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# Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

13 May 2024

## Afghanistan

### **Governance and persecution: protests against the Taliban in Badakhshan**

On 07.05.24, the Taliban met with protesters in Badakhshan province (cf. BN of 06.05.24). Some of them were reportedly taken by force to the provincial capital Faizabad for the occasion. No agreement was reached, but the Taliban subsequently declared the protests over. The protesters continued to demand that those from the ranks of the Taliban who were suspected of being responsible for the killing of two protesters be handed over to the local population. On 09.05.24, additional Taliban forces were deployed to the province in order to destroy opium poppy fields in a concerted action the following day.<sup>1</sup>

### **Security situation**

The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) has claimed responsibility for the bomb attack on a Taliban convoy in the city of Faizabad in Badakhshan province on 08.05.24 leaving three Taliban dead and six others injured. The attack targeted a Taliban patrol involved in the campaign against poppy cultivation (see above).<sup>2</sup>

### **Humanitarian situation**

Heavy rains and flash floods in Baghlan province (Burka and Markazi districts) have killed 315 people and injured 1,630, according to Taliban reports on 12.05.24. Thousands of livestock died, and 2,655 houses were destroyed or damaged. Floods also caused casualties in Herat province and Ghor provinces. In Takhar province, floods killed 20 people and injured 80 others.

On 08.05.24, an earthquake measuring 4.1 on the Richter scale struck Badakhshan province. There were no reports of damages caused.<sup>3</sup>

## Chad

### **Interim president wins presidential election according to electoral body**

According to the official provisional election results announced on 09.05.24, interim President Mahamat Idriss Déby won the presidential election on 06.05.24 with over 61 percent of the vote. The election is intended to mark the end of a transitional phase that had lasted since April 2021 due to the death of Déby's father, long-term president Idriss Déby Itno. Prime Minister Succès Masra, in office since January 2024 (cf. BN of 08.01.24) and the main opposition candidate, secured around 18.5 of the votes, according to the electoral authority. Masra reportedly declared himself the winner of the election shortly before the surprisingly early announcement of the official results. His party, Les Transformateurs, said it had won 73 percent of the votes. The party criticised numerous irregularities. On 12.05.24, it filed a complaint with the constitutional council.

According to the official results, former Prime Minister Albert Pahimi Padacké came third with around 16.9 percent of the vote. On 28.02.24, opposition leader and potential presidential candidate Yaya Dillo had been killed by security forces (cf. BN of 04.03.24).<sup>4</sup>

#### **Deaths following the announcement of the election results**

At least ten people were reportedly killed and others injured in N'Djamena during the celebrations following the announcement the election victory of Déby, who is also a general. This was reportedly caused by shots fired by members of the army and armed civilians. More detailed reports are lacking due to a ban by the health ministry on hospitals sharing information on victims with the press.<sup>5</sup>

## **Colombia**

#### **Paz Total: ELN announces resumption of kidnappings for economic purposes**

On 06.05.24, the ELN announced that it would resume kidnappings for financial purposes, as the government had failed to fulfil agreements made at a negotiation meeting in Mexico in December 2023 to create a peace financing fund within three months. Petro's government has denied this and criticised the guerrillas' unilateral decision. Negotiations with the ELN are currently in crisis. The central ELN command recently criticised the fact that government representatives were also holding separate, unauthorised regional peace talks with a recently split-off front of the ELN (Comuneros del Sur) operating in Nariño. The cycle of talks between the ELN central command and the government, originally scheduled for April 2024, was therefore initially cancelled. On 27.04.24, the ELN called on the government to decide whether to hold talks with the Central Command or the Comuneros del Sur. Talks with the ELN Central Command are currently scheduled for the week between 20.05 and 25.05.24 in Caracas. However, it is unclear what influence the current events will have on their organisation.<sup>6</sup>

## **Côte d'Ivoire**

#### **Gbagbo chosen as presidential candidate**

Media report that the country's political players are preparing for the upcoming presidential election scheduled to be held in autumn 2025.

On 10.05.24, the Parti des peuples africains-Côte d'Ivoire (PPA-CI) chose Laurent Gbagbo as its candidate for head of state at a party conference. Gbagbo had already held this office and is ineligible to vote or stand for election due to a conviction in connection with the conflict in 2010 and 2011 (cf. BN of 08.08.22, 05.06.23 and 03.07.23). PPA-CI approached the government again in March 2024 to seek a political solution to this issue.

Other major parties have not yet officially nominated their presidential candidates. Charles Blé Goudé, who is also disenfranchised, recently reaffirmed his ambition to take on government responsibility at the meeting of his party Cojep. Since December 2023 following the death of former President Henri Konan Bédié (cf. BN of 07.08.23), the Parti démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI-RDA) has been led by Tidjane Thiam who is reorganising the PDCI-RDA with a view to the 2025 elections. President Alassane Ouattara himself has not yet commented on whether he will seek a fourth term in office; there have been statements of support from his party, Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix (RHDP). Reports say that finally, Guillaume Soro, who is in exile, may also want to play a role in the 2025 election, following recent contacts with Ouattara.<sup>7</sup>

## **Iran**

#### **Second round of parliamentary elections**

The second round of the parliamentary elections took place on 10.05.24. According to the electoral commission, conservative candidates won most of the seats that had not yet been allocated. After the election, 233 of the 290 parliamentary seats are now held by candidates from the conservative camp. The second round had become necessary as not all candidates received the required minimum number of votes in the first round. A number of reformist candidates had been disqualified by the Guardian Council in advance.

The first round of parliamentary elections, held on 01.04.24, had recorded a low voter turnout. According to official figures from the interior ministry, 41 percent of eligible voters participated nationwide. Interior minister Ahmad Vahidi said that turnout in the second round was lower than in the first. Eyewitnesses reported that many polling stations were quieter in this round than before. According to former information and communication technology minister Azari Jahromi, the turnout in Tehran in the second round was around 8 percent. Media report that, according to the second-round vote count, over 90 percent of eligible voters in Tehran and most major cities did not vote.<sup>8</sup>

### **Filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof sentenced to eight years in prison**

According to media reports, filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof was sentenced to eight years in prison on 08.05.24. In a post on social network X, the filmmaker's lawyer wrote that a revolutionary court sentenced Rasoulof to eight years in prison, flogging, a fine and confiscation of property. He added that the sentence was upheld by an appeals court and that the case was sent for execution. Apparently, the main reasons for the conviction were public statements critical of the regime and the production of films and documentaries, which the court considered to be examples of collusion with the intention of committing a crime against the country's security.

Rasoulof and other artists had been arrested in July 2022 for taking part in the "Lay Down Your Guns" campaign, which had called on the military not to use lethal force against protesters. Rasoulof was released in February 2023. His passport had previously been confiscated in September 2017 after he returned to Iran after winning an award at the Cannes Film Festival for his feature film "A Man of Integrity", which focuses on corruption in Iran. Rasoulof is banned from leaving the country.

Rasoulof's latest film "The Seed of the Sacred Fig" is due to be screened in competition at the Cannes International Film Festival. According to Rasoulof's lawyer, Iranian authorities summoned some members of the film crew for questioning on 30.04.24. The authorities pressured them to withdraw the film from the Cannes festival. In addition, the actors and actresses involved have also been banned from leaving Iran, the lawyer said.<sup>9</sup>

## **Iraq**

### **Eleven alleged IS members executed**

On 06.05.24, eleven people were executed in al-Hut prison in Nasiriyya (Dhi Qar province). Details, including the specific offences for which they had been convicted, were initially unclear. Human rights groups have condemned the lack of transparency in connection with executions in Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

## **Lebanon**

### **Security situation in the Lebanese-Israeli border area**

Hezbollah and the Israeli army continue to exchange fire. In response to the Israeli takeover of the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, Hezbollah has announced the mobilisation of its forces.

At least 402 people are now reported dead on the Lebanese side, among them 79 civilians, and 14 military personnel and nine civilians on the Israeli side. The financial damage caused by the conflict to Lebanon's infrastructure and economy is now estimated at USD 1.5bn.<sup>11</sup>

## **Liberia**

### **President signs decree establishing war crimes tribunal**

On 02.05.24, Liberia's President Joseph Boakai signed a decree establishing a war crimes tribunal. The law was passed by both chambers of parliament. 20 years after the end of the civil war, this is a first step towards justice for the victims. The two civil wars between 1989 and 2003 were marked by massacres, rape, and the use of child soldiers. An estimated 250,000 people were killed.

A truth and reconciliation commission had previously called for the establishment of a special court, but no action was taken until the 2023 presidential election, in which Boakai made justice a key campaign issue.<sup>12</sup>

## Libya

### Fighting in the west

Media reports say that on 07.05.24, local armed groups violently clashed in the western city al-Jamil, 45 kilometres from the capital Tripoli, with at least nine people injured and one killed; several civilian and government buildings were damaged by gunfire.<sup>13</sup>

## Mali

### Humanitarian crisis in Ménaka region

The children's rights organisation Save the Children says that more than 140,000 people, among them over 80,000 children, are trapped in the town of Ménaka in north-eastern Mali. Armed groups have been blockading the city for four months. Food prices are rising and essential supplies such as medicines are hard to come by. Aid organisations are struggling to provide people with basic necessities. Children in particular are at risk of malnutrition and disease. Many of the children are believed to have fled to Ménaka from other locations and are unaccompanied.<sup>14</sup>

## Myanmar

### Security situation

Fighting between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army in Maungdaw and Buthidaung (Rakhine State) has displaced around 40,000 Rohingya since 06.05.24. In an attack on a village inhabited by ethnic Rakhine in Maungdaw on 06.05.24, military troops together with a recently recruited Rohingya militia reportedly set fire to residential buildings and killed a woman.

On 08.05.24, military airstrikes on Thayetchaung Township (Tanintharyi region) killed two children, injured eight other civilians, and damaged a hospital. On the same day, troops of the military and the pro-military Pyu Saw Htee militia set fire to Tanel Lokethar village (Sagaing region) during a raid.

On 09.05.24, the military killed at least 20 people and injured around 30 others in an airstrike on a Buddhist monastery in Saw (Magway region). The attack took place during a meeting at the monastery attended by members of local resistance forces (People's Defence Forces, PDF) and village leaders appointed by the National Unity Government in exile. Several clergymen and a child were among the victims.

Also on 09.04.24, at least 32 civilians died in a village in Myingyan commune (Mandalay region) as a result of fighting between the military and resistance groups. A further 14 people were injured. Military-run media reported that "PDF terrorists" had fired on the village; a local resistance group said the civilians died in the crossfire.

In an attack on a village in Myinmuy Township (Sagaing) on 11.05.24, military soldiers allegedly shot dead 32 civilians who had sought refuge in two monasteries. In the municipality of Salingyi (Sagaing), military troops injured a civilian by firing mortar shells at a village on 12.05.24.<sup>15</sup>

## Nigeria

### Zamfara State: Deadly attack on village and abduction of over 100 people

Two separate incidents of violence carried out on consecutive days in the north-western state of Zamfara have caused widespread concern. According to media reports, armed men attacked the village of Bilbis in the Tsafe Local Government Area (LGA) on 09.05.24, killing at least 20 people, injuring seven others, and kidnapping two. The attackers arrived on motorbikes and opened fire. Similar attacks have occurred recently in the same LGA and in Zurmi, Maradun, Anka and Bungudu LGAs.

On 10.05.24, gunmen attacked three villages in Birnin Magaji LGA and abducted over 100 people to extort ransom. This is according to media reports based on eyewitness accounts. Kidnappings for ransom have become a regular occurrence in north-west Nigeria. The perpetrators belong to armed gangs described by the Nigerian government and other state agencies as bandits or terrorists. The kidnappers mainly target villages, educational institutions, and travellers (cr. BN of 23.10., 27.11. and 04.12.23, 12.02. and 25.03.24). To curb kidnapping-related crime, the

government of Zamfara state imposed a night curfew along the borders with Sokoto and Katsina from 02.04.24 (cf. BN of 15.04.24).<sup>16</sup>

### **Investigative journalist detained for nine days**

Daniel Ojukwu, a journalist from the Foundation for Investigative Journalism (FIJ) organisation, was released under strict conditions on 10.05.24 after nine days in detention without trial. According to media reports, the prominent journalist had been arrested by a special police unit on 01.05.24 on charges of violating the Cybercrimes Act. This law dates back to 2015 and, according to critics, has been used by Nigerian authorities several times to stifle press freedom. Specifically, Ojukwu has reportedly been targeted by the special police unit against cybercrime due to his reporting on misconduct by a government agency in 2023. On 09.05.24, the day before his release on high bail, media professionals and civil society organisations demonstrated peacefully in the capital Abuja.

Nigeria ranks 112 out of 180 in RSF's annual World Press Freedom Index, up from 123 last year (cf. BN of 05.06.23). Critics say that the improvement in the ranking cannot be reconciled with Nigeria's continuing deficits in the area of press freedom.<sup>17</sup>

## **North Macedonia**

### **Parliamentary and presidential elections: Opposition wins double election victory**

Recent media reports say that in the parliamentary and presidential elections held on 08.05.24, the largest opposition party, the conservative Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), won a clear victory over the previously ruling Social Democratic Party (SDSM). In the second round of the presidential elections, held at the same time as the parliamentary elections, the conservative VMRO-DPMNE candidate, law professor Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, was elected president with 65.15 percent of the vote. Siljanovska-Davkova, who will be the first female president of North Macedonia, defeated Social Democratic incumbent Stevo Pendarovski, who secured 29.25 percent of the vote. On 09.05.24, the state election commission informed that the VMRO-DPMNE also clearly won the parliamentary elections with 43.23 percent of the vote according to the provisional official results. The previously ruling SDSM under the leadership of former Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski, won only 15.36 percent. According to media reports, the leading candidate and chairman of the VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, will therefore become the country's new Prime Minister. The DUI (largest party of the Albanian minority), which until now has been in government with the SDSM, secured 13.78 percent, while the opposition Albanian party alliance Vlen ("It's worth it!"), made up of four smaller parties, won 10.72 percent, followed by the pro-Russian Left Party (6.75percent) and the newly founded ZNAM (5.57percent, a split from the SDSM). According to the constitution, the newly elected parliament is constituted no later than 20 days after the elections. After receiving a mandate to form a government, Mickoski will have 20 days to present his new cabinet to parliament for election.<sup>18</sup>

## **Pakistan**

### **Security situation**

On 09.05.24, unidentified gunmen shot dead seven hairdressers from neighbouring Punjab province near the port city of Gwadar in the province of Balochistan. Armed separatist groups in Balochistan have a history of killing people from Punjab. According to media reports, the local police do not believe the deadly attack on the hairdressers was related to their work. Meanwhile, the Balochistan Liberation Army has claimed responsibility for an incident in April 2024, in which nine workers from Punjab province were abducted from a bus and killed (cf. BN of 15.04.24).

According to reports from 07.05.24, the attack on 26.03.24 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, where five Chinese engineers and a Pakistani driver were killed (cf. BN of 08.04.24), had been planned in Afghanistan. The Pakistani government presented evidence of this to the Afghan Taliban, but they have not responded.

According to reports from 12.05.24, a policeman was killed during a protest against rising costs for food and fuel in the Pakistani-controlled part of Kashmir.<sup>19</sup>

## **Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel**

### **Gaza Strip: Current developments; humanitarian situation**

The Hamas-led Ministry of Health said on 12.05.24 that more than 35,000 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip since the start of the war. The ministry does not officially distinguish between combatants and civilians. The Israeli military claims to have killed more than 13,000 militia members. None of the figures can be independently verified.

In addition, according to the Israeli military, a total of 266 military personnel were killed and 1,610 others wounded since the beginning of the ground offensive up to 10.05.24.

Fighting in Gaza, including airstrikes by the Israeli military, continues. The Israeli military started an offensive in the southern governorate of Rafah on 07.05.24. According to UNRWA, more than 300,000 people have already fled Rafah. The area around al-Mawasi, which Israel has designated as a "humanitarian zone" and to which people are supposed to move, is already overcrowded and lacks water and supplies. As a result, many refugees have also moved to the largely destroyed city of Khan Younis and Deir al-Balah further north to seek shelter. In al-Mawasi, there is a lack of sanitation, accommodation, and drinking water. Jaundice, believed to be caused by hepatitis, is spreading there.

On 07.05.24, the Rafah border crossing on the Gaza side was brought under Israeli control. Both southern border crossings, Rafah and Kerem Shalom, were initially closed due to heavy fighting. On 08.05.24, the Kerem Shalom crossing was reopened, but work on the Palestinian side was initially unable to resume due to ongoing fighting. The only border crossing that remained operational was the Erez crossing into Israel, in northern Gaza. A total of 60 truckloads were able to enter Gaza via this crossing on 09.05.24. The main hospital in southern Gaza, Abu Youssef al-Najjar, had to be closed and evacuated due to the fighting.

On 11.05.24, the Israeli military ordered further evacuations from densely populated parts of Rafah. It is estimated that an additional 40,000 people were affected by the new orders. The following day, the Israeli military extended its offensive to these areas.

In northern Gaza, particularly Gaza City, heavy fighting resumed after Hamas fighters regrouped there. According to a UN spokesperson, an estimated 300,000 people in northern Gaza are still suffering from acute famine.

A lack of fuel has prevented the transfer of medical patients from the north to the south of the Gaza Strip. The UN have warned that hospitals and ambulances would soon be forced to suspend their services due to the lack of fuel. On 10.05.24, ten of the twelve bakeries supported by aid organisations in southern Gaza had to cease operations. The remaining four are not operating at full capacity and are likely to close soon due to lack of fuel and ingredients.<sup>20</sup>

### **Israel: Several people injured by rockets from the Gaza Strip; ongoing protests**

On 08.05.24, a woman in Beersheba, in southern Israel, was lightly injured by a Hamas rocket from Gaza while she was in a playground that was hit by the rocket.

On the night of 12.05.24, three more people were injured when a rocket from Gaza hit their house in the Israeli city of Ashkelon.

The weekly protests in Tel Aviv demanding an agreement with Hamas for the release of the hostages and the resignation of Prime Minister Netanyahu continued. Police used water cannons and clashes between demonstrators and security forces increased.<sup>21</sup>

## **Somalia**

### **Government requests termination of UN political mission**

In early May 2024, the Somali foreign ministry requested the termination of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), whose mandate expires in October 2024. The political mission, which currently has 360 members, has been deployed there since 2013 to advise the government on security reforms and democracy building, among other things. In addition to UNSOM, the UN-mandated peacekeeping mission of the African Union (African Union Transition Mission in Somalia - ATMIS), with around 10,000 troops, will remain in Somalia until the end of 2024, when it will withdraw and hand over security to the Somali state.<sup>22</sup>

## **Sudan**

### **Ongoing battles**

UN OCHA reports that at least 27 civilians have been killed and 130 injured in fighting around the capital of North Darfur, El Fasher. Heavy artillery fire and air strikes began on the morning of 10.05.24, initially in the east of the city. As the day proceeded, the attacks shifted to the centre, forcing residents to flee to southern parts of the city. Access to the city is severely restricted, making it almost impossible to deliver humanitarian aid.

Over 1,500 tonnes of goods are currently stuck at the border crossings with Sudan. Deliveries by sea are also being delayed. This is due to bureaucratic delays and insecurity along the transport routes.

Fighting is also continuing in the country's capital Khartoum. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) fired artillery at neighbourhoods held by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), including the occupied Republican Palace, which has been in RSF hands since April 2023.<sup>23</sup>

### **Unlawful arrests and killings**

Media report an increase in recent weeks in cases of detention, torture, and murder of Sudanese activists by both the RSF and the security forces of the transitional government. Lawyers, resistance committee members and other activists have reportedly been detained, tortured and in some cases killed in detention. There are also reports that in some regions of the country, anyone suspected of having contacts with the RSF is being arrested and interrogated by the SAF, the police or one of the secret services. In the eyes of the Sudanese army, people who speak out against the war are so-called "sleepers" of the RSF and are also under suspicion.<sup>24</sup>

## **Syria**

### **Northern Syria: Seven dead in Turkish airstrikes**

The Turkish defence ministry stated on 10.05.24 that it had killed seven Kurdish fighters in two different regions in northern Syria. According to the information, those killed were linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is banned in Türkiye. The People's Defence Units (YPG) in Syria, the largest armed faction within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), are also considered by Türkiye to be a wing of the PKK.<sup>25</sup>

### **Southern Syria: Protests continue in Suweida**

Peaceful protests have been taking place regularly in the Suweida governorate in southern Syria since August 2023 (cf. BN of 21.08.23 and 28.08.23). According to media reports, protests and demonstrations are taking place almost daily. The demonstrators are demanding the resignation of Bashar al-Assad and the fall of the government. They highlight the participation of many women in the movement. The predominantly Druze-populated governorate has played a special role in the course of the conflict compared to other governorates. The majority of the people did not join the nationwide opposition movements. Due to the deteriorating economic and security situation in Suweida, especially since the collapse of the Lebanese financial sector in 2019, a protest movement eventually formed there as well.<sup>26</sup>

### **North-west Syria: Numerous refugee camps lose sanitation services**

The online platform Syria Direct reports that 194 refugee camps in northwestern Idlib governorate have been without sanitation and water services since the beginning of 2024.

According to the report, three aid organisations had to stop working due to lack of funding. Four other organisations were forced to reduce the scope of their assistance. In total, around 200,000 people, or about 12 percent of the refugee camps in the north-west, have been affected for months by the lack of waste and sludge removal, as well as drinking water, which is fuelling the increased spread of disease, particularly as temperatures rise. According to the local aid organisation Syrian Response Coordination Group, the overall humanitarian aid in the north-west has been reduced by 47percent.<sup>27</sup>



## **Türkiye**

### **Arrest orders for 87 suspected Gülen members**

On 07.05.24, the Istanbul chief public prosecutor's office issued arrest warrants for 40 people, including 14 young people and teachers. Police arrested 38 of the suspects who are accused of living in student hostels allegedly linked to the Gülen movement and of having contacts with other Gülen members.

The Izmir public prosecutor's office also issued arrest warrants for 31 people, among them former police officers, for alleged links to the Gülen movement. Police arrested 26 of the suspects in eleven provinces.

On 08.05.24, a further 15 people were arrested after the Ankara chief prosecutor's office had issued arrest warrants for 16 suspects, among them active duty and dismissed military officers and former military cadets.<sup>28</sup>

### **High school student sentenced for insulting the president**

A high school student in Diyarbakır was sentenced to more than seven months in prison on 09.05.24 for allegedly insulting President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. According to media reports, Yusuf S. had allegedly called Erdoğan a dictator on the social network X in December 2022.

The Diyarbakır public prosecutor's office opened an investigation against him and the 2nd Diyarbakır juvenile court closed his case in the first hearing on 09.05.24. During the hearing, the defendant denied having an account on X and contested the evidence presented by the prosecution. The court reduced his sentence from one year to seven months and 23 days and suspended it due to the short period of imprisonment and the defendant's age. The 17-year-old was prosecuted and convicted despite the fact that the general assembly of the court of cassation had ruled in case 2018/62 that calling the president a "thief", "murderer" or "dictator" does not constitute the offence of insulting the president. For example, journalists Orhan Şahin and Başak Günsever, Çorum office workers' union leader Ertuğrul Alper, and CHP member Canan Kaftancıoğlu had all previously been acquitted for calling Erdoğan a dictator.

Insulting the president is a criminal offence under Article 299 of the Turkish penal code. Anyone who insults the president can be sentenced to up to four years in prison; the sentence can be increased if the offence was committed through the mass media. Since Erdoğan's election as president in 2014, more than 160,000 people have been investigated on suspicion of insulting the president, of whom 45,000 have been charged and 13,000 convicted.<sup>29</sup>

## **Tunisia**

### **Arrests for criticising the president**

On 11.05.24, the authorities reportedly arrested three people who had repeatedly expressed criticism of President Kaïs Saïed in recent weeks.

The detainees are a female lawyer who also works as a TV commentator, a radio and television presenter and a columnist. The latter two were arrested in connection with reports on imprisoned journalist Mohamed Boughalleb (cf. BN of 25.03.24). All the defendants are being prosecuted under Decree No. 54, issued by President Saïed in September 2022 to combat the dissemination of "false news" (cf. BN of 26.09.22).<sup>30</sup>

## **Ukraine**

### **Attacks on energy infrastructure and civilian casualties**

According to the Ukrainian authorities, Russian missile and drone attacks on 08.05.24 hit almost a dozen energy infrastructure facilities and caused severe damage to three thermal power plants. The regions most affected were Poltava, Kirovohrad, Zaporizhia, Kyiv, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk and Vinnytsia. The state energy company Ukrhydroenergo said that two hydroelectric power plants, which were also badly hit, had to be shut down. A gas storage facility in the Lviv region was also attacked, according to the governor. Ukrenergo, the national grid operator, had to temporarily cut power to nine regions. The energy ministry said that the losses will be compensated by doubling electricity imports.

According to regional authorities, two people were killed in Nikopol city (Dnipropetrovsk region) as a result of Russian shelling on the night of 09.05.24. In the Kharkiv region, at least two civilians were killed by Russian attacks on border settlements, according to the governor on 11.05.24. One fatality was reported from Sumy following a Russian missile attack. According to local authorities, a Ukrainian rocket attack on a fuel depot in the town of Rowenky in the occupied Luhansk region left four people dead.<sup>31</sup>

#### **War, recruitment and OPCW statement on chemical weapons use**

According to the Ukrainian defence ministry, the Russian army launched a ground offensive in the Kharkiv region on 10.05.24. Ukrainian commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrskyjv said that initially, the attempt to break through the Ukrainian defence lines was repelled. The governor of the Kharkiv region informed of the evacuation of over 6,000 people in the area near the border. Meanwhile, the Russian defence ministry announced the capture of several villages. Fighting is now concentrating on the small town of Vovchansk. Syrskyj spoke of a difficult situation and admitted on 12.05.24 that the Russian attackers had made partial gains on some parts of the front. He also reported heavy fighting in various parts of the Donetsk region. The Kharkiv regional governor also reported Russian attacks in small groups "to test the positions of our military". Ukrainian military sources say that the Russian side is seeking to create a "buffer zone" in the Kharkiv and Sumy regions to prevent further Ukrainian shelling of the Russian border region of Belgorod.

The Ukrainian parliament has approved a bill allowing prisoners to perform voluntary military service if their remaining sentence does not exceed three years. Olena Shulyak, leader of the Zelenskyi party Sluha Narodu (Servant of the People), explained that the draft law "opens the possibility for certain categories of prisoners who expressed a desire to defend their country to join the defence forces." Excluded are prisoners who have committed serious offences, such as crimes against national security, rape, murder, attempted murder of law enforcement officers, drug trafficking and serious corruption offences. The Ukrainian parliament also voted in favour of tougher action against conscientious objectors. The bill includes higher fines for those caught trying to evade conscription and allows the authorities to detain conscientious objectors for up to three days. Both bills have yet to be signed by President Zelensky. Meanwhile, at an event organised by the Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland (RND) on 11.05.24, Federal Chancellor Scholz assured Ukrainians who had fled to Germany to escape the war that they would be allowed to stay if they had a job and a residence permit. Asked about Ukraine's wish for the conscripts to return, he said that "their stay in Germany will not be jeopardised by this".

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said that there is insufficient evidence that chemical weapons were used in the war zone in Ukraine. Russia and Ukraine had accused each other of such use and submitted corresponding information to the OPCW. According to the OPCW, the allegations are "not sufficiently substantiated". Nevertheless, the organisation is extremely concerned about the possible use of chemical weapons.<sup>32</sup>

#### **Foiled assassination plot against President Zelensky and dismissal of senior government officials**

On 07.05.24, the Ukrainian informed of the dismantling of an "agent network" controlled by the Russian secret service FSB, which was allegedly preparing an assassination attempt on President Zelensky and senior government officials from the Ukrainian security services. The attack plans of three named FSB employees intercepted by the SBU allegedly involved recruiting security officials close to President Zelensky, arresting him and killing him. Two officers of the president's bodyguard were subsequently arrested on charges of passing on information to the Russian side. On 09.05.24, President Zelensky dismissed Serhiy Rud, the head of the state security administration (UDO) responsible for his personal protection.

On 09.05.24, the Ukrainian parliament decided to dismiss the deputy PM and infrastructure minister Oleksandr Kubrakov, whose responsibilities included the reconstruction programme. The ministry will be split into two separate government departments. Parliament also accepted the resignation of agriculture minister Mykola Solskyj, who had already stepped down amid corruption allegations.<sup>33</sup>

## Venezuela

### Press freedom: Attorney General accuses media professionals of corruption

On 07.05.24, attorney general Saab accused two journalists, Roberto Deniz and Ewald Scharfenberg of the investigative online portal armando.info, of having received money from the entourage of the recently arrested former oil minister Tareck El-Aissami during his time in office, and other offences. In return for the money, they allegedly spread discrediting disinformation about key Chavismo political figures. As alleged evidence, Saab showed a video of El-Aissami's confidant Samark López, who was recently arrested for corruption and made similar accusations. Armando.info repeatedly reports on corruption and human rights violations. This week, it announced the publication of a major new report on corruption in Maduro's Venezuela. Many in the media have dismissed the allegations as unfounded and see the accusations as an attempt to discredit the medium and representatives of the press. From exile, the founder of armando.info, Ewald Scharfenberg, has also rejected all such accusations and expressed fears of attacks or arrests of media professionals or relatives still based in Caracas. Several media professionals from armando.info, including Scharfenberg and Deniz, had left the country in 2018 due to previous critical reporting after being sued for defamation in connection with reports in 2017.<sup>34</sup>

## Yemen

### Fighting between Houthis and government forces

According to several reports, fighting broke out on the night of 12.05.24 between the Houthis and a militia allied to the internationally recognised government near the city of Marib. Marib is a strategic transport hub that has repeatedly been the centre of fighting in the past.<sup>35</sup>

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