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Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

11 March 2019

Egypt

Well-known news photographer released from prison

Well-known Egyptian photojournalist Mahmoud Abu Zeid, widely known as Shawkan, was released in his country on 4 March 2019 after more than five years in prison. As part of his probation, Abou Zeid still has to spend 12 hours a day at a police station for the next five years. After being arrested in clashes between security forces and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood in the summer of 2013, he was accused of having terrorist connections.

Police kill seven terrorist suspects

According to police reports, seven persons were killed in a firefight and raid near the capital Cairo involving Hasm supporters. Three of the militants driving a pick-up truck were planning a hostile act planting a bomb in Giza. Four others were killed in a subsequent raid. One policeman is said to have been injured. The Hasm is an Islamist movement that has claimed responsibility for attacks on security forces in the past.

Afghanistan

Treatment options for mental illness

A physician and co-founder of an Afghan NGO, which is particularly committed to the medical treatment of women, explained in an article that treatment options for mentally ill people are virtually non-existent in Afghanistan. Psychiatric clinics and trained personnel are few and far between. The few facilities are spread across the country and have little capacity. The organisations “Medica Afghanistan” and “PARSA” (Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Support for Afghanistan) offer counselling and treatment especially for women in Kabul. In Afghan society, mental illness is seen as a sign of weakness and is a social taboo. Mentally ill people are stigmatised and discriminated against. They are often treated by mullahs or taken to traditional “sanatoriums”. In a famous shrine in Jalalabad, for example, people try to cure mental illness by putting patients through strict tests. Sick people there are often chained for days, sometimes even months.

Supply situation

The organisation “Famine Early Warning Systems Network” (FEWS NET) believes that the negative effects of the drought, the ongoing conflict, the poor market situation for casual workers, below-average remittances from Iran and displacement will continue to have a negative impact on supplies for the population. At the moment, day labourers are finding work for one to three days a week, compared to two to three days a week that would normally be possible at this time of year. The average daily wage is only 300 Afghani, which is unusually low for this time of year.

(Note: 300 Afghani is currently equivalent to about US \$ 4).

Algeria

Protests continue against the 5th term for President Bouteflika

On 8 March 2019, on the third Friday in a row, demonstrations were held in Algiers and several provinces of the country against the renewed presidential candidacy of the Head of State in April 2019, with hundreds of thousands of people taking part. The protests went off peacefully for the most part. In Algiers, however, according to official sources, riots took place in the vicinity of the National Museum of Antiquities and Islamic Art. The museum itself was plundered. Journalists reported that the police used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowds. According to the media, at least three persons were injured and 195 were arrested.

Last Sunday, many businesses and employees of large public and private companies in several Algerian cities called for a general strike in social media to oppose the candidacy of the President. In Algiers, most shops and markets remained closed.

Bouteflika returned to Algeria after a two-week hospital stay in Geneva.

India

Estimated timeline for parliamentary elections

According to the Election Commission, the parliamentary elections are to take place in seven phases between 11 April 2019 and 19 May 2019 and the election results are to be counted on 23 May 2019. The current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has held the majority in the lower house of parliament since 2014. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is aiming for a second term in office.

Iran

Petition of exiled Iranians against newly appointed Chief Justice

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei appointed the strictly conservative Ayatollah Seyyed Ebrahim Raissi as the new Chief Justice on 7 March 2019. He is considered to be responsible for the mass executions of 5,000 opposition members ordered by the founder of the republic Ayatollah Khomeini in 1988. 100 Iranian opposition members and human rights activists in exile have criticised the appointment of Seyyed Ebrahim Raissi as head of justice as “promotion of a criminal” in a petition. They say the Islamic Republic is insulting “the survivors of the mass executions of 1988”. Together with his father-in-law, Ahmed Alamolhoda, the arch-conservative Friday Imam of Mashhad and Supreme Leader Khamenei’s representative in the province of Razavi-Khorazan, Raissi is considered to be an staunch opponent of President Rohani’s policy of pragmatism and a cautious political opening.

Judicial advisor criticises child marriage

According to Ali Kazemi, the advisor to the Iranian judiciary, marriage between underage girls and older men constitutes child abuse, but cannot be legally sanctioned in Iran. Rather, the families need to be educated. Although Iran signed the International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, it was subject to Sharia law. According to Section 1014 of the Iranian Civil Code, parents are permitted to marry off their daughters from the age of 13 and their sons from the age of 15. At present, women’s and children’s rights activists are fighting for the amendment of the law.

Criminal charges filed against Minister of Communications

At the end of February 2019, the public prosecutor’s office filed a criminal complaint against Minister of Communications Mohammad Jahromi. He is in favour of free access to the Internet and against the censorship of social networks. President Rohani sharply criticised the actions of the judiciary.

“Homosexuals endangering national security”

The Islamic Republic of Iran’s judiciary charged the female equality activist Rezvaneh Mohammadi with “violating its national security” because she sought to “normalize same-sex relations”. The Iranian lesbian and transgender network group, 6rang, wrote on its website in late February that Rezvaneh Mohammadi’s charges include “collusion against national security by normalizing same-sex relations.” This is the first time an activist has faced such an accusation in Iran. She may be sentenced up to five years imprisonment.

World Bank: No equal rights for Iranian women

According to a survey carried out by the World Bank survey, Iran ranked 184th in an international ranking on equal rights for women. 187 countries’ laws were analysed in 35 categories for the study. Only Sudan,

Saudi Arabia and the UAE performed worse. For 10 years, the World Bank has been investigating the legal situation regarding equality between women and men in almost all the countries of the world. Iran received no points in the category freedom of mobility for women and in the question of marriage and family rights. The study also shows that Iranian women are exposed to strong gender discrimination in the labour market. On the other hand, Iran received 75 points on the question of women setting up businesses.

Yemen

Southern separatist group warns of new conflict

The separatist group Southern Transitional Council (STC) has stressed that it wants to be involved in future peace talks on Yemen. The STC is striving for greater autonomy for the southern parts of Yemen and warns that disregarding this demand will lead to further conflicts. The group has controlled the city of Aden since 2018.

Bombings

According to reports, at least one person was killed and eleven others were injured when an explosion ripped through a popular market in Yemen's south-western province of Taiz on 4 March 2019.

On 3 February 2019, three civilians were allegedly killed and six others were injured when artillery projectiles from the Houthi rebels hit a house in the town of Hodeidah. On 28 February 2019, five children were reportedly killed in an attack on their house in the Hodeidah Governorate.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Ebola still not under control

Seven months into the largest ever Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Ebola response is failing to bring the epidemic under control in a climate of deepening community mistrust, Médecins Sans Frontières/ Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said at a press conference in Geneva on 7 March 2019. Since the beginning of 2019, more than 40 percent of the people in whom Ebola was confirmed have not come to the treatment centres but have died at home. The use of police and armed forces to compel people to comply with health measures against Ebola is leading to further alienation of the community and is counterproductive to controlling the epidemic. Attacks have been carried out on Ebola treatment centres. On 24 February 2019, the treatment centre in Katwa and on 27 February 2019 the treatment centre in Butembo (both in North Kivu Province) were attacked by gunmen, after which MSF withdrew the staff from there. After the Butembo treatment centre reopened on 2 March 2019 under the direction of the Ministry of Health and in collaboration with WHO and UNICEF, it was attacked by the May-May militia on 9 March 2019. A policeman was killed and an employee was injured. As of 9 March 2019, there have been 921 of Ebola in the eastern Congolese provinces of North Kivu and Ituri (856 confirmed and 65 suspected cases). So far 582 people (517 confirmed and 65 suspected cases) have died of Ebola.

Kosovo

Kosovo Special Tribunal starts work

The new "International Special Tribunal for Crimes in Kosovo 1998-1999" in The Hague has started its work 20 years after the Kosovo War. It is to clarify whether members of the former Liberation Army (UÇK) committed crimes against humanity. The trigger was the report by politician Dick Marty on alleged war crimes committed by the UÇK, which had already been published in 2010. Among its most serious crimes are drug trafficking, kidnappings and illegal organ trafficking. Several suspects are also mentioned by name, including today's President Hashim Thaci.

Many people in Kosovo reject the court and see it as a provocation. The UÇK fighters are widely regarded as heroes who merely resisted Serbian tyranny. That is why in 2015 the Kosovar Government voted for the establishment of such a court, yielding to major pressure from the international community.

Many of the former UÇK fighters are now influential figures in politics and business, for instance President Hashim Thaci, Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj or President of Parliament Kadri Veseli. Proceedings against Haradinaj and his brothers were already instituted in 2007 before the "UN War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague". However, no convictions were made due to lack of evidence, because almost all witnesses to the prosecution died under mysterious circumstances. Again, it will be difficult to persuade witnesses to testify.

It is said that the first witnesses have already been taken out of the country for security reasons. Several ex-UÇK fighters have been summoned since mid-January. As yet, no formal charges have been filed.

Niger

Clashes between the Army and Boko Haram

Dozens of people have been killed in fighting between the Army and the Islamist militia Boko Haram. As the Nigerien Ministry of Defence announced on 9 March 2019, the jihadists attacked a remote military post in the southeast of the country. 38 Boko Haram insurgents and seven troops were killed in the firefight. The army seized five militia vehicles as well as machine guns, missile launchers and ammunition.

Nigeria

Election of governors and assemblies of federal states

On 9 March 2019, the elections for assemblies took place in all 36 federal states as well as the elections of the governors in 29 federal states. Seven states did not hold governor elections, as the previous incumbents have not yet completed their four-year term. In the southern state of Rivers, the National Electoral Commission INEC stopped the vote count on 10 March 2019 because widespread violence and disturbances, including the kidnapping of some employees, had occurred in the polling stations and the polling centres. Babajide Sanwo-Olu of the APC party, which had previously provided the governor, was elected as the new governor in the fiercely contested state of Lagos, Nigeria's economic metropolis that has a population of up to 20 million.

Pakistan

Action against members of armed organisations

In the midst of the tensions with India, Pakistan took action against the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) group, which had claimed responsibility for the attack on 14 February 2019 in the Indian part of Kashmir (see Briefing Notes of 18 February 2019). Some leaders and members of the group were reportedly arrested. In this context, a decree was also issued allowing the confiscation of assets of armed organisations that have been classified as terrorist organisations under the anti-terror laws.

Protest marches for women's rights and gender justice

On the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March 2019, thousands of women took part in an "Aurat" march (women's march) in the country's larger cities (Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Hyderabad, Quetta, Peshawar, Faisalabad). In Karachi alone there were about 1,000 participants. The first protest march of this kind took place there in 2018 with around 5,000 participants. The marches are organised by the movement "Hum Auratein" (We the Women), founded in 2008, which more and more women from different social strata have joined over the years to demonstrate for women's rights and gender justice.

Russian Federation

Media law tightened

On 7 March 2019, the Russian State Duma approved an amendment to the law, which tightens the penalties for the publication of offensive or false information by online media or private persons. Critics of the law argue that it could shut down Kremlin- and authority-critical websites and promote self-censorship. Online media registered with the official Roskomnadzor media authority would be able to remove content considered to be fake news before their website would be shut down. Internet sites that are not registered with the media authorities will be blocked without warning if false information is disseminated.

According to the amendment, the penalties for publishing fake news for private individuals will be up to RUB 100,000 (EUR 1,340), for civil servants up to RUB 200,000 (EUR 2,680) and for operators of online media up to RUB 500,000 (EUR 6,700). Fines of up to RUB 100,000 (EUR 1,340) are provided for insulting Russian authorities, state symbols and Russian society, and repeat offenders may face prison sentences of up to 15 days.

Arrests made at protests against Internet law

On 10 March 2019 thousands of people in Moscow and other cities protested against the bill to stop Russian data streams from flowing through foreign servers in the future. Critics fear a stricter censorship of the Internet in Russia and isolation from the global data network. Several people were arrested during the protests in Moscow.

Somalia

Bombings

At least six troops were killed in a car bomb explosion waged by Al-Shabaab in front of a restaurant frequented by government soldiers near the presidential palace in Mogadishu on 7 March 2019, according to Al-Shabaab sources.

One civilian died outside Mogadishu near the city of Afgoye (Lower Shabelle region) in the a booby trap explosion on 7 March 2019.

Unknown persons assassinated a community leader at a mosque in Boosaaso (Puntland) on 8 March 2019.

Hostilities

On 8 March 2019, Somali military attacked a camp of Al-Shabaab near Gambole (Middle Shabelle region) with the support of US ground and air units. Eight extremists were killed in the process

On 9 March 2019, fighter planes of unknown origin attacked foreign fighters of Al-Shabaab in the Bur Madow area (Bay region). The number of casualties is not known.

Syria

Numerous ISIS fighters surrender in Baghuz

Fierce battles have been raging for days around the Syrian Baghuz, the last-remaining ISIS stronghold. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has been poised to advance into the enclave for weeks but has repeatedly held back to allow for the evacuation of civilians. According to SDF estimates, however, about 500 ISIS fighters in Baghuz may have entrenched themselves in tunnels and caves and have set many booby traps. In addition, there are said to be up to 4,000 women and children in the area.

According to Kurdish sources, a total of 400 to 500 people left the village last week via an escape corridor. Most of them were civilians, but also fighters and their relatives. More than 150 ISIS fighters, Syrians and foreigners from different countries surrendered and were arrested.

The pro-opposition Syrian Human Rights Observatory even spoke of 300 ISIS fighters and a total of 1,600 people who had surrendered.

Millions of people in Syria still dependent on aid

The President of the German Caritas Association, Peter Neher, warned on 6 March 2019 against a reduction in humanitarian aid efforts. Despite extensive ceasefires in most parts of the country, large parts of the population are still dependent on aid supplies in order to survive. He said by no means all of the estimated 13 million people in need of aid could receive supplies. He said Caritas International is also concerned that the emerging reconstruction is being used by the Syrian government as an instrument for maintaining power. For example, for months now, confiscations and expropriations have been used to drive out sections of the population that are critical of the regime and to settle people loyal to the regime in formerly war-torn districts.

Tajikistan

Opposition activist allowed to leave Tajikistan

On 2 March 2019, opposition activist Sharofiddin Gadoev was able to leave the country and return to the Netherlands after he had been forcibly returned to Tajikistan on 15 February 2019 - according to human rights groups – where he was questioned by the security authorities. In an interview after his return, Gadoev accused the Tajik security authorities of torture and ill-treatment during his detention. Gadoev is a co-founder of the opposition movement “Group 24”, which is banned in Tajikistan. Since 2015 he has been in

self-imposed exile in the Netherlands until he was brought to his homeland on 15 February 2019 while travelling to Russia (cf. Briefing Notes of 25 February 2019).

Thailand

Thai Raksa Chart (TRC) banned

The TRC, one of Thailand's largest opposition parties, was banned by the Constitutional Court last week. Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya stood as the top candidate for this party in February 2019 (see Briefing Notes of 18 February 2019). The ruling expels TRC board members from Thai politics for ten years, including Preechapol Pongpanich, leader of the TRC. The Election Commission asked the court to dissolve the party after it nominated Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya Sirivadhana Barnavadi for prime minister, a move which the commission described as "antagonistic toward the constitutional monarchy."

Chad

Chad closes border with Libya

After rebels of the Union des forces de la résistance (UFR) had penetrated Chad at the beginning of February with about 50 armed flatbed trucks from southern Libya, the closure of the border to Libya was ordered. Observers saw the advance as an attempt to overthrow President Idriss Déby. The border area is increasingly a retreat for smugglers, terrorists and rebels, Interior Minister Mahamat Abali Salah said on state television on 4 March 2019. At Chad's request, the advance of the rebels had been thwarted by airstrikes conducted by the French armed forces. The rebels wanted to destabilise the country, the military said. Central African Chad is an important ally of the West in the fight against Islamist terror in the Sahel.

Turkey

Accreditation refused and travel advisory tightened

Two German journalists, one correspondent of the ZDF broadcaster and a reporter who writes for the newspaper Tagesspiegel had to leave Turkey and returned to Germany after the Turkish government refused to renew their accreditation on 10 March 2019. The Turkish authorities did not state any reasons for their decision. According to media reports, around 80 other foreign journalists are currently waiting in Turkey for their press cards, which are normally issued at the turn of the year. The Federal Foreign Office then updated its travel advisory for Turkey at the weekend to say there was a risk that the Turkish government could "take further measures against representatives of the German media or civil society institutions". The Federal Foreign Office now also refers to statements made by the Turkish government at the beginning of March 2019, according to which persons who have taken part in meetings of organisations classified as terrorist abroad, for example, and who want to go on holiday in Turkey, can be arrested on entering the country. In addition, it said it can also be assumed that even non-public comments in social media would be forwarded to the Turkish prosecution authorities, for instance, by anonymous reporting.

Largest mosque in Turkey opened

After a construction period of around six years, a large mosque with six minarets and a capacity of 63,000 worshippers was opened in Istanbul last week. On 7 March 2019, worshippers gathered for the first time for morning prayer. The mosque on Camlica Hill is the largest in Turkey and a prestigious project of President Erdogan. The mosque complex also includes a conference hall, a library and a museum.

Women's Day rally dissolved

On 8 March 2019, security forces in Istanbul used tear gas and rubber bullets to crack down on and disperse a mass rally to mark International Women's Day. The demonstration had not been approved in advance because of security concerns, but many women gathered to protest for their rights. A rally went off peacefully last year. A protest march for International Women's Day took place peacefully in Ankara on Friday evening.

Venezuela

Nationwide blackout

Since the evening of 7 March 2019, large parts of Venezuela have been affected by a power outage, the extent and duration of which are unique in the country's history to date. The power outage appears to have affected practically all parts of the country and has led to wide-ranging consequences, such as blackouts and outages of trains, cold stores, refrigerators, air conditioning systems and various facilities in hospitals. In the days since, there have been repeated supply bottlenecks and outages.

According to reports from NGOs and individuals, there have been serious effects on the health system. There are reports that 15 dialysis patients have died and 80 newborns have died at a hospital in Maracaibo.

The Maduro government blames US cyberattacks on the infrastructure of Venezuela's most important hydroelectric dam (Guri dam). However, international observers and the opposition blame decades of maladministration and mismanagement.

Demonstrations

On Saturday fresh both pro- and anti-Maduro demonstrations took place in the capital. Television broadcasts and videos show police units in several places at times using tear gas against opposing demonstrators, while other units allow them to pass or even withdraw. Guaidó has called for a "march on Caracas", urging supporters to continue mobilising and telling them he intends to embark on a tour of the country.

Cases of desertion

Following the attempts to bring humanitarian aid into the country on 23 February 2019 and the subsequent escalations, more than 300 members of the armed security forces, mainly from the GNB, have deserted from Venezuela to Colombia. Similar cases have also been reported from the border with Brazil.

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