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Briefing Notes

Group 62 - Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

17 August 2020

Afghanistan

COVID-19 pandemic

There are no major changes compared to last week. Infections are reported from all 34 provinces. Kabul is most affected, followed by Herat, Balkh, Kandahar and Nangarhar (as of 16 August 2020). Since hygiene measures are usually not observed, experts expect a further increase in infections in the next four weeks. The Afghan Ministry of Education announced that public schools will reopen on 21 August 2020.

Release of prisoners

After the Loya Jirga had recommended the controversial release of 400 Taliban prisoners (see BN of 10 August 2020), the government released the first 80 prisoners from Pul-e-Charkhi prison in Kabul on 11 August 2020. France called on the Afghan government not to release anyone who had killed French nationals. The Australian government made a similar request.

Attacks, fighting, civilian victims

At least 85 pro-government workers and 71 civilians were killed in August 2020 (as of 13 August 2020), according to information from the New York Times. The Afghan Interior Ministry announced on 13 August 2020 that at least 121 civilians had been killed and 336 injured in the previous two weeks. There had been fighting in the provinces of Baghlan, Faryab, Jawzjan, Sar-e-Pul, Balkh, Kandahar, Maidan Wardak, Nangarhar, Logar and Ghazni as well as attacks in Kabul, it said. The Taliban deny the government's information on civilian casualties.

Algeria

Three years in prison for journalists

Journalist Khaled Drareni was sentenced to three years in prison for "endangering national unity" and "inciting to hold an unarmed gathering". He had reported on the peaceful mass protests that led to the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Drareni is the editor of the Casbah Tribune news website, a correspondent for the French broadcaster TV5 Monde and works for Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

Belarus

Protests against President Lukashenko

Protests against incumbent Alexander Lukashenko continue after the official announcement of his election victory in the presidential election, which ended on 09 August 2020. According to media reports, around 100,000 people gathered in Minsk at a rally against the president and alleged election fraud on 16 August 2020. At the same time Lukashenko gave a speech to supporters in which he called for the defence of the country's independence and

rejected new elections. According to the Ministry of the Interior, about 65,000 people attended the rally, while non-governmental observers estimated the number of participants to be lower. In previous post-election protests, hundreds of people had been injured and at least two protesters had been killed in violent clashes between protesters and police officers. The police had arrested around 7,000 people. On 14 August 2020, more than 2,000 of those arrested were released.

Bolivia

General strike causes significant supply problems

The nationwide general strike, which was called by the Bolivian trade union federation because of the renewed postponement of the presidential elections on 3 August 2020 (see BN of 10 August 2020), resulted in the blocking of important road connections by protesters cutting off supplies to several cities and causing significant supply bottlenecks. Fuel and drinking water became scarce and food prices rose significantly. Medical care is also at risk in some places, thus the army deployed helicopters to transport urgently needed oxygen for the treatment of COVID-19 patients. Some radical groups attempted to forcefully dismantle the blockades and injured several people.

Government enacts law: presidential and parliamentary elections

On 14 August 2020, the parliament passed a law (No. 1315), which stipulates the election of a new president and a new parliament by 18 October 2020. While the EU and the UN, among others, welcome the law, the opposition calls it a fraud and continues to demand the observation of the original election date 06 September 2020. The opposition, however, announced to lift the roadblocks, but it is unclear whether all anti-government groups will act accordingly.

China

Hong Kong: Activists arrested

The media entrepreneur and owner of the government-critical daily Apple Daily, Jimmy Lai, his two sons and several members of the management were arrested on 10 August 2020 in a police raid on the newspaper's premises. Lai is a prominent supporter of the democracy movement and is considered one of the harshest critics of the Chinese leadership. On the same day, well-known democracy activist Agnes Chow and activists Wilson Li and Andy Li were arrested. The ten people arrested in total are charged with making secret agreements with foreign forces, which can be punished with up to life imprisonment according to the new security law (see BN of 06 July 2020). Jimmy Lai was released on bail on the night of 12 August 2020. Agnes Chow has been at large on bail since 11 August 2020.

Hong Kong: COVID-19 pandemic, legislative council election

On 31 July 2020, Head of Government Carrie Lam had postponed the upcoming elections to the Legislative Council, the Hong Kong Parliament, by one year until September 2021, citing the COVID 19 pandemic as the reason for this decision. The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in Beijing decided on 11 August 2020 that the members of the Hong Kong Parliament would remain in office until then.

Colombia

Dead in attack

Unknown persons killed eight people in an attack in the village of Samaniego (Nariño province) on 15 August 2020. They are also believed to be responsible for the murder of another victim who was found the next day. According to the prosecutor's office, a dozen armed groups are active in drug trafficking in the area. Since the government's peace agreement with the rebel organization Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in 2016, dissidents from the FARC, the rebel group Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and paramilitaries from the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC) have rivalled for control of the region.

Ethiopia

Deaths at protests in the south

According to official figures, at least ten people (according to Amnesty International, 16) lost their lives in clashes between protesters and security forces in Boditi and Sodo, two towns in the Wolayata zone in the south of the country, on 10 August 2020. Over 30 people were injured and over 100 are reported to have been arrested. The protests were triggered by the arrest of local officials and activists of the Wolayata National Movement Party the day before. They are accused of having incited violence.

Like many ethnic groups, the Wolayata people who live in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region demand an autonomous region. The federal system allows each ethnic group to vote in a referendum on the establishment of its own autonomous region, as was most recently the case with the Sidama in November 2019 (see BN of 25 November 2019).

HRW deplores repression and prison conditions

The human rights organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) criticized the detention conditions of opposition activists and journalists in Ethiopia in a statement on August 15, 2020 and sees the risk of the country falling back into its authoritarian practices, which had been considered overcome since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in April 2018. More than 9,000 people were arrested in connection with the murder of the singer Hachalu Hundessa at the end of June 2020 in Addis Ababa, which led to violent clashes claiming more than 200 lives throughout the country (see BN of 06 July 2020).

Iran

Publication ban issued due to corona-related interview

An interview with a member of the government's anti-corona staff resulted in a publication ban for the Tehran daily Jahan-e Eghtesad. The official interviewed specifically criticized the corona infection figures provided by the Iranian Ministry of Health. The official figures were untrustworthy and corresponded to only one twentieth of the true figures, he said. The official information about the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran has always been questioned, among others by critics and users of the social networks as well as parliamentarians and members of the Tehran City Council.

Human rights activist Sotoudeh on hunger strike

On 11 August 2020, the internationally known lawyer and human rights activist Nasrin Sotoudeh started a hunger strike in Tehran's Evin prison. She had been sentenced to 148 lashes and 33 years in prison for her political and human rights activities in spring 2019. Sotoudeh said she went on hunger strike in protest, after her demands for the release of political prisoners because of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences had remained unanswered by the judiciary. Although the Iranian judiciary had announced in March 2020 that more than 80,000 prisoners had been granted leave because of the pandemic, it seems that political prisoners have been largely excluded from this special measure. Around 300 Iranian activists at home and abroad had supported this demand with an open letter to international human rights organizations and the WHO.

Situation of Christians

The situation is deteriorating for people who have converted from Islam to Christianity, according to media reports. The International Society for Human Rights (ISHR) reported the arrest of 35 professing Christians in the past few weeks as well as several house searches. It said that four converts were sentenced to between two and five years in prison on 01 August 2020.

The report mentioned that €127,000 had been demanded as bail for the release from prison from the family of the Iranian-Armenian chairman of a Christian house church, Joseph Shahbazian.

As reasons for the Iranian regime's tougher action, especially against evangelical, missionary Christians, ISHR cites the growing poverty and the fact that the country is overtaxed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Iraq

Missile attacks on the Green Zone and Taji Base

On the night of 10 to 11 August 2020 a Katyusha rocket landed in the Green Zone, another one in the Baghdad district of Karrada and a third one was intercepted. During the investigation of the launch site 17 km south of the Green Zone, another missile ready for launch was found and defused.

In the night of 15 to 16 August 2020 two rockets struck near the Taji Base that is occupied by coalition forces. There was no personal injury in any of the incidents.

Although no one has claimed responsibility for firing the rockets, it is generally believed that they are linked to the Iraqi government's actions against the pro-Iranian Kataeb Hezbollah and the deaths of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Ever since these killings, various groups have tried to hit coalition troops or representatives of the Iraqi state in retaliation for the deaths of these two key actors.

On 16 August 2020, a major part of the Taji military base was handed over to Iraqi control as planned.

Ivory Coast

Several dead in demonstrations

There have been repeated clashes between supporters and opponents of President Alassane Ouattara and with the security forces. The background to these clashes is Ouattara's announcement to run again in the presidential elections in October 2020. It is controversial whether the constitution allows a third term of office for the 78-year-old (see BN of 10 August 2020).

In the city of Daoukro, about 230 km north of the economic metropolis of Abidjan, which is the stronghold of the opposition presidential candidate Henri Konan Bedie, three people died, one person was killed in Bonoua, around 60 km east and another one in Gagnoa, around 300 km west of Abidjan. There were also clashes in Yopougon, a district of Abidjan, in which the police used tear gas. A total of 86 arrests are said to have been made.

Kosovo

Police criticized for intimidating journalists

According to recent media reports, the country's media union has expressed its concern that intimidation and harassment of journalists in Kosovo continues to increase. In a press release the journalists' association of Kosovo (AJK) also criticized that the police used firearms to prevent a team of reporters of state broadcaster RTK from filming on 13 August 2020 in Zubin Potok in the Serbian-run north of the country. The journalists were arrested on the shores of Lake Ujman/Gazivoda and detained for two hours to check filming permits, although the reporters had previously been given permission to film by the UN-KFOR peacekeeping mission and the police. According to the press release, such detentions and other forms of intimidation threaten the safety of journalists, their independent reporting and the general freedom of the media in Kosovo.

Lebanon

Beirut: Investigation into the explosion in the port

In the aftermath of the large-scale explosion of a warehouse in Beirut on 04 August 2020, which resulted in the immediate death of at least 178 people (more than 6,000 were injured, at least 30 are still missing), the Attorney General Ghassan Oueidat has submitted complaints against 25 people to the competent judge Fadi Sawan. 19 of the accused are already in custody. Fadi Sawan was chosen because of his exceptional reputation as an impartial judge. The investigation is not yet complete, this is merely a first indictment. The Attorney General has already summoned several senior politicians for questioning, including some past and current ministers.

Meanwhile, estimates of the economic damage caused by the explosion in the port run as high as USD 15 billion. Four hospitals have been badly damaged, at least in one case the damage could be irreparable. As a result, treatment options for many diseases are severely limited. The Saint George Hospital, for example, is one of the few facilities

in Lebanon that can treat children suffering from cancer. It is to be feared that the destruction will result in a considerable number of victims of diseases that could be treated otherwise.

Mozambique

Jihadists capture the port of Mocímboa da Praia

In the morning of 12 August 2020, the jihadist group Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama (disciples of the prophetic tradition), who swore allegiance to IS in 2019, succeeded in conquering the port of the city of Mocímboa da Praia with its 30,000 inhabitants, after days of fighting in Mozambique's northernmost province Cabo Delgado. So far, Mozambique's military has not succeeded in recapturing the port. The port is vital for cargo deliveries for the natural gas liquefaction plant on the Afungi Peninsula, which is currently under construction about 60 km to the north. The facility is at the heart of the development of the huge natural gas fields in the Rovuma Basin. Since the beginning of the Islamist uprising in Cabo Delgado province in October 2017, over 900 civilians have been killed and around 250,000 have been internally displaced.

Nigeria

Sentenced to stoning for rape

On 12 August 2020, an Upper Shariah court in the northern Nigerian city of Kano (capital of the state of the same name) sentenced an elderly married man to death by stoning for raping a ten-year-old girl (according to other sources the victim was twelve years old) according to Section 127 (b) in conjunction with Section 126 of the Kano State Sharia Penal Code Law 2000. The crime happened in the remote village of Farsa (Tsanyawa Local Government Area, state of Kano). The defendant admitted the crime. He can appeal the judgement within 30 days.

Death sentence for blasphemy

On 10 August 2020 an Upper Shariah court in the northern Nigerian city of Kano sentenced a 22 year old singer to death by hanging for blasphemy according to section 382 (6) of the Kano State Sharia Penal Code Law 2000. The court held that he committed blasphemy by highly praising an imam in a song distributed on WhatsApp at the end of February 2020 and placing this imam above the prophet Mohammed. He had also called Mohammed an atheist. The singer, who is said to have not denied the allegations against him, can appeal the judgement within 30 days. On 10 August 2020, the same court sentenced a 17-year-old to ten years imprisonment for making derogatory comments about the Prophet Mohammed.

North Macedonia

Migration pressure and COVID-19: state of emergency imposed in the border region

According to a UNHCR statement and with reference to local media reports of 06 August 2020, the government of Northern Macedonia has decided to impose a 30-day state of emergency in those regions of the country that are particularly affected by a renewed increase in migration pressure along the Balkan route. According to the reports, the decision was also made in connection with the coronavirus emergency and the increasing risk of infections in the country. The affected areas are mainly on the southern border (with Greece) and the northern border (with Serbia). In order to be able to take the necessary measures in the border regions, including those to provide health care for migrants, a separate crisis management centre will be set up.

Somalia

Attack on hotel in Mogadishu

Al-Shabaab attacked the Elite hotel in Mogadishu, which is popular with government employees and journalists, on 16 August 2020. A car bomb exploded at the entrance to the hotel, which was then stormed by armed men. The

militants reportedly took hostages inside the hotel before being killed by security forces a few hours later. According to preliminary data, 17 people were killed and 28 wounded. Two government officials were among those killed.

150,000 people displaced by floods

As a result of heavy rainfall and flooding, more than 150,000 people have had to flee their homes since June 2020. The government has issued warnings for communities along the Jubba and Shabelle rivers. Parts of the city of Afgoye have been washed away by the water and thousands of families are without electricity. A total of 650,000 people have been displaced by floods so far in 2020. Many of the recently displaced are short of food and live in overcrowded makeshift shelters.

Fighting between al-Shabaab and residents of Mudug

On 12 August 2020, fighting took place between al-Shabaab and residents of the village of Shabellow in Mudug region. Several casualties, among them civilians, have been reported. The fighting reportedly broke out when al-Shabaab tried to impose taxes on villagers. The militant group briefly took control of the village and burned houses and shops. There is a Somali National Army base nearby.

Relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions

On 15 August 2020, educational institutions were reopened after four months of closure. International flights were resumed on 03 August 2020 and domestic flights on 05 July 2020.

Sudan

Dead in fighting in the east

In ongoing clashes between two hostile ethnic groups, at least 30 people have been killed in Port Sudan and over 80 others were injured since 09 August 2020. The central government has deployed the military to the region and a curfew has been imposed. Several people are said to have been arrested. Witnesses reported that the fighting began when members of a Nubian tribe invaded a borough of Port Sudan considered the stronghold of the Bedouin Beni Amer tribe.

Conflicts between these groups have increased since the overthrow of former President Omar Al-Bashir in April 2019. The Darfur region in the west has been particularly affected.

Trial against former president Al-Bashir postponed

At the request of the defence, the trial against Al-Bashir has been postponed indefinitely. The official reason given was that the bail request of three co-defendants must be decided first. The former head of state, who was overthrown in April 2019, is charged with the military coup he led in 1989 against the elected government of Prime Minister Sadik Al-Mahdi. In order to consolidate his claim to power, Al-Bashir is said to have committed the most serious human rights violations. More mass graves were discovered at the end of July 2020.

South Sudan

Over 100 dead in conflict between soldiers and civilians

At least 127 people have been killed in clashes between soldiers and armed groups in Tonj East in the centre of the country since 10 August 2020. According to a military spokesman, 82 civilians and 45 soldiers were among the victims. The UN had previously reported at least 70 deaths. The violence was apparently triggered by a dispute between soldiers and a youth gang over their disarmament. The youths allegedly attacked a military base in Romic. The disarmament of the civilian population is part of the peace agreement of 2018. Nevertheless, clashes between rival groups, local militias and the army are still prevalent. Some citizens fear that the authorities cannot protect them sufficiently against violence and that they will lose their protection if they disarm.

UN warns of escalating violence

On 14 August 2020, the UN Commission for Human Rights in South Sudan warned against a further escalation of violence in the country. The violence in six out of ten states was endangering the stability of the country. Since June

2020, hundreds of civilians have been injured and killed and hundreds of girls and women have been abducted. The latter became victims of sexual violence. More than 80,000 people have fled the attacks, the declaration said.

Syria

Idlib: Russian-Turkish patrols suspended

On 14 August 2020, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that military patrols along the M4 highway in north-west Syria had to be suspended due to increasingly frequent rebel attacks. Since March 2020, the joint operations of the Russian and Turkish military have been considered a condition for the ceasefire between Turkish and Syrian forces.

However, not all rebel groups cooperate with their protective power, Turkey, but keep attacking the convoys.

US commander warns of ISIS resurgence

General Frank McKenzie, Supreme Commander of the US Forces in the Middle East, warned on 12 August 2020 that elements of IS are regrouping west of the river Euphrates. Living conditions in the areas that are now back under government control are worse than when IS first gained control of them, he said.

The prison camps for IS supporters and their families in the Kurdish-run SDF areas meanwhile provided the breeding ground for increasing radicalization. In the notorious al-Hol camp, which houses up to 70,000 inmates, mainly women and children, the first cases of COVID-19 are said to have occurred to make things even worse. One day earlier UNICEF had reported that eight small children had died of malnutrition and dehydration in al-Hol between 06 and 10 August 2020.

Venezuela

Another lockdown

As of 17 August 2020 there will be a nationwide curfew throughout the country. The head of the administration of Caracas, Darío Vivas, is one of the most recent victims of the coronavirus in Venezuela. Many important people within the government administration are now infected.

Additional strict regulations apply in the provinces of Bolívar, Sucre, Caracas, Miranda, Táchira, Zulia and La Guaira. According to the available data, the province of Miranda currently is the epicentre of the epidemic, followed by Caracas.

The lockdown will hamper or even stop all activities by the opposition; previously there had been repeated protests, mainly because of the supply situation. The state of Miranda, which has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, is currently experiencing significant problems with its water and electricity supply.

Western Balkans

COVID-19 pandemic: Health systems under pressure again

The Western Balkans, which initially weathered the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring relatively well, have been struggling with another sharp rise in new cases and deaths since June 2020, after many governments had initially lifted restrictions prematurely and subsequently had to reintroduce more severe restrictions. According to media reports on 03 August 2020, the countries of Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, whose health systems are under severe pressure, have been particularly hard hit. The average infection rate in Montenegro over the past few weeks was about 240 cases per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by Kosovo with 145, Bosnia and Herzegovina with 96, North Macedonia with 94, Serbia with 79, and Albania with 47 cases.

Yemen

Abuse of Ethiopian migrants

On 13 August 2020, Human Rights Watch (HRW) accused the Houthi rebels in Yemen and Saudi Arabian border guards of killing dozens of Ethiopian migrants in April 2020. On 16 April 2020, Houthi rebels evicted thousands of migrants from their informal settlements in al-Ghar, Saadah Governorate, which is located two kilometres from the Saudi Arabian border. They were trucked to the border with Saudi Arabia and their settlements were destroyed. The migrants were accused of spreading the coronavirus. Those trying to flee were shot by the Houthis. Fighting broke out at the border between the Houthis and Saudi Arabian border guards, who also fired directly at the migrants. The migrants arrested by the border guards are being held in overcrowded and unsanitary prisons in Saudi Arabia, according to HRW.

Around 140,000 migrants came to Yemen in 2019. More than 90% of them are Ethiopians crossing Yemen on their way to Saudi Arabia. They usually cross the border in the mountainous area between the Saadah Governorate in Yemen and the Jazan region in Saudi Arabia. Earlier HRW had documented the abduction, kidnapping, detention and physical abuse of Ethiopian migrants by smugglers in Yemen in order to extort money from their families.

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BN-Redaktion@bamf.bund.de