 3 February 2015.

Mass grave discovered

A mass grave (containing the remains of more than 20 Yezidis) who had presumably been shot by ISIS was once again discovered on 6 February 2015. Just a few days previously, Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers had discovered a mass grave containing the remains of 25 Peshmerga soldiers.

UN report on child abuse

According to estimates by the United Nations, children are being systematically abused by armed groups. They are being used as human shields and suicide bombers, young children are reportedly being forced to build bombs for jihadists. The United Nations is accusing ISIS, inter alia, of torturing children in Iraq, of crucifying, burying them alive and selling them as sex slaves. According to some reports, children who are mentally challenged have been used as suicide bombers. Those particularly hard hit are above all the children of minorities.

Turkey

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State takes over Aysa Bank

On 4 February 2015, Turkey's Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency took over Bank Aysa which belongs to the empire of the government critic and Islam cleric Fethullah Gülen. The country's banking watchdog transferred 63 percent of Bank Aysa's preferred shares into the state-run Savings Deposit Insurance Fund, which answers directly to the prime minister and went on to replace the bank's leadership with a new chief executive and board of directors. Turkey's Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency cited structural weakness and insufficient transparency to allow for proper regulation of the bank as the reason for its decision to take control. The work of the bank had previously been hampered by a large number of legal conditions such as handling the payment of tax and social contributions for its customers. In 20014, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan officially announced that the bank had become bankrupt, sending its market value into a downward spiral.

Bank Aysa had once been the flagship project of the Islamic-conservative Justice and Development Party of Turkey (Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). It was set up in 2006 by supporters of the Gülen movement, becoming Turkey's largest bank under Islamic law which specifically means outlawing interest.

Alevi protests

Thousands of Alevi took to the streets of Istanbul on 8 February 2015 in support of maintaining secularism. They accused the Islamic-conservative AKP party of President Erdogan of attempting to turn Turkey into a "reactionary" state that disregards the faith and identity of its minorities. Alevi make up between 15 and 20 million persons, thus making them the second-largest religious community in Turkey which has a majority Sunni Muslim population.

Palestinian Autonomous Territories

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Palestinians set up committee for International Criminal Court

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is pressing ahead with his plans to lodge charges against Israel before the International Criminal Court. Last week, he ordered the formation of a committee to oversee cases to lodge with the International Criminal Court. The Palestinians formally joined the International Criminal Court last month, enabling them to submit war crimes and crimes against humanity complaints against Israel. Israel denies the charges. The committee will be chaired by former chief negotiator at the peace talks with Israel, Saeb Erekat and will include 40 well-known representatives from the Palestinian political scene, universities and human rights organizations. Rasi Hamed, a representative of the hardline Islamic Hamas from the Gaza Strip will also sit on the committee. Palestinian leaders had already announced that they would begin pressing charges against Israel in April for the ongoing resettlement of sections of the Palestinian population to the West Bank which has been occupied by Israel since 1967. The occupation of foreign territory constitutes a breach of international law.

Iran

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Secret service activities in Germany

According to the findings of German security authorities, Iran's secret service VEVAK (Vezerat-e Ettelā'at va Amniat-e Keshvar, Ministry of Intelligence and Security) which has a large office at the Iranian Embassy in Berlin is working first and foremost against anti-governments activists living in exile. It is focusing above all on activities considered to be an attack on the political system or that call Islamic principles into question. This applies regardless of whether the activities are politically motivated or are merely the expression of creative activity, religious conviction or traditional customs. In doing so, the regime is using its own cover associations and Internet portals that are seeking to gain support for the suspension of international sanctions against Iran.

Jordan

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Jihadists executed

The Jordanian government has ordered that two jihadists be executed by hanging. The executions came hours after ISIS posted a video appearing to show a Jordanian airforce pilot being burned alive who had been seized by ISIS in December 2014. One of the persons executed was the terrorist Sajida al-Rishawi. Negotiations to release her were held days before between the Jordanian government and ISIS. Rishawi had been on death row for her role in the series of attacks on three hotels in Jordan's capital, Amman in 2005.

Yemen

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Resistance forming following coup by Houthi rebels

On 7 February 2015, thousands of protestors took to the streets in a number of cities in protest against Houthi rebels taking over political control. They had dissolved the country's parliament on 6 February 2015 as they announced the establishment of new institutions in a "constitutional declaration". In Sanaa, the rebels vio-

lently dispersed a rally near the university. A revolutionary committee led by Muhammad Ali al-Houthi is now virtually running the country. He is a cousin of rebel leader Abdul Malek al-Houthi. The committee will oversee all further steps, in particular the envisaged establishment of a presidential council comprising 5 members. Rebel leader Abdul Malek al-Houthi justified the complete seizure of power on 7 February 2015. He said it was necessary in order to fill the political vacuum in the wake of the resignation of the President and the government. He went on to say the Houthis want to stabilise the country and eliminate the threat posed by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Abdul Malek al-Houthi said he was open to the participation of other parties. However, the most important political parties have so far ruled out any cooperation.

Syria

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Attack on Damascus

The rebel group Jaish al-Sham ("Islamist Army") pounded residential areas inside the capital city of Damascus with at least 20 missiles on 5 February 2015, killing seven civilians. The group had already fired 38 missiles on the Syrian capital on 25 January 2015, killing seven people.

ISIS suffers defeats

ISIS is in the process of strategic withdrawal after Kurdish fighters (People's Protection Units (YPG)) regained control of Kobane (Ayn al-Arab). According to an announcement made by Syrian Kurds on 9 February 2015, People's Protection Units managed to regain control of 120 villages. ISIS lost further ground in fighting with Syrian government troops close to an airbase in the province Deir al-Zor. They have also lost in the ground campaign fought by Kurdish fighters in the north-eastern Al-Hasaka province close to the border with Iraq. ISIS are under pressure but are by no means close to collapse on Syrian territory.

Airstrikes on ISIS

Airstrikes reportedly destroyed an arms convoy by ISIS from Syria to Iraq. On 5 February 2015, the Kingdom of Jordan which is a US ally launched a large-scale attack in the city of Raqqa, which is currently an ISIS stronghold. Air Force chief Major General Mansour al-Jobour said 56 suspected targets have since been destroyed. The international alliance said that airstrikes had destroyed 20 percent of ISIS' capabilities..

Planned ceasefire suspended

The current ceasefire plan drawn up by the United Nations, brokered by the UN's Syrian envoy, Staffan de Mistura, has been suspended, at the very least. According to western diplomats, the Syrian regime is not willing to make any concessions to the armed rebel groups.

Tunisia

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Government coalition with moderate Islamists

The cabinet headed by Prime Minister Habib Essid was approved on 5 February 2015 by 166 members of the 217-seat parliament, 30 members opposed. The Foreign Minister and five other ministers are members of the secularist Nidaa Tounes party. Three portfolios (Justice, Interior and Defence) went to independent candidates. The former spokesperson of the moderate Islamist Ennahda party, Zied Ladhari, was appointed Minister of Labour, Ennahda takes three secretary of state posts. In the first cabinet draft presented on 23 January 2015, Prime Minister Habib Essid earlier attempt to form a government consisting of just his Nidaa Tounes party. This draft was withdrawn when it became clear he would not manage to gain a parliamentary majority.

Attacks by Islamists foiled

A spokesperson of the Ministry of the Interior announced on 7 February 2015 that 32 Islamists who were planning to carry out heavy attacks on military and civilian facilities in Tunis and a number of regions in the south had been arrested. Some of them were reportedly returnees from Syria. They had been fighting alongside the Islamists. According to the Tunisian news agency, the detainees are supporters of the Ukba-ibn-Nafi Brigade which is said to have joined ISIS.

Somalia

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High-ranking Al-Shabaab leader killed

Yussuf Dheeq was killed in a US airstrike in the town of Diinsoor south of Magadishe on 31 January 2015. Mr. Dheeg was in charge of Al-Shabaab's external operations.

Al-Shabaab leader killed

27 Al-Shabaab members were killed in an airstrike in southern Somalia in a number of airstrikes carried out by AMISOM (The African Union Mission in Somalia) on Al-Shabaab strongholds in the Lower Juba region.

Car bomb in Mogadishu

One pedestrian was killed and six civilians were wounded when a car bomb exploded in Mogadishu on 4 February 2015. The target of the attack, a government employee, remained unharmed.

South Sudan:

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Decision taken on division of power

In the course of the most recent ceasefire agreement concluded between the government led by President Salva Kiir and the rebel leader Riek Machar (cf. BN of 2 February 2015), the two parties agreed to thrash out further details of the future strategy by 5 March 2015. At the proposal of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Kiir is to remain President and Machar is to be reappointed Vice-President. After a pre-transitional period of three months, a Transitional Government of National Unity – TGoNU is to be formed for a further 30 months. The elections due to take place in June 2015 are to be postponed.

Violations of human rights

According to Ivon Simonovic, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, serious violations of human rights continue even though the situation has calmed down slightly.

West Africa/Ebola

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Situation update

The WHO announced on 15 January 2015 and again on 29 January 2015 that the number of new cases of Ebola in the countries worst hit by Ebola, namely Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, reported had dropped significantly for the first time since June 2014, with fewer than 100 new cases being reported per week. On 4 February 2015, the WHO said the number of new cases of Ebola reported was rising once again (fourth calendar week: 99 new cases, fifth calendar week; 124).

The organisation said Senegal had reopened its borders with Guinea once the number of new cases of Ebola dropped. However, the reopening of schools in Liberia planned for 2 February 2015 has to be postponed until 16 February 2015 because of the lack of hygiene facilities for the prevention of Ebola.

The 2015 humanitarian action plan of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has earmarked further investment (US\$ 500 million) for countries affected by Ebola.

On 1 February 2015, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the management and implementation of a joint programme to fight Ebola haemorrhagic fever disease in West Africa. By virtue of the MoU, areas of cooperation and partnership between the two parties include: exchange of information and suggestions on needs to fight Ebola in West Africa, identification of available potential and all other means that could strengthen the programme's efficiency and efforts to build new partnerships with relevant local and international circles to fight this epidemic in West Africa.

Nigeria

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Presidential and parliamentary elections deferred

On 7 February 2015, the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Prof. Attahiru Jega announced that the presidential and parliamentary elections due to take place on 14 February 2015 are to be postponed until 28 March 2015 and that parliamentary elections of the 36 federal states (including governors) will be deferred from 28 February 2015 until 11 April 2015. The reason given for postponement of the elections was that there were not sufficient troops in the north-east of the country owing to the military operations against the hardline Islamist group Boko Haram to safeguard nationwide elections. The incumbent Goodluck Jonathan from PDP (People's Democratic Party) and the retired Major General in the Nigerian Army Muhammadu Buhari (1983 to 1985) who is the presidential candidate for the APC (All Progressives Congress) opposition party established in 2013 are the most promising candidates. Since Nigeria's return to civil government in 1999, the President has always come from the ranks of the PDP. It has been predicted that the presidential election will be the first head-to-head race since 1999. The Chairperson of the APC, John Odigie-Oyegun, said the postponement was "highly provocative". He and Buhari urged the people to renounce violence.

Suicide bombing at President Jonathan's election campaign

A suicide bomber blew herself up at around 3 pm on 2 February 2015 on a road very close to the Pantami Stadium in Gombe, Gombe state, just 20 minutes after President Goodluck Jonathan's convoy passed the parking lot after rounding off his presidential campaign rally in the stadium. One innocent by-stander was killed, 18 persons were wounded.

West Africa

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Plans to deploy regional intervention force to combat Boko Haram

On 7 February 2015, the five west African countries Nigeria, Benin, Niger, Cameroon and Chad pledged to deploy 8,700 troops, police and civilians as part of a regional effort to fight Boko Haram militants.

Nigeria/Cameroon/Chad

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Chadian troops seize Gamboru and Ngala from Boko Haram

On 3 February 2015, Chadian troops entering from the Cameroonian town of Fotokol freed the Nigerian town of Gamboru and the neighbouring town of Ngala from the grip of Boko Haram. This was preceded by Chadian airstrikes on terrorist bases. According to Chadian army sources, around 200 Islamists and nine troops were killed.

Boko-Haram massacre in Fotokol

According to the Cameroonian Minister of Information, around 800 Boko Haram insurgents attacked the town of Fotokol (along the border with Nigeria, Far North Region) in the early hours of 4 February 2015. They are said to have randomly killed over 90 villagers and to have wounded more than 500. Homes and mosques were destroyed. Cameroonian troops managed to drive the Islamists out of the city. 50 insurgents and six soldiers were reportedly killed in the clashes. The attack on Fotokol was obviously an act of retaliation by Boko Haram for Chadian troops recapturing the Nigerian neighbouring town of Gamboru the day before.

Niger

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Boko Haram attack on border town in Niger

According to military sources, the Islamist insurgents have attacked a border town in Niger for the second time in three days. On 6 February 2015, Boko Haram attacked the town of Bosso but were driven back to Nigeria. They say troops have managed to repel the insurgents in Diffa but that fighting rages on along a bridge to Nigeria. Hundreds of troops who will help to fight back Boko Haram have been deployed in the area spanning the border between Niger and Nigeria. The Parliament in Niger will take a decision on 9 February 2015 whether or not to deploy troops to Nigeria in response to the attacks.

Democratic Republic of Congo

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Between 21 and 27 men and women working in a field were killed in the town of Mayangose (close to the district capital Beni) by machete-wielding attackers on 3 February 2015. The Islamists rebel organisation ADF (Allied Democratic Forces) which originally operated in Uganda and killed over 260 people in and around Beni between early October and late December 2014 is being blamed for the attack.

Central African Republic

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UN Security Council to deploy more peacekeepers

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon urged the Security Council on 5 February 2015 to deploy 1,030 more peacekeepers (750 troops and 280 police officers) for the Central African Republic within the framework of the UN MINUSCA mission (Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic). This would take the mandated strength of the peacekeeping operation to nearly 13,000 uniformed personnel. Almost 8,700 had already been deployed in the Central African Republic by late December 2014. The Security Council is due to renew the mandate of the mission in April 2015. The security situation remains volatile, Ban Ki-Moon said. Clashes between anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka elements continue. Criminal activities aimed at, among other things, controlling the country's natural resources are increasing. Pockets of vulnerable Muslim communities remain under nearly constant threat and in dire humanitarian conditions, despite the efforts of the international forces, he said.

Mali

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MINUSMA

MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali) was one of the most dangerous UN missions in 2014. The multinational force lost 28 troops and 75 were wounded, some severely. MINUSMA became a prime target in the wake of regrouping of Islamist groups in north Mali. Protests broke out in Gao on 27 January 2015 sparked by a meeting between MINUSMA representatives and local leaders after news of plans to create a buffer zone in the north and to disarm pro-government militia leaked. Three protestors were shot by UN peacekeepers during the rally. The UN announced that it had merely fired warning shots in response to the attacks in which incendiary devices were used.

Suicide attack

At least 15 persons were killed in two suicide bombings carried out by pro-government Gambia militiamen on Tuareg rebels close to Tabankort on 28 January 2015. A third attack was foiled.

EUTM mission extended

German participation in the EU-led military training mission EUTM-Mali is to be extended by 15 months and the ceiling of the mandate is to be raised by 100 to 350 troops. Germany is scheduled to lead the mission from August 2015 until late May 2016 (when the current mandate is due to end).

West Balkans

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Mass exodus

Kosovo, EU countries and the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon are becoming increasingly concerned about the over the growing exodus. (cf. BN from 19 January 2015) Reports indicate that around 50,000 thousand Kosovans have left the country in recent months. Most Kosovans leaving their country head for Germany, Austria or France. In Germany alone, the number of asylum seekers has risen by 101 percent year-on-year. 10,200 asylum seekers from Kosovo applied for asylum in Hungary in the month of January 2015 alone. And the trend continues. Kosovo's Ministry of Education reports that around 5,200 children have ceased attending school in the past few months. Whole settlements are at risk of depopulation, especially in

structurally weak regions. 290 Kosovans were arrested within 48 hours last week for attempting to enter Hungary from Serbia unlawfully. Around 60,000 Kosovans have reportedly applied for a Serbian passport. Unless a halt is put to the trend, it is anticipated that at least 10 percent of the 1.8 million population will have left Kosovo by the end of 2015. The government is appealing to its citizens not to leave, saying it has already developed a strategy to improve living conditions. Parliament will address this issue in the next few days.

Rumours have been circulating since the autumn of 2014 that Germany and France are granting asylum. Immigration racketeers are attempting to encourage potential migrants to leave Kosovo by spreading rumours that they will receive social benefits and a residence permit. In addition to smuggling illegal migrants, they benefit from buying up the migrants' property. Every day, several packed buses leave the bus station in Pristina, heading for Belgrade. The Brussels Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo guarantees Serbian and Kosovan nationals freedom of movement. Kosovan nationals are automatically issued with an official document at the Serbian border allowing them to reside in Serbia. There, they are met by immigration racketeers who escort them as far as the Hungarian border. Anyone who is unable to travel on to Hungary immediately finds temporary accommodation in holiday apartments in northern Serbia, where immigration racketeers have rented several motels and properties.

Background:

15 years after the end of the war and seven years after declaring independence, Kosovo is still the poorest country in the Balkans. The economy is still under-developed, one-third of the population is unemployed and around 40 percent of the population are living below the poverty line. Dissatisfaction with the leadership, corruption and nepotism is also rife. Kosovo is also a turntable for trafficking in drugs, arms and humans. Thousands of people took to the streets in early February to protests against the government (cf. BN of 2 February 2015). The most frequent slogan chanted was: "You cannot rule a country with thieves". Kosovo's new cabinet has 21 minister and 41 deputy-ministers. This in itself is a record-breaker in the Balkans. The new government only commenced work – following a stalemate lasting several months – in December 2014 (cf. BN of 15 December 2014 to 24 November 2014). It is dominated by the two largest parties, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) and the Democratic League (LDK). The LDK had left the block of opposition parties intending to jointly form a government in order to prevent former Prime Minister Hashim Thaci from serving a third term.. Many consider this to be an act of treason.

This conflict-ridden situation characterised by dissatisfaction and poverty has robbed people of hope and prospects. Furthermore, the social security systems do not offer appropriate cover. The suicide rate has skyrocketed, especially in the post-war period. All of this and promises from the west have even caused Kosovans who have a job to leave their country. However, it is quite clear what has caused this swift and sudden mass exodus given that the reasons for it have existed for quite some time. Some people suspect political motives Others speak of an organised system involving travel agencies, coach companies, customs officers and immigration racketeers.

Albania

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Growing migration

Emigration is also on the rise in Albania. In Germany alone, the number of asylum seekers has risen by 500 percent year-on-year. Each day, coaches full of people leave a number of Albanian towns heading for Germany. Immigration racketeers who try to lure potential migrants to leave Albania by spreading rumours are partly responsible for this (cf. the article on Kosovo). Albania responded with an action plan (comprising border controls, information campaigns etc.) in a bid to prevent illegal migration.

Albania has always had one of the highest migration rates in Europe in proportion to its population. Around 1.4 million Albanians have left their country in the past two decades.

Migration is motivated first and foremost by financial concerns – poor living conditions, unemployment and low wages. (Cf. BN of 19 January 2015; 26 August 2014).

Croatia

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ICC rejects genocide charges

On 3 February 2015, the International Criminal Court (ICC) ruled that neither Croatia nor Serbia committed genocide against each other's populations. This ruling by the supreme UN Court that neither country had committed genocide has put an end to the legal battle that has been ongoing since 1999. The Croatian government had originally claimed that Serbia was involved in ethnic cleansing between 1991 and 1995. All attempts to reach an out-of-court solution to the conflict failed and in 2010 Serbia responded to the Croatian claim by launching a counter-suit with the ICC over the death and expulsion of thousands of Serbs.

In the view of the ICC, both sides committed acts of violence but neither side showed the specific intent required for acts of genocide. In the ruling it said that at the beginning of the Balkan war, the Serbs had indeed carried out acts using coercion in order to drive Croats out of the country, but that the intent was not to destroy the Croat ethnic group. During an offensive launched by Croat troops to recapture territory from Serbian rebels, the Court found insufficient evidence of genocide. While the ICC conceded that Serbian mercenaries, had killed a substantial number of Croatian people, it said the Serbs had also suffered attacks on a substantial part of their ethnic people. The Court ruling has been eagerly awaited both Croatia and Serbia. Whereas Croatia was disappointed by the ruling but are willing to accept it, Serbia was satisfied.

Ukraine

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Diplomacy offensive in Kiev and Moscow

Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande travelled to Kiev on 5 February 2015 to hold talks on the Ukraine crisis with Ukrainian President Petro Poroschenko and to propose a comprehensive peace plan (offering an exchange of prisoners, a ceasefire and far-reaching autonomy for eastern Ukraine). After the meeting in Kiev, the Ukrainian President announced that all three interlocutors had pressed for a peaceful solution to the violent conflict and for the implementation of the Minsk Agreement involving, inter alia, a ceasefire between Ukrainian troops and pro-Russian separatists as well as the withdrawal of heavy arms. However, no common statement was issued by the three politicians and no reasons were given.

Angela Merkel and François Hollande continued their talks with President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on 6 February 2015. They said the talks had been "interesting and constructive". During a teleconference held on 8 February 2015, Merkel, Putin and the Ukrainian President Poroschenko discussed a broad package of measures to achieve a "global solution" to the conflict and agreed to hold a summit meeting in Minsk on 11 February 2015. Whereas the Ukrainian government assumes that the meeting will be followed by a swift, unconditional ceasefire between the two sides, Putin says the summit will only take place if the parties have managed to "agree on a series of points" that they have been "actively" discussing.

Situation in the East

According to reports issued by the Ukrainian army on 4 February 2015, pro-Russian separatists launched a large-scale offensive in which 80 locations were attacked within 24 hours. Fighting involving around 5,000 Ukrainian troops has been centred on Debaltseve. It is at risk of being fully surrounded by separatists. Separatists are eager to capture this railway junction as it would give them a better logistics junction between Lugansk and Donetsk, both of which are under their control.

On 6 February 2015, the warring factions agreed on a 24-hour ceasefire for the town of Debaltseve so that civilians could be brought to safety.

Discord over US supply of arms to Ukraine

Discussions are underway in the US about the option of supplying the Ukrainian army with arms in the face of the escalating violence. On 5 February 2015, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, said during a visit to Kiev that President Barack Obama will be taking a decision on the supply of arms shortly. Up to now, President Obama has refused to supply arms. At a security conference held in Munich last weekend, the Ukrainian President urged the west to supply arms to Ukraine. Despite objections from Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and Federal Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the US - and above all the Republicans - are considering the option of supplying arms to Ukraine and have criticised Germany for the reluctance it has shown.

India

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Christian protestors detained

Hundreds of Indian Christians were arrested by police in New Delhi on 5 February 2015 during a protest against growing religious intolerance. According to police sources, the protesters were detained for attempting to march from a cathedral near the country's parliament to Home Minister Rajnath Singh's residence. The action was fuelled by an incident in which unknown persons broke into a Delhi church, desecrating property and by several other acts of vandalism and arson on local churches. The protestors are blaming Hindu hardliners for the attacks.

There has been ongoing tension between Hindus and members of religious minorities in India since the Hindu nationalist, Narendra Modi, swept national elections to become Prime Minister last May. According to the Christian relief organisation Open Doors, the 2015 index of persecution of Christians in countries worldwide shows that the situation for Christians in India has deteriorated dramatically over the past twelve months.

Philippines

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Suspected terrorist behind the Bali bombings killed

Zulkifli Abduhir (alias Zulkifli bin Hir, referred to by the nom de guerre Marwan) was killed on 25 January 2015 by Special Action Force (SAF) officers during a raid in the Philippines. DNA analyses on a man who was killed on the island of Mindanao during clashes with the police, indicate this, further tests are to confirm. Zulkifli bin Hir was considered to be a leading member of the hardline Islamist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). He is thought to have masterminded the 2002 Bali night club bombings which killed 202 people. He is also thought to have been involved in the suicide bombings on the Philippines and has been among the FBI Most Wanted Terrorists since March 2007.

East Timor

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Prime Minister resigns

According to government sources, Xanana Gusmão resigned as Prime Minister along with his coalition on 6 February 2015; he will remain in office until his successor is sworn in. Accusations of corruption are said to have been the reason for his resignation. Gusmão had led East Timor's struggle for independence against Indonesia for decades and was the country's first President. He gained the Prime Minister ship in 2007.