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Group 22 – Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

4 April 2016

Afghanistan

Military confrontations

Between 1 December 2015 and 15 February 2016, the United Nations recorded a total of 4,014 security-related incidents across the country, representing an 8.3 percent decrease compared with the same period in 2014 and 2015. However, it was noted that in 2015, January and February had the highest totals for those months since 2001. Armed clashes accounted for more than half of the security incidents, followed by attacks with improvised explosive devices at 19.2 percent. A total of 154 assassinations (including failed attempts) were recorded, representing a 27 percent decrease compared with the same period in 2014 and 2015. During the reporting period, 20 suicide attacks were registered, compared with 30 in the same period in 2014 and 2015.

In the last weeks, armed clashes, air and rocket attacks, raids and other incidents occurred in southern Helmand and Uruzgan provinces (where thousands of families apparently left their home villages), in northern Baghlan, Faryab, Balkh and Jawzjan provinces, in north-eastern Kunduz province, eastern Nangarhar, Kunar, Nuristan and Laghman provinces, in western Farah, Herat and Badghis province, in central Kapisa province and also in south-eastern Ghazni and Paktia province.

Targeted bombings and attacks

On 22 March 2016, at least ten members of the security forces died in bomb attacks in southern Zabul and western Herat provinces. In southern Kandahar province, an apparent ‘insider attack’ killed at least seven members of the Afghan Local Police.

On 24 March 2016, five police officers were abducted during an attack launched by Taliban members in Noorgram district (eastern Nuristan province). In eastern Kunar, a soldier was killed in a bomb attack on a military vehicle; seven soldiers and one civilian were injured.

On 26 March 2016, at least two civilians were killed in attacks carried out in western Badghis and southern Zabul provinces. In central Maidan Wardak province, a judge from the southeastern city of Ghazni was assassinated.

On 27 March 2016, a high-rank military officer was killed in a bomb attack in central Logar province.

On 28 March 2016, a rocket hit the new parliament building in Kabul, causing material damage. In eastern Nangarhar, the Supreme Court Chief Justice’s father was abducted.

On 29 March 2016, a bomb attack targeted a former senator in Kabul, killing at least four individuals and injuring another 15. In northern Jawzjan province, Taliban members executed three men whom they accused of supporting the government.

On 30 March 2016, Taliban members publicly executed a man for murder in southern Nimroz province. In central Daikundi province, the military attorney and his driver were killed in a roadside attack.

Taliban insurgents are planning attacks on major cities

The Taliban have announced high-profile attacks on major cities for their upcoming spring offensive. So far, their only success has been a temporary takeover of Kunduz city in September 2015.

Recruitment of underage soldiers

In the fiercely embattled southern province of Helmand, the Taliban appear to have started a major recruiting campaign of underage youths.

Pakistan

Forced conversion and marriages

According to information provided by the catholic Fides news agency, at least 1,000 girls from religious minorities are abducted annually and forced into marriage, with the number of cases being highly underreported.

Attack in Lahore

On Easter Sunday, 27 March 2016, a suicide attack killed at least 72 people, among them 35 children, and injured more than 330 others in a public park in the city of Lahore (Punjab). The Taliban faction Jamaat ur-Ahrar has claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it was targeted against both Christians and the government. The attack was aimed at Christians celebrating the feast of Easter. However, more Muslims than Christians were killed and injured in the atrocity.

Iraq

Casualty figures

According to Iraq Body Count (IBC), a total of 1,073 civilians were killed in March 2016.

The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) recorded 575 civilians killed and another 1,196 injured in March 2016. Moreover, 544 members of the Iraqi security forces (including Peshmerga and other allies but excluding Anbar operations) were killed and 365 were injured.

Baghdad was the worst affected province with 1,029 civilian casualties (259 killed, 770 injured). Ninive province recorded 133 killed and 89 injured, Babil 65 killed and 141 injured, Kirkuk 34 killed and 57 injured, Diyala 11 killed and Salahaddin province six killed and one individual injured.

According to information obtained from the Health Directorate in Anbar, 201 civilian casualties were recorded until 30 March 2016 (64 killed and 137 injured).

UNAMI points out that these figures have to be considered as the minimum, since reports of victims cannot be verified in conflict areas.

Islamic State ‘rocket expert’ killed

The US military claims to have killed ISIS rocket expert Jasim Khadijah, a former Iraqi military officer, on 3 April 2016.

Syria

ISIS loses town of al-Qaryatain to government

As was reported on 3 April 2016, Syrian forces and their allies have retaken from ISIS the strategically significant town of al-Qaryatain located between Damascus and Palmyra in Homs province. Before the war, the town had been home to a large Christian community. For more than a month now, a fragile armistice has been maintained in Syria; however, extremist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) are not included in the ceasefire.

Mass grave discovered in recaptured Palmyra

According to information obtained on 2 April 2016, government troops found the dead bodies of 42 people (24 civilians and 18 soldiers) in the northeastern parts of the city after its recapture on 24 March 2016.

Islamic State executes 15 of its own members

On 3 April 2016, the Syrian Observatory for Human reported that the Islamic State has killed 15 of its fighters,. The ISIS members were executed in connection with the assassination of senior ISIS figure Abu Hija al-Tunisi, who died on 30 March in an airstrike, the Observatory said.

Jihadists killed in airstrikes in Idlib province

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported on 3 April 2016 that 20 jihadists have been killed in airstrikes in the northeastern parts of the country, among them al-Nusra front spokesman Abu Firas al-Suri, who had met in Idlib with other jihadists.

Yemen

Agreement on ceasefire and peace negotiations

On 23 March 2016, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, UN Special Envoy for Yemen, announced that a nationwide ceasefire would start on 10 April 2016 and that peace negotiations between the Yemeni government and Houthi rebels were to begin on 18 April 2016 in Kuwait. Last year, some 6,000-6,2000 people were reported to have been killed in combat actions, with about half of them civilians. 80 percent of Yemen's 24 million people are dependent on humanitarian aid, and an estimated 2.4 million have been forcibly displaced.

Cabinet reshuffle

On 03 April 2016 Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi dismissed Prime Minister Chaled Bahah, citing economic shortcomings and security failures as reasons for the reshuffle. Chaled Bahah, who was also Vice President, had come to office in 2014. He is to be appointed as presidential adviser. Ahmed Obaid bin Daghr is to become head of the cabinet, and Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar the new vice president.

Abducted Christian priest is safe

Indian external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj has stated that Salesian priest Tom Uzhunnalil, an Indian national who was apparently abducted by ISIS units in a raid on a Christian nursing home in the city of Aden on 4 March 2016, is alive and safe. However, his whereabouts were still unknown, the foreign minister said. The Indian government was adopting all possible means for his quick and safe release, she added.

Lebanon

75 girls liberated from human traffickers

As was reported on 31 March 2016, Lebanese security forces have broken up a human trafficking network north of Beirut and liberated 75 girls, mostly Syrians, who had been beaten and forced into prostitution. Apparently, some of the girls were lured from refugee settlements or sold to the traffickers by other refugees.

Turkey

Bomb attacks in southeastern Turkey

On 2 April 2016, a bomb attack killed five Turkish soldiers and one police officer in the city of Nusaybin (Mardin province, which is predominantly Kurdish). The PKK is blamed for the attack. On 31 March, seven police officers were killed and 23 individuals injured in an attack on a police bus in the Kurdish-controlled city of Diyarbakir. After two years of relative calm, the Kurdish conflict has been escalating again since July 2015. Since then, Diyarbakir and other Kurdish cities have repeatedly been the scene of violent street fights claiming victims on both sides. In its attempt to destroy the PKK, the Turkish government is expanding bombing raids to PKK targets in northern Iraq.

EU begins forced removal of refugees to Turkey

Three weeks after the EU-Turkey Agreement to end irregular migration from Turkey, the forced removal of irregular migrants from Greece to Turkey starts on 4 April 2016. Under the agreement, all irregular migrants who have crossed from Turkey to Greece after the cut-off date of 20 March 2016 will be deported to Turkey

as of 4 April 2016, with the only exception of people who can prove that they are subject to persecution in Turkey. Since that cutoff-date, around 5,000 people have come to the Greek Aegean islands. For every Syrian returned, another Syrian refugee will be resettled from Turkey to the EU, with numbers capped at 72,000. Germany is due to take about 15,000 refugees.

Egypt

Egypt asks for US military intervention

According to a press release citing an investigative blog, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has asked US President Obama for an urgent military intervention against ISIS in the Sinai peninsula. If ISIS wasn't stopped, it might be on the point of transforming the Sinai peninsula into its primary base in the Middle East, al-Sisi warned.

According to the blog, high-rank Egyptian military figures have started to look for alternatives in case Washington refuses to give military assistance. An Egyptian appeal to Russia could not be ruled out, the report went on.

Mali

EU military mission attacked

On 21 March 2016, four gunmen attacked the Nord-Sud-Hotel in Koulikoro near Bamako, which had been converted into the EU military training headquarters. Apparently, one of the attackers was killed and two others wounded. On 23 March 2016, police reported they had arrested 21 suspects and recovered grenades, ammunition, a machine gun and an assault rifle.

Senior Jihadist leader arrested

Malian security forces have arrested Souleymane Keita, the suspected top jihadist in the south of the country. On 31 March 2016, AFP news agency reported that he was captured a few days before near the Mauritanian border.

Sudan

400,000 people in need of food aid

On 3 April 2016, the head of UN's World Food Programmes (WFP) said that some 400,000 people in Sudan might be in need of food assistance because of the low rainfall. In some parts of the country, farmers were experiencing significantly shorter harvest seasons than before, he said. The areas worst affected by drought were eastern Sudan, East Darfur and the centre of the Kordofan region, he added. In addition to the planned help for the people hit worst by the drought, the WFP already aims at providing food assistance to around 3.8 million people in Sudan.

Niger

Official election results

On 22 March 2016, the electoral commission published the official results of the presidential runoff elections held on 20 March 2016. President Issoufou gained 92.5 percent of the votes, opposition leader Amadou got seven percent. The turnout was 60 percent. The President's new term of office started on 2 April 2016.

Senegal

Constitutional referendum

On 20 March 2016, Senegalese citizens went to vote on a constitutional referendum initiated by President Sall. The proposal included more civil rights for the citizens, the reduction of the presidential term from

seven years to five and an age limit for presidential candidates to a maximum of 75 years. On 22 March 2016, the Ministry of the Interior stated that nearly 63 percent of voters had approved the constitutional amendment, while roughly 37 percent voted against it. Voter turnout was around 40 %. President Sall's term of office (lasting until 2019) is not affected by the reduction in time.

West Africa/Ebola

WHO downgrades Ebola global risk

On 29 March 2016, WHO director general Margaret Chan stated that the Ebola outbreak in West Africa no longer constituted a public health emergency of international concern. The emergency had been first declared in August 2014. With the exception of some individual cases, the outbreak was finally brought under control, she said. The decision followed a recommendation of a panel of international experts. The emergency had led to interference with international traffic and trade.

Somalia

Security situation

On 28 March 2016, security forces of Galmudug (autonomous administration of parts of Galguduud and Mudug regions) arrested twelve al-Shabaab fighters in Mudug region, among them one citizen of Tanzania and two Kenyans.

On the same day, suspected al-Shabaab members shot dead a Somali-Canadian business man inside a mosque.

In the night of 29 March 2016, al-Shabaab fighters raided a police checkpoint in the town of Qoryoley (Lower Shabelle region). No information was provided on the number of victims.

On 30 March 2016, soldiers of the Somali army arbitrarily shot at civilians in the town of Afgoye (Lower Shabelle region), it was reported. The security forces did not succeed in catching the perpetrators.

On 31 March 2016, a suicide bomber killed a government official of Puntland and five police officers in Galkayo. Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility, saying the attack was in revenge for actions taken against the militia in Galmudug and Puntland.

On 30 March 2016, suspected al-Shabaab militiamen raided two vehicles carrying Turkish and Azeri citizens, killing two Turkish students and an Azeri woman.

On 31 March 2016, two individuals lost their lives when a bomb was detonated in a mosque in Beledweyne (Hiran region). Apparently, the incident was linked to clan disputes.

A former mayor of Mogadishu has stated that the security situation is deteriorating in the capital.

The Pentagon has informed that on 1 April 2016, US forces launched a drone strike targeting al-Shabaab senior leader Hassan Ali Dhoore near Jilib (Middle Juba region). The results of the operation were still being assessed, it was stated.

According to reports from Somali government circles dated 1 April 2016, the Somali armed forces and AMISOM are planning to recapture the town of Janale (Lower Shabelle region) held by al-Shabaab since September 2015. On 2 April 2016, AMISOM issued a press release stating that the al-Shabaab commander of Janale and 22 fighters were killed in the operation.

Côte d'Ivoire

Inter-tribal clashes claim dozens of lives

Since mid-March 2016, at least 20 people have been killed in conflicts on land use in the northeastern part of the country. More than 1,000 people have fled the inter-tribal clashes between herders and farmers in Bounkani region to neighbouring Burkina Faso, it was reported from UN circles. In view of the conflict, it is planned that 400 UN troops – up from 200 – will be stationed in the region. The Ivorian forces have announced to raise their troops from 500 to 700 in the region. The conflict region is roughly 600 kilometres north of Abidjan, the country's economic hub.

Nigeria

Leader of Ansaru Islamist militant group arrested

According to reports from the military of 3 April 2016, Khalid al-Barnawi, the leader of Ansaru („Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa“ – an Islamist terrorist organisation based in northern Nigeria), was arrested on 1 April in Lokoja, the capital of central Kogi state. He is the successor of Ansaru founder Abubakar Adam Kamar, who had been killed in March 2012 during a police raid in the city of Kano. In June 2012, Al-Barnawi, Kamar and the leader of the terrorist organisation Boko Haram were added to the FBI's list of most wanted terrorists. The Ansaru group, who had entered the public sphere for the first time in mid-2012 with a video, is considered a Boko Haram spin-off with connections to the terrorist network al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), placing its focus above all on international jihad. They are responsible for kidnapping citizens of Western states several times.

More than 500 hostages freed from Boko Haram

On 30 March 2016, the commander of Operation Lafiya Dole combatting the terrorist organization Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria, informed the press of the liberation of 567 civilians held hostage by Boko Haram in Kala-Balge Local Government Area near the border with Cameroon. 15 terrorists were killed in the operation, he reported.

Benin

Patrice Talon elected as President

On 20 March 2016, the run-off vote for the office of president was won by businessman Patrice Talon with 65 percent of the votes. His main competitor, Prime Minister Lionel Zinsou, gained 35 percent. In the first election round held on 6 March 2016, none of the 33 candidates had obtained absolute majority (see BN of 14 March 2016).

DR Congo

Former vice-president Bemba convicted

On 21 March 2016, Jean-Pierre Bemba, former vice-president of DR Congo (2003-2006), was found guilty of crimes of war in three cases (murder, rape and pillage) and of crimes against humanity in two cases (murder and pillage) by the International Criminal Court (ICC). The crimes had been committed in neighbouring Central African Republic by about 1500 soldiers of the militia 'Movement for the Liberation of Congo' (MLC) under Bemba's command in the time period between October 2002 und March 2003. The court established that the soldiers had tortured a large number of men, women and children, raped many women and girls and plundered numerous goods. In its conclusions the court held that Bemba had acted in his capacity as military commander with authority and control of the MLC troops who committed the crimes. The verdict was the first to punish rape and other sexual violence as a means of warfare. The sentence will be delivered at a later point of time. The judgement may be subject to appeal.

Republic of Congo

President Sassou Nguesso wins re-election

On 24 March 2016, the minister of interior informed that long-term office holder Sassou Nguesso won the election held on 23 March with around 60 percent of votes cast. Opposition leader Guy-Brice Parfait Kolelas came second (15 percent), followed by retired General Jean-Marie Mokoko (14 percent). Kolelas, Mokoko and several more candidates made accusations of electoral manipulations in a joint protest call and demanded a recount of votes. They called for peaceful protests and civil disobedience. To allow Mr Nguesso's re-election, both the 70-year age limit and the two-term barrier for presidents were removed by a constitutional change approved by a referendum in October 2015, which had been boycotted by government opponents.

Serbia

Radovan Karadzic sentenced to 40 years by UN tribunal

On 24 March 2016, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) convicted Radovan Karadzic, 70-year old founder and first president of Republika Srpska (Bosnia) and sentenced him to 40 years imprisonment for the genocide in Srebrenica and other crimes. Former general Ratko Mladić, Commander-in-chief of the Bosnian-Serb forces who massacred some 7,000 Bosnian Muslims, is facing verdict next year.

Vojislav Šešelj acquitted by UN tribunal

On 31 March 2016, the leader of the Serb Radical Party SRS Vojislav Šešelj was acquitted by the tribunal on all charges for lack of evidence. He was a close confidant of former head of state Slobodan Milosevic and an advocate of greater Serbian nationalism. He had to take responsibility for the killing and expulsion of Croats and Muslims during the wars in Croatia (1991-95) and in Bosnia (1992-95).

The acquittal is considered a defeat for the legal reconditioning of war crimes. There are also concerns that nationalist forces will now have a new impetus.

Early elections

Early elections have been set for 24 March 2016. Regardless of his comfortable majority in parliament, Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic (Serbian Progressive Party – SNS) is striving for a new mandate to accomplish Serbia's EU accession and to finish the necessary reforms after two years in office. Some critics accuse him of merely trying to extend his power. At present, a new election victory of SNS is deemed to be certain. Opposition parties are considering the new elections unnecessary and unfair, saying that governing authorities have oppressed criticism and public control at all levels and are not even shying away from censorship (see BN of 18 January and 21 March 2016).

Protests against NATO agreement

On 27 March 2016, more than 6,000 people took to the streets in protest against Serbia's cooperation with NATO. The agreement came into force in the beginning of March. Among others, it includes joint military manoeuvres. Prime Minister Vucic says that Serbia has no plans for NATO membership, but instead wants to maintain military neutrality. Recent surveys show that 80 percent of the population are against cooperation with NATO, while public support for EU accession has meanwhile dropped below 50 percent. At the same time, the number of citizens with a positive attitude towards Russia has increased in recent years.

Kosovo

Bomb attack at sports hall ahead of Serbian Prime Minister's visit

In the night of 4 April 2016, a bomb attack was launched at a sports hall in Zubin Potok, hours before Serbia's Prime Minister arrived in the town to hold an election rally there. Nobody was injured in the incident. Kosovo-Serbs are entitled to vote in the early elections held in Serbia.

FYR Macedonia

Border to Greece will remain closed until the end of the year

On 26 March 2016, the Macedonian parliament decided to keep the country's borders closed at least until the end of the year in order to prevent the transit of refugees. At the same time, the state of emergency was extended which allows the deployment of the military at the borders. The southern border to Greece is sealed off since February.

Ukraine

New mobilisation drive

On 22 March 2016, President Poroshenko announced a new mobilization effort to call up some 10,000 soldiers. At the same time, volunteers are to be recruited for military service for a monthly salary of 7,000 hryvnia (approx. 240 Euro), well above the minimum wage of around 1,400 hryvnia. The new fighters are to replace some of the 45,000 soldiers who have served on the frontline in Eastern Ukraine for more than a year now. So far this year, already around 13,000 people are said to have volunteered for the army. The government is planning to build a professional army.

Azerbaijan/Armenia

Fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh claims many casualties

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the Southern Caucasus has escalated again. At least 30 soldiers have lost their lives in the heaviest clashes since the ceasefire of 1994. Armenian sources put the death toll at 18, Azerbaijan says 12 of its soldiers were killed. Apparently, also civilians have been injured and killed. Both sides have claimed that the enemy's losses were far more serious. The two former Soviet republics blame each other for the outbreak of fighting which started on 1 April 2016 with the use of rockets, artillery and tanks. On 3 April, Azerbaijan declared a unilateral ceasefire.

Background

Nagorno-Karabakh is inhabited almost exclusively by Armenians, but belongs to Azerbaijan under international law. After an armed conflict lasting three years (1991-1994) with a death toll of tens of thousands, the local Armenians asserted themselves against Azerbaijan with the assistance of the Republic of Armenia and Russia. In 1994, a ceasefire was agreed, with a de facto separation of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan. The 'Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh', which is not recognised by international law, considers itself an independent state and has a parliament, a government and a president. The country can survive only with Armenian economic and military support. Years of negotiations for a settlement of the conflict have brought about no substantial progress.

Bangladesh

Christian convert murdered

On 22 March 2016, a Muslim who had converted to Christianity in 1999, was murdered on the streets of the northern town of Kurigram. Immediately afterwards, the attackers detonated a Molotov cocktail to create panic. Police believe that the murder was religiously motivated. In social networks, ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attack. In the last six months, several attacks have been carried out targeting religious minorities, secular bloggers and foreigners. Six individuals were killed and more than 100 injured in the incidents. In the previous week, a Shiite priest was stabbed to death, probably by Islamic State supporters. In January, a Hindu priest had suffered the same fate.

Regional elections marred by unrest

On 23 March 2016, regional elections were marred by violence in several parts of the country, claiming at least ten lives.

Vietnam

Tran Dai Quang sworn in as President

On 2 April 2016, Vietnam's National Assembly approved Tran Dai Quang as the country's new president. He had been the only candidate nominated at the communist party's 12th National Party Congress in January.

Prison sentence for civil rights campaigner

On 23 March 2016, the prominent blogger and civil rights activist Nguyen Huu Vinh was sentenced to five years in prison for abusing democratic freedoms to harm the interests of the state. His assistant Nguyen Thi Minh Thuy was handed down a three-year prison sentence.

Colombia

Peace negotiations with rebel groups

Peace negotiations have been prolonged with the major rebel group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). Originally, a deadline had been set to 23 March 2016 to sign a formal peace treaty. However, no agreement reached was on several issues including the disarmament of FARC fighters.

On 30 March 2016, the government and the second largest rebel group Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) agreed to start formal peace negotiations after two years of informal talks held in Caracas (Venezuela). No information was given regarding the starting date for negotiations.