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Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

COVID-19 pandemic

A sharp increase in COVID-19 diseases and infections is reported in western Afghanistan. The regional hospital in Herat is working at the limit. The number of beds has been increased from 100 to 130, all of which are occupied by COVID-19 patients. The hospitals in Kandahar and Nangarhar have also reached their capacity limits. On 10 December 2020, the health ministry repeated its appeal to the citizens to comply with the protective measures. Apparently, people hardly ever wear masks and do not observe the distance rules. The vaccine platform COVAX (Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access) has announced that a vaccine would be available for Afghanistan in 2021 and that vaccination costs would be covered for up to 20 percent of the population. However, there were still logistical problems, in particular with regard to the maintenance of refrigeration chains. A plan for vaccinating the remaining 80 percent is being developed, the platform said.

Peace negotiations

Negotiations have been postponed until 5 January 2021. Both delegations have exchanged papers setting out their demands. The Afghan government wishes to maintain the country's designation as an Islamic Republic, as well as its constitution, security forces and national institutions and achievements such as freedom of the press. The Taliban want, among other things, a country with an Islamic constitution without suffix or prefix, the establishment of an Islamic Council, freedoms and rights for women within the framework of Islamic principles and the implementation of their foreign policy.

Fighting, attacks, civilian victims

On 10 December 2020, a journalist and her driver were shot dead in Jalalabad (capital of Nangarhar province). The IS claimed responsibility for the attack. Apparently, the assassins were arrested by the police.

On 12 December 2020, suspected IS fighters fired at least ten missiles at various parts of Kabul from the northern Kabul district Lab-e-Jar, killing at least one civilian and injuring two others.

On 13 December 2020 at least two people were killed and two more injured in Kabul when an improvised booby trap device was detonated. The attack took place in police district (PD) 15 near the Parwan Hotel. On the same day, unidentified individuals shot dead a prosecutor in the Kart-e-Naw (PD 8) district. A week earlier, another prosecutor had been murdered in Kabul.

The Afghan interior ministry informed that within one month 22 military personnel were killed in a targeted manner, eight of them in Kabul. Among the victims were also people who were no longer in service, such as retired officers and a former security guard.

The Australian Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) considers Afghanistan to be the country most affected by the consequences of terrorism in 2020 out of 163 countries studied. This puts Afghanistan ahead of Iraq and Nigeria in terms of the consequences of terrorism.

In addition to attacks, fighting was reported in several provinces last week, killing or injuring civilians. For example, at least eleven civilians died in an air raid in the Arghandab district of Kandahar province on 12 December 2020.

Albania

Minister of the Interior resigns after police violence and protests

On 10 December 2020, interior minister Sander Lleshaj resigned with reference to the shooting of a 25-year-old man by a police officer in the night of 8 to 9 December and the events that followed. Apparently the young man was moving outside during the pandemic-related curfew, and did not follow the police officers' instructions to stop. The police officer in question was arrested. Since 9 December 2020 protests against police violence have been held in numerous larger cities, and they are continuing even after the minister's resignation. Both police officers and protesters have suffered injuries. Media report that demonstrators threw stones and set fire to rubbish bins and trees. Police used tear gas and arrested several people during these days. The authorities have called on people to respect pandemic restrictions, especially the ban on gatherings of more than ten people. The outgoing interior minister has blamed the opposition for the protests, accusing them of abusing the 'unjust killing of a young man' for political purposes.

Albania / North Macedonia

Opening of EU accession negotiations postponed

Despite a recommendation to the contrary from the European Commission (see BN of 12 October 2020), the Permanent Representatives Committee (Coreper II, ambassadorial level) decided on 30 November 2020 not to open EU accession negotiations with Albania and northern Macedonia for the time being. On 8 December, the General Affairs Council (ministerial level) failed to agree on the opening of accession negotiations with the two candidate countries before 2020. According to media reports, the main reasons were Bulgaria's concerns about North Macedonia. First of all, Bulgaria demands that points of contention with Northern Macedonia be resolved in historiographical issues, the status or designation of the official language of North Macedonia in the EU context and the existence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. German minister of state for Europe Minister Michael Roth, representing the German Council Presidency, has expressed hope that a breakthrough on this issue would be achieved during Portugal's EU Presidency in the first half of 2021 at the latest.

Armenia / Azerbaijan

Fragile ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh

One month after the end of the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus, there were new battles on 11 and 12 December 2020. Representatives of the region, which is predominantly inhabited by Armenians, accused the Azerbaijani military of having injured members of its forces in an attack. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, in turn, blamed Armenia and threatened to react harshly. A peace agreement brokered by Russia on 9 November 2020 gave Azerbaijan back control over areas in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions that had been under Armenian administration for more than 25 years. According to international law, however, these areas belong to Azerbaijan. Russian troops are deployed on the ground to monitor compliance with the agreement. They also reported a breach of the agreement on 11 December 2020 in the Gadrut region, but without attributing responsibility to either side in the conflict.

Belarus

Arrests during continuing protests in Minsk

Once again, thousands of people protested against President Alexander Lukashenko. Security forces in the capital Minsk violently attacked the demonstrators and arrested up to 135 protesters, human rights organisations report. Only a week ago, more than 300 people were arrested.

In contrast to the central protests shortly after the presidential election on 9 August 2020, the opposition has been trying to thwart the strategy of the violent security forces with many small protest marches over the past few weeks. This time again, thousands of people took part in the rallies. First, they gathered in their residential areas and then formed larger groups. There were also protests in other cities in the country.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Serious crisis of confidence in Bosnia's supreme judicial authority

On 10 December 2020 Milan Tegeltija, president of the Bosnian supreme judicial authority ('High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council' HJPC) announced his resignation. According to recent media reports, both the public and the international community including the Office of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (OHR), the EU Representation in Sarajevo, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the US Embassy had called upon him to resign because of allegations of interference in the office. Nine out of 14 members of the HJPC had also put forward this request at a council meeting. The EU delegation in Bosnia had indicated that the current judicial crisis was casting a shadow over the leadership of the supreme judicial police and was having a negative impact on the country's judiciary as a whole. An expert report published by the European Commission comes to the conclusion that the authority needs to be fundamentally reformed and is currently unable to cope with serious crime and corruption. Political pressure on the judiciary also needs to be reduced, the report says.

China

Hong Kong: Media entrepreneur indicted

On 11 December 2020, media entrepreneur Jimmy Lai, who was arrested on 2 December 2020 for fraud allegations (see BN of 7 December 2020), was charged with violating the security law. He is accused of collusion with foreign forces, which can be punished with up to life imprisonment. In interviews, Mr. Lai had called on foreign countries to impose sanctions on Hong Kong.

Hong Kong: arrests

On 7 December 2020, eight people were arrested for participating in an unauthorised protest on 19 November 2020 at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Three of the detainees are accused of having demanded Hong Kong's independence, which is a criminal offence under the Security Act.

A Chinese employee of the American news agency Bloomberg was arrested on 7 December 2020. She is accused of endangering national security. Chinese citizens are not allowed to work as reporters for foreign news media. They are therefore usually employed for supporting activities.

On 8 December 2020, police arrested eight leading members of the democracy movement: former lawmaker Eddie Chu, former leader of the Democratic Party, Wu Chi-wai, as well as Leung Kwok-hung, Figo Chan and Tang Sai-lai of the League of Social Democrats and Councillors Tsang Kin-sing, Andy Chui and Lancelot Chan. They are accused of organising a protest march, participating in it and inciting participation in connection with unauthorised protests on 1 July 2020.

Xinjiang: Software identifies suspects to be interned in re-education camps

In a report published on 9 December 2020, Human Rights Watch (HRW) presents the analysis of a state document dated around the end of 2018, which contains data on more than 2,000 inmates (Uighurs and members of other Muslim minorities) of re-education camps in Aksu Prefecture. It was fed to Radio Free Asia from an unnamed source in Xinjiang. The reasons for detention include communication with or connections to suspects, contacts or travel abroad, practising Islam in a manner not authorised by the state, use of software to circumvent state censorship on the Internet, and frequent switching off of mobile phones (making it impossible to trace the activities of those concerned). In some cases, people have been interned for things that happened years or decades ago. According to the source, the people concerned were identified by a software called the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP) for further review by the police. IJOP compiles and evaluates data collected from the population in various areas of everyday life (see BN of 6 May 2019).

Colombia

80 massacres in 2020

The non-governmental organisation Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (Indepaz) informs that in 2020, armed groups committed a total of 80 massacres (defined as incidents resulting in at least three deaths) by 10 December 2020, killing a total of 340 people. Of the 32 departamentos existing alongside the capital district of Bogotá, 20 have been affected by the crimes, Antioquia, Cauca and Nariño most severely.

DR Congo

End of the governing coalition and political crisis

On 6 December 2020, after several weeks of negotiations, President Félix Tshisekedi announced the end of cooperation between his party coalition Cap pour le Changement (CACH) and that of his predecessor Joseph Kabila, Front commun pour le Congo (FCC). He appointed a representative to establish a new majority. His reform programme had been blocked in the governing coalition of the two camps, he said. The FCC represents the majority in both houses of parliament. The appointment of Sylvestre Ilunga as prime minister in May 2019 had to be based on the FCC's majority. A dispute over the appointment of three new constitutional judges by Tshisekedi, who apparently overruled the Prime Minister, contributed to the end of the coalition.

Media report of violent clashes in parliament between CACH and FCC members on 7 and 8 December 2020, when security forces used tear gas against supporters of Tshisekedi who tried to enter the parliament building. On 10 December 2020, the National Assembly (lower house) removed its president Jeanine Mabunda from office. The Kabila camp, of which she is a member, accused Tshisekedi's side of buying votes.

Ethiopia

USA report on deployment of Eritrean troops in Tigray

According to US authorities, Eritrean soldiers have actively supported the Ethiopian army in the fight against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the regional state of Tigray. On 11 December 2020 a US State Department spokesperson stated that there were 'credible reports' of an Eritrean military operation in Tigray. Both Eritrea and Ethiopia have denied this information. The TPLF chairman and former regional president Debretsion Gebremichael had always claimed that the northern neighbour state was involved, thus justifying the missile attacks on several Eritrean targets (see BN of 30 November 2020).

According to the United Nations (UN) and aid agencies, fighting in Tigray is still going on, but the Ethiopian government rejects this information as untrue.

UNHCR criticises Ethiopia for forced repatriation of Eritrean refugees

The UN refugee agency UNHCR reports that several hundred Eritrean refugees who had fled to other parts of the country in order to escape the fighting in Tigray have been returned to their camps by Ethiopian security forces. UNHCR criticises the fact that supplies are not guaranteed there. Also, the refugees fear forced repatriation to Eritrea, as well as attacks by the local population because of the deployment of Eritrean military in the conflict in Tigray.

Relief and humanitarian aid for crisis region

For the first time since the beginning of the Ethiopian military offensive in Tigray, a convoy of international aid supplies was allowed to enter the embattled region. On 12 December 2020, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) stated that a delivery was made in coordination with the Ethiopian authorities and with the participation of the Ethiopian Red Cross. The trucks carrying medicines and medical equipment were destined for the regional capital, Mekelle.

For weeks, the UN had also been calling for humanitarian aid for the refugee camps in Tigray. In early December 2020, an agreement guaranteeing 'unconditional access' was reached with the Ethiopian government (see BN of 07 December 2020). However, this agreement has not yet been implemented, as the central government insists on retaining the lead in this matter.

Meanwhile, a government spokesperson has admitted that a UN team was fired upon by Ethiopian forces on 6 December 2020 and briefly arrested for having broken through two checkpoints and driven into areas they were not allowed to enter.

Due to a government-imposed news embargo and strict access restrictions, it is not possible to independently verify information on possible fighting and the humanitarian situation in Tigray.

Ghana

Incumbent President wins presidential election

On 7 December 2020, incumbent President Nana Akufo-Addo of the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) won the presidential election securing 51.6 percent of the votes cast, followed by his strongest challenger John Dramani Mahama (National Democratic Congress – NDC) who gained 47.4 percent. Ten other candidates had run against them, but they were considered to have no chance. On 4 December 2020, Akufo-Addo and Mahama had signed an agreement committing themselves to non-violent elections. Since 7 December 2020 police recorded more than 60 violent incidents in connection with the elections, leaving five people dead and 17 injured. Nevertheless, the voting, in which 13 million of a total electorate of 17 million took part, was described as largely peaceful, free and fair by observers in their initial assessments. The NDC questions the election results and has refused to recognise them. Akufo-Addo and Mahama had already competed in the two previous presidential elections. Mahama had won in 2012 and Akufo-Addo in 2016. Ghana is an important export country for gold, cocoa and, for some years now, oil. It has a stable democracy and good governance by West African standards. Economic growth is expected to decline significantly as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic in 2020. Corruption is a problem.

On 11 December 2020, supporters of the NDC protested against the election results in Bolgatanga, capital of the Upper East region, setting fire to car tyres and blocking a road. Police dispersed the protests; initially, no one was arrested.

Parliamentary elections

Eleven parties and independent candidates took part in the parliamentary elections, which were also held on 7 December 2020. The NPP won 137 of 275 seats. The NDC secured 136 seats, one mandate went to an independent candidate and in one constituency the result was still pending. The NDC announced its intention to challenge this election result as well.

Iran

Death sentence carried out against journalist critical of the regime

According to media reports, IRNA state news agency informed of the execution of the journalist and blogger Ruhollah Zam on 12 December 2020. Press reports say that the founder of the regime-critical social media channel Amad News had been arrested by Iranian security forces in Iraq in October 2019 and was brought to Iran. At the end of June 2020, he was sentenced in Tehran (see BN of 13 July 2020). On 8 December 2020, the sentence was confirmed by the supreme court, a spokesman for the judiciary stated.

The spokesman added that Zam, being the website's operator, had been spreading propaganda against the system and in 2017, he had significantly fuelled protests against the government via the social media. As a result, he was accused of 'corrupting the earth', to which the death penalty is applicable under Iranian criminal law. The approach of the Iranian leadership shows their willingness to take action against exposed opposition members abroad as well.

Violation of Islamic dress code

Media reports of 7 December 2020 say that two female models and two photographers were arrested in the city of Kermanshah during a fashion presentation, with the women acting as shop window models in disregard of the strict Islamic dress code. Female mannequins are not allowed to have female proportions and must wear a headscarf. Public fashion shows by women are prohibited. In recent years there have been some arrests of people who have published photos on social networks such as Instagram for fashion purposes.

Iraq

Protests in the Kurdistan Autonomous Region (KR-I)

The protests, especially in the provinces of Sulaimaniyya and Halabja in the KR-I, have escalated from 6 December 2020. By 9 December at least seven people (six protesters and one member of the security forces) had died, the youngest known victim was 13 years old. The Kurdish regional government then imposed a three-day curfew. The protests were sparked by the precarious economic situation, high unemployment and unpaid wages of public employees. After the end of the curfew on 12 December 2020, unrest flared up again, but so far without a fatal escalation. During the protests, buildings of the regional government were repeatedly set on fire.

Several independent media houses, but also media houses close to the regional government (such as Speda and Payam) have received letters from the ministry of youth and culture asking them to adjust their coverage of the protests and not to broadcast pictures of violent acts. Several media houses published the letters. Previously, the NRT, a station close to the opposition, had been repeatedly closed down.

Three people killed by Turkish air strike

Three men who have been missing for several days were found dead on 12 December 2020 in Dohuk province, Amedi district. They were victims of a Turkish air strike in the region a week earlier, in which, according to the Turkish Ministry of Defence, five PKK fighters were killed.

Lebanon

Strikes announced

Several major unions have announced nationwide strikes from 16 December 2020 onwards, mainly against the likely removal of subsidies for various goods. At present, the dollar reserves of the Lebanese central bank are said to be around 18 billion dollars; below the threshold of 17.5 billion dollars, the bank will not be able to maintain the subsidies for certain goods like basic foodstuffs, petrol and medicines, as otherwise its basic reserves would have to be attacked, the leadership of the bank stated. The protests are directed against a removal of these subsidies, at least without accompanying legislation that would significantly mitigate the effects. Lebanon has only a rudimentary social system, and for many Lebanese, these subsidies are on the one hand vital and on the other hand one of the few ways to benefit from state revenues.

Investigations into the explosion in the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020

On 10 December 2020, Judge Sawwan, who was appointed to lead the investigation, officially informed that the investigation would now also cover Interim Prime Minister Diab and three other ministers, an unprecedented event in Lebanon. The parties of the concerned ministers and Diab's party rejected the allegations, and also Hezbollah publicly stated that it considered this to be a purely political decision. First hearings are scheduled to take place later this week.

Nigeria

Attack on boys' boarding school

On 11 December 2020, an attack was launched on the boys boarding school Government Science Secondary School in the city of Kankara in the northern state of Katsina. Media report that 100 to 150 armed attackers killed a security guard and abducted numerous students. On 13 December 2020 the governor of Katsina stated that 333 of the 839 boarding school students were still missing; however, it was assumed that some had managed to escape. The governor ordered the closure of all boarding schools in the state. On the evening of 13 December 2020, President Buhari's spokesman informed that ten children were in the hands of the kidnappers; it was assumed that the kidnappers wanted to extort a ransom. Already on 12 December 2020, the military reported that they had located the attackers' hiding place in the forest; there had been gunfights, the military said.

Apparently, bandits have carried out more frequent attacks with looting and abductions for the past year and a half in the region. So far, the neighbouring state of Zamfara (west of Katsina) has been particularly affected. Experts fear that terrorists may also mingle with the gangs.

Pakistan

Christian journalist shot dead in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa

On 7 December 2020 a Christian journalist was shot dead in Dera Ismail Khan in the north-western province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Immediately before the crime, to which no one has yet claimed responsibility, the reporter had published a report about the destruction of Hindu temples in Pakistan.

Opposition movement continues protest march in Lahore

On 13 December 2020, the opposition movement Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a merger of eleven parties, organised another protest march in Lahore (Punjab) as it had announced before (see BN of 19 October 2020). The incumbent government of Prime Minister Imran Khan is under criticism mainly because of high inflation, restrictions on civil rights and media censorship.

Syria

Attack on checkpoint in Ras al-Ayn

Turkish authorities have confirmed that on 10 December 2020, two soldiers of the Turkish army and two members of Syrian-Arab militias were killed by the explosion of a car bomb in the Turkish-occupied part of Northern Syria. The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights even reported a total of 16 deaths.

Ras al-Ayn has been under the control of the Turkish military since October 2019 and has repeatedly been the target of attacks by suspected Kurdish underground fighters since then.

On the same day the Turkish authorities informed that an attack in the neighbouring Turkish province of Şanlıurfa was foiled where a Syrian Kurd tried to drive a bomb-laden vehicle to a checkpoint at Viranşehir, but was killed by police officers before the bomb was detonated. The explosives needed for the bomb were apparently brought to Turkey from northern Syria.

Venezuela

Opposition referendum

Following the official elections to the National Assembly on 6 December 2020, which were boycotted by large sections of the opposition, a referendum was conducted by the opposition under Leopoldo López and Juan Guaidó, with the intention to derive a mandate to extend the term of office of the existing National Assembly due to the fact that the preparation and conduct of the official election had been illegitimate and unfair. The referendum lasted a full week, starting on 7 December 2020. According to the opposition, more than 6.2 million eligible voters took part in the referendum, which would roughly correspond to the participation in the official elections (the figures for which are doubted by the opposition, however).