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Briefing Notes

Group 62 - Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

27 July 2020

Afghanistan

COVID-19 pandemic

It is believed that the pandemic has not yet reached its peak and the number of people infected will continue to increase in the coming weeks. Kabul remains the most affected, followed by Herat, Balkh, Nangarhar and Kandahar. The requirements and recommendations for containing the virus are often ignored and compliance is not strictly controlled. Shops and restaurants are open in most cities. The measures can vary from province to province. According to the World Food Program (WFP), the average price of wheat flour rose by 13% between 14 March 2020 and 22 July 2020, while the costs for legumes, sugar, cooking oil and rice increased by 30%, 22%, 33% and 19%, resp.. At the same time, the purchasing power of casual workers and livestock farmers fell by 5% and 10%, respectively (compared to 14 March 2020).

Domestic flights possible again

The Afghan Civil Aviation Authority announced that domestic flights would resume after a three-month hiatus. On 15 July 2020 Kam Air resumed its regular domestic flights to the provinces. Ariana Airlines, Kam Air and Emirates Airlines offer international flights to and from Kabul.

Attacks, hostilities, civilian casualties

According to information from the New York Times at least 254 pro-government forces and 83 civilians have been killed in July 2020 so far, 117 resp. 32 of them between 17 and 23 July 2020. The Afghan Office of National Security Council (ONSC) announced on 25 July 2020 that 46 civilians had been killed and 83 others injured in the previous week. The ONSC reported over 400 Taliban attacks in 23 provinces.

The body of a policewoman kidnapped by the Taliban two weeks ago was found in the Anbar district of Ghazni province on 25 July 2020.

One of the most serious incidents occurred in Herat province (Adraksan district) on 22 July 2020, when at least eight civilians lost their lives in an air strike of the Afghan Air Force. The reported number of victims varies, some sources mention significantly more victims. According to the government six Taliban commanders were also killed in the attack.

On 21 July 2020 at least 14 police officers were killed in a so-called insider attack in the Takhtapol district of Kandahar province.

Hindus and Sikhs

The Indian embassy in Kabul announced on 26 July 2020 that several Sikhs had received visas and had been allowed to enter India. The embassy said that the eleven-member group included a man kidnapped in Gurdwara in Paktia province and released later, as well as a girl who had been rescued from a forced marriage and forced conversion. The visas are be valid for six months. According to research by the news channel Tolo News, only 1,350 Hindus and Sikhs are still living in Afghanistan.

Algeria

COVID-19 pandemic: curfews extended once more

On 26 July 2020 the government extended the curfews, originally imposed on 10 July 2020, for 29 of the country's 48 provinces by 15 days. Hotspots are the capital Algiers and Blida. During this period curfews apply between 8 p.m. and 5 a.m. Travel to and from the affected provinces, including the capital of Algiers, is only permitted to a limited extent.

Bolivia

Date of presidential and parliamentary elections postponed again

The elections originally scheduled for 03 May 2020 and later postponed to 06 September 2020 because of COVID-19, are now to take place on 18 October 2020. The calls for a further postponement became louder recently after experts forecast the pandemic to peak in Bolivia in late August or early September 2020. Interim president Jeanine Añez and several ministers also tested positive for the virus.

Brazil

Indigenous leader died of COVID-19

Domingos Venite, leader of the indigenous Sapukai Guarani people, died from COVID-19 on 21 July 2020, authorities announced. The 68-year-old had been treated in a hospital for almost one month after being infected with the coronavirus. The Sapukai are the largest indigenous community in the state of Rio de Janeiro. According to media reports, the local health authority instructed the indigenous community to forego its traditional death ritual to prevent the virus from spreading further. After the US, Brazil currently is the country most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Recently, more and more indigenous people became infected.

Colombia

Armed group violence related to COVID-19

Armed groups commit individual murders and other crimes to implement their own constraining measures for COVID-19. Nine civilians have already died, according to a press release by the human rights organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) of 15 July 2020. To prevent the virus from spreading, armed groups have imposed curfews and other measures in several parts of the country. To enforce their rules they threaten and attack people who are believed not to abide by them. According to the information provided by HRW, the violent forces are the guerrilla organisation Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and groups that have emerged from the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo (FARC – EP) as well as from the demobilization of paramilitaries. HRW also said that some of the measures imposed and implemented by armed groups are more restrictive than those imposed by the government. The UN Secretary General's quarterly report on the situation in Colombia, which was presented on 14 July 2020, shows that illegal armed groups and criminal organizations are taking advantage of the pandemic to expand the territory under their control and to commit more crimes against certain sections of the population. The report says that the departments of Antioquia, Cauca, Chocó, Meta, Nariño and Putumayo are particularly affected.

Egypt

Attack on checkpoints in Bir al-Abd/Sinai peninsula

According to information provided by the army Egyptian security forces killed 18 suspected jihadists in Bir al-Abd in the northern Sinai peninsula on 21 July 2020 when they tried to attack a checkpoint. Two soldiers are said to have been killed and four others injured in the attack. In November 2017 IS had attacked a mosque in Bir al-Abd murdering more than 300 people.

It is said that since the takeover of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi as head of state in 2013 hundreds of Egyptian security forces lost their lives in attacks on the Sinai Peninsula, most of these attacks were claimed by Islamic State.

Egypt / Libya

Egyptian parliament approves military interventions

On 20 July 2020 parliament approved a resolution authorizing combat operations abroad in defence of national security in the West against criminal and armed militias as well as foreign terrorist groups. Already in June 2020 Egyptian President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi had warned the Government of National Accord (GNA), based in the Libyan capital, against taking the port city of Sirte and the military base Jufra that are controlled by the Libyan-Arab Army (LNA).

Ethiopia/Eritrea

Ethiopia's Prime Minister visits military camps in Eritrea

During his stay in Eritrea on 19 July 2020 Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed also visited the National Service Training Center in Sawa. Usually, external visitors do not have access to the training and military camp in Zoba Gash-Barka. Abiy and his Eritrean counterpart Isaias Afwerki landed on the military airport in Sawa in an Ethiopian Airlines plane. Abiy visited the Sawa Military Academy and attended rehearsals for the graduation ceremonies of the students.

Since 2003 all high school students are taught in Sawa at the Warsay-Yikealo school during their 12th and last school year. The 33rd recruitment group is currently receiving military training in addition to schooling.

Iran

New demonstrations

After protests against the increase in the price of gasoline had escalated violently in November 2019, the next few months remained quieter. Renewed demonstrations are reported again now. The protests are directed against Iran's Middle East policy and its support of Arab movements in Gaza (Hamas) and Lebanon (Hezbollah), as well as the economic situation. The government is seeking to prevent another escalation of these protests. More security forces are deployed. The economic situation has deteriorated further since the protests in November 2019. US sanctions have severely crippled the important oil business and also the COVID-19 pandemic has caused serious economic damage.

Release of imprisoned Baha'i demanded

The International Society for Human Rights (IGFM) and the Society for Threatened Peoples are calling on Iran to immediately end the arbitrary detention and persecution of members of the Baha'i community and to ensure the free exercise of their belief for them. The appeal, published on 17 July 2020, was signed by thirty German parliamentarians, human rights defenders, health experts and others. The prisoners are particularly at risk during the current COVID-19 pandemic, the appeal said. The authors of the appeal particularly criticize that the pressure of persecution of the Baha'i is increasing right in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past two months at least 77 people have been arrested on unfounded charges, summoned to court, indicted and sentenced to prison terms of up to 13 years, they say.

World conference and major rally for freedom

On 17 July 2020 tens of thousands of exiled Iranians from all walks of life attended the world conference "Free Iran". Even in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic the Iranian opposition in exile remains resourceful to find ways to articulate its protest against the clerical regime. It was the world's largest virtual conference. A mass rally with the same theme held in the centre of Berlin - in full compliance with corona prevention rules - was video-linked to the conference. In this way more than 30,000 locations in over 100 countries were connected via the internet. Almost 1,000 well-known politicians attended the conference and confirmed their commitment to the freedom of

the Iranian people and their resistance to the clerical regime. The mass rally at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin was organised by the main Iranian opposition organisation (chaired by Maryam Rajavi), the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI, formerly political wing of the militant Mujahidin: Mujahedine Khalq Iran, MEK) and the human rights organisation UNHH eV.

COVID-19 pandemic

At the rate of over 220 deaths per day, the number of corona deaths has risen to over 15,000, according to the Ministry of Health. Ministry spokeswoman Sima Lari said that the number of infections detected to date rose to almost 285,000 on 23 July 2020. The Ministry deplored that the population does no longer take the risk seriously. Deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirji told the ISNA news agency that this is the main reason for the spike in infections.

Iraq

More violence in Baghdad protests

On the night of the 26 to 27 July 2020 demonstrations in Baghdad escalated again. Near the Tahrir Square tear gas was used after protesters had almost completely blocked the road. As evidenced by videos circulating on social media live ammunition might have been used as well. As yet the news situation remains unclear.

Operation Claw-Eagle

The Turkish military operation "Claw-Eagle" against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq continues. On 27 July 2020 two vehicles near Dohuk were hit by an air strike. The people riding in the cars were killed, according to the Turkish military they were PKK members. The collateral damage of the offensive is considerable in some places, several villages were abandoned due to the bombing, since the beginning of June five civilian deaths have been confirmed so far. In at least one instance the bombing in Erbil province on 12 July 2020 caused a five-day forest fire resulting in considerable economic damage. According to information from the Turkish Ministry of Defence, Turkish units have penetrated up to 40 kilometres into Iraqi territory. Identical reports from both sides state that the number and range of Turkey's air strikes are significantly more intensive than in previous Turkish military operations.

Lebanon

Economic situation

A combination of corona crisis, government debt crisis and the associated currency crisis still has its grip on the country. Since 22 July 2020 half of the country's filling stations had to close down temporarily as the availability of gasoline dropped dramatically due to the shortage of US-Dollars. The central bank's restrictions on US-Dollar transactions are seriously interfering with imports. Lebanon is extremely reliant on imports for supplies of gasoline and flour. So far, protests against the current political situation have been peaceful.

Montenegro / Serbia

COVID-19 Pandemic: EU recommends renewed entry ban

According to media reports, EU diplomats notified the editorial team of RadioFreeEurope (RFE) on 16 July 2020 that the two Western Balkan countries Montenegro and Serbia will be removed from the EU list of safe countries whose citizens are allowed to re-enter the EU, because of the recent spike of coronavirus infections. Up to this date Montenegro had reported 1,287 infections and 24 deaths, Serbia 19,717 infections and 442 deaths. However, the EU list of "safe third countries" which is reviewed and updated every second week is not binding for the member countries.

Morocco

COVID-19 Pandemic

Significant travel restrictions for entering or leaving were imposed on nine cities (Tangier, Tétouana, Fez, Meknes, Casablanca, Berrechid, Settat, and Marrakesh) on 26 July 2020 because new infections spiked. Exemptions apply for medical emergencies or when the local authorities have issued special travel permits. Airports are closed for national and international flights; only national airlines may transport passengers in line with special arrangements. Face masks have to be worn outside of one's own private premises.

Nepal

COVID-19 Pandemic: Country-wide curfew lifted

On 21 July 2020 Nepal lifted the country-wide curfew imposed four months ago. A government representative referred to the recommendation of the ministry of health and the declining number of cases. Starting from 17 August 2020 both domestic and international flights are supposed to resume. The borders with neighbouring countries will also reopen again. However, requirements such as wearing a mask or distancing rules will stay in force.

Nigeria

ISWAP executes abducted aid workers

On 22 July 2020 the jihadist terrorist organization Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a splinter group of the Boko Haram terrorist organization, published a video showing the shooting of four humanitarian workers and a security officer. The four humanitarian workers had been employed by the aid organizations Borno State Emergency Management Agency, Action Against Hunger, REACH International and International Rescue Committee. The group of five, all of them male Nigerian citizens, were riding in a vehicle on a road from Monguno to Maiduguri (Borno state) when they were abducted by the terrorists. According to press reports the hostages were shot after negotiations between ISWAP and the government about ransom money in the amount of USD 500,000 had failed.

North Macedonia

Exploratory talks on government formation announced

Following a narrow parliamentary election victory the party chairman of the social democratic party (SDSM) and former prime minister Zoran Zaev announced on 23 July 2020 that exploratory talks about the formation of a new government coalition with potential partners would start at the beginning of August 2020. All political parties qualify as negotiating partners that are prepared to accept the "European, democratic, freedom-loving and progressive concept" of SDSM as well as Macedonia's way of becoming a NATO member country. According to recent media reports six political parties and alliances will take the 120 parliamentary seats. The Social Democratic Union won 46 seats, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) 44 seats and the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) 15 seats. The alternative Albanian party, the "Alliance for Albanians" together with the "Alternativa" would have 12 seats. The Levica Party (Left) has won two seats and the Democratic Party of Albania (DPA) one seat. The two parties that formed the last regular government in office until the end of 2019, the Social Democrats under Zaev and DUI, voiced their interest in renewing their former coalition. This alliance could count on a total of 61 seats, i.e. the minimum required majority. An alliance consisting of VMRO-DPMNE and DUI would only have 59 seats and thus would need additional coalition parties.

Pakistan

Market in Parachinar attacked

A bomb detonated at a crowded market place in a Parachinar neighbourhood mainly inhabited by Shiites, on 23 July 2020. This location is close to the Afghan border in the former tribal areas which now form part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. At least 17 people were wounded. The security authorities were accused of not having provided sufficient protection during the ensuing demonstrations.

In recent years Parachinar has repeatedly seen attacks by radical Sunni groupings. The region surrounding Parachinar was once controlled by the Taliban and probably still serves as their retreat while according to information by the Pakistani government the military has successfully liberated the region from extremists.

Activists of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) who defend the rights of the Pashtuns in the region announced that they would continue their protests until the perpetrators of the attack were caught.

Activities of separatists in Balochistan

In July 2020 militant separatist groups carried out several targeted attacks in the south-western province of Balochistan. At least ten security staff were killed in individual attacks of the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF). The BLF is one of the most active members of the alliance Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS) consisting of four militant Balochi groupings.

Last month the Baloch National Party (BNP) left Prime Minister Imran Khan's coalition government, because the incumbent government had failed to take care of the grievances of the Baluchi minority since the 2018 elections. Party leader Akhtar Mengal criticized in particular that out of the 5,000 Baluchi people documented and reported missing by his party more than 400 had indeed reappeared, but that over the same period another 1,800 had disappeared.

Russian Federation

Historian and human rights activist sentenced to prison

On 22 July 2020 a court in the north-eastern region of Karelia sentenced the prominent historian and human rights activist Yuri Dmitriyev to 3.5 years in prison. The court found him guilty of having sexually assaulted a person under the age of 14. Human rights activists, scientists, artists and politicians advocated for the release of the 64 year old who has spent three years in pretrial detention. They assume that the prosecution was politically motivated because Dmitriyev's publications about governmental persecution during Joseph Stalin's regime (1922-1953) counteract government efforts to rehabilitate Stalin. The former leader of the Karelian branch of the human rights organization Memorial could be released in November 2020 if the pretrial detention time was taken into account, but prosecutors proclaimed that they will lodge an appeal in order to call for a more severe sentence.

Serbia

COVID-19 Pandemic: Physicians accuse the government of failure

In an open letter published on 21 July 2020, 350 Serbian physicians accused their government of completely failing in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and called for an exchange of the national crisis response team. Serbia is in the midst of a health crisis. President Aleksandar Vučić has to face criticism that the actions to contain the pandemic were relaxed too abruptly and prematurely. During the state of emergency imposed in mid-March strict curfews applied. When they were lifted at the beginning of May 2020 many things were all of a sudden permitted again, including soccer games in front of thousands of spectators or parties in nightclubs. In addition, parliamentary elections were held on 21 June 2020 which Vučić's party won (see BN of 22 June 20).

Somalia

Prime minister dismissed

Prime minister Hassan Ali Khayre was removed from office by a parliamentary vote of no confidence. He had been in office since February 2017. The deputy prime minister will temporarily serve as prime minister until a successor is appointed. A quarrel between President Farmaajo and Khayre about the date of the upcoming national elections in February 2021 is thought to be the underlying reason for the vote of no confidence.

Sudan

Casualties during attacks in Darfur

On 24 July 2020 gunmen attacked a group of land owners who had returned to their fields for the first time after an agreement had been concluded two months ago that allowed the initial land owners to return to their fields. They had fled Darfur during the many years of war. An attack on the village of Aboudos (South Darfur region) left 20 people dead, including women and children and at least 20 were wounded.

Another attack took place on 25 July 2020 with more than 60 deaths and at least 60 wounded. Reportedly, around 500 armed men ambushed the village Masteri (West Darfur region) near the border with Chad and set buildings and a market place on fire. The hostilities continued until the evening of the next day.

The United Nations (UN) reported that between 19 July and 26 July 2020 dozens of people were killed or injured during at least seven attacks. Most fights were about farmland. The Sudanese government announced the deployment of security forces to the region.

Syria

Attack in Ras al-Ayn

In the morning of 26 July 2020 another bomb exploded in Turkish-occupied northern Syria. The official news agency SANA and the pro-opposition Syrian Human Rights Observatory both reported consistently about eight casualties and 19 wounded. The bomb is said to have been detonated on a vehicle in a vegetable market. The Turkish defense ministry holds Kurdish fighters responsible for the attack.

The village directly bordering Turkey has been under the control of Turkish supported Arab militia from Syria since October 2019. On 21 July 2020 the Turkish President Erdoğan confirmed that the Turkish military would stay in Syria until the Syrian people could live freely, safely, and peacefully.

Exchange of fire with Israel, Lebanese Hezbollah fighter killed

On 20 July 2020 Israeli fighter jets reportedly flew air strikes on a military base near Damascus killing five foreign fighters and injuring several others. The dead included Ali Kamel Mohsen, a member of the Lebanese Hezbollah. The strike took about 15 minutes. Israeli bases in the Golan Heights were hit by a mortar attack from Syria on 24 July 2020, whereupon Israeli combat helicopters flew air strikes on three bases in neighbouring Quneitra. Reportedly no further casualties resulted on either side.

UN: Consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for the Arab world

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA) published a report on 23 July 2020 according to which it expects an economic downturn in the Arab world for the current year of up to 5.7%. This means that another 14.3 million people will slip into poverty, thus raising the total number in the region to about 115 million. Consequently, approximately one quarter of the people in the Arab world will live in poverty.

To date, all Arab countries combined have recorded more than 830,000 corona cases and at least 14,717 corona virus casualties. This corresponds to an infection rate of 1.9 per 1,000 inhabitants and a mortality rate of 17.6 per 1,000 cases. Thus, the mortality rate is still significantly lower than the global average of 42.6 deaths per 1,000 cases.

Tunisia

New Prime Minister appointed

Following Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh's resignation on 15 July 2020 for lack of a parliamentary majority, Tunisia's President appointed the incumbent minister of the interior, Hichem Mechichi as Prime Minister (see of BN 20 July 2020). Mechichi will now have one month to form a new government which will have to pass a vote of confidence in parliament and will have to gain the absolute majority.

Turkey

Bill on control of social media

A bill published on 21 July 2020 shows that the government intends to extend its control of social media even further. Accordingly, Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms shall, among other things, be obliged to set up a permanent establishment in Turkey with a Turkish citizen as their representative. If a provider does not comply with these rules, fines or restrictions of their services may be imposed. If any content breaches the rules applicable on the world wide web charges may be brought against the future local representatives. Band width is to be cut by up to 90% for service providers not opening a permanent establishment in Turkey. However, Parliament will still have to pass the bill submitted by the governing parties Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) and Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP).

CHP party congress

The largest opposition party in Turkey, the Republican People's Party (CHP), held its 37th party congress in the Bilkent Odeon Conference Centre in Ankara on 25 and 26 July 2020. On the first day the delegates elected the party chairman, on the second day the sixty members of the parliamentary group. Incumbent party chairman Kemal Kilicdaroglu was re-elected. He has held the chair since 2010 when he took office at the 33rd party congress which was held after the resignation of former chairman Deniz Bayka.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the party congress took place without guests. The 1,356 delegates entitled to vote were subjected to a temperature check at the entrance, and seating arrangements had been devised such that the minimum distances could be kept in the room seating 4,000.

Ukraine

Ceasefire in Eastern Ukraine

The office of the President in Kiev communicated on 26 July 2020 that starting from 11 pm CET a full and ubiquitous ceasefire would apply in the contested areas in Eastern Ukraine between the Ukrainian military and pro-Russian separatists. The Ukrainian military and representatives of the pro-Russian separatists from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions had previously declared that they had prepared everything to cease fighting. Also representatives of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were involved in the negotiations. During a phone call between the Russian President Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart Zelenskyy both praised the agreement on a new ceasefire and simultaneously asked for more efforts of the Ukraine contact group to implement the existing peace agreements. According to Kremlin information Putin criticised Ukrainian attempts to renegotiate parts of the steps of a peace plan agreed in Minsk in 2015. Both politicians now confirmed their commitment to the plan.

In the past, each of the about two dozen attempts for a full ceasefire had failed after a short while.

The most important points of the recently agreed ceasefire include a ban on any "attack activities" as well as the use of "any flying apparatuses", i.e. drones. Also, no heavy weapons may be set up in settlements or their surroundings. In case of violations of the ceasefire, shooting back is only permissible with the permission of the highest level of command.

Yemen

UN warn of further food shortages

On 22 July 2020 the United Nations (UN) warned that the number of people in South Yemen at risk of acute food insecurity could increase from two to 3.2 million if no further funds for aid would come in. The significant underfunding of this year's relief, the ongoing conflict in the country, less remittances from Yemenites abroad, floods, locusts and the COVID-19 pandemic are exacerbating the situation, the UN said.

Zimbabwe

Opposition members arrested ahead of protest rallies

On 20 July 2020 police arrested the well-known investigative journalist Hopewell Chin'ono together with Jacob Ngarivhume, chairman of the small opposition party Transformation Zimbabwe. Only recently Chin'ono uncovered corruption among government representatives when purchasing materials to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Ngarivhume called on the population to take to the streets country-wide to protest against government corruption and the economic crisis. His call is supported by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Zimbabwe's largest opposition party. On 22 July 2020 the two detainees were charged with inciting public violence among the population during the planned demonstrations. On 24 July 2020 a court ordered continued custody of Chin'ono until the next court hearing on 7 August 2020. Meanwhile, the planned demonstrations were banned de facto because President Mnangagwa imposed a curfew to contain the COVID-19 pandemic on 21 July 2020 taking effect on 22 July 2020. The confinement provides for exceptions for necessary grocery purchases or visiting health care institutions as well as an additional night-time curfew. The opposition accuses Mnangagwa of having ordered these measures only to prevent the protests on 31 July 2020.

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BN-Redaktion@bamf.bund.de