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Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

18 November 2019

Afghanistan

Exchange of prisoners

On 12.11.19 the Afghan government announced an exchange of prisoners between the Taliban and the USA. Two professors from the American University in Kabul who were kidnapped in 2016 (cf. BN of 08.08.16) are to be exchanged for three high-ranking Taliban members. One of the Taliban members is reportedly Anas Haqqani, the younger brother of the leader of the Haqqani network and deputy leader of the Taliban, Sirajuddin Haqqani. Anas Haqqani has been sentenced to death. The two others, Haji Mali Khan and Hafiz Rashid, are also members of the Haqqani network which is allied with the Taliban.

Interior ministry employees shot dead by Taliban

On 12.11.19 Taliban attacked the village of Iskan in the Jurm district of the north-eastern province of Badakhshan. They attacked two employees of the Afghan interior ministry (MOI) who were on holiday there with their families. The two men were executed in front of the villagers. Six other MOI employees were able to escape. According to information from the villagers, Taliban commander Qari Shamsullah was responsible for the attack.

Attack in Kabul

At least twelve people, for the most part civilians, died when a car bomb exploded on 13.11.19. The attack occurred near to Fahim Street, in the 15th police precinct (Qasaba). It is suspected that the attack was aimed at vehicles belonging to a Canadian security firm. No-one has claimed responsibility for the attack so far.

Algeria

Berber activists convicted

28 people received fines and prison terms on 11.11.19 for carrying the flag of the Amazigh, a Berber minority in the north of Algeria, at demonstrations. The court affirmed the charge of undermining national integrity. Sentencing for 20 other people was adjourned. A different court has released five people who were taken into custody on the same charges.

The demonstrations have gained momentum in recent weeks because people are not content with the changes which have taken place to date. In the demonstrators' view, the present interim government and the candidates for the presidential election on 12.12.19 are former members of the old elite. They are calling for the elections to be postponed until new candidates are presented. Army chief Ghaid has tightened security measures in recent weeks, restricted traffic connections in the direction of the capital and threatened to take tougher action against the demonstrators. The number of arrests is also reported to have risen in recent weeks.

Belarus

Results of the early parliamentary elections

According to initial media reports, not a single opposition candidate was elected to the Belarusian parliament in the early parliamentary elections on 17.11.19. All 110 members of parliament reportedly belong to parties which are loyal to Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko. Two opposition candidates entered the House of Representatives following the last parliamentary election in September 2016. They were not allowed to run in this year's parliamentary elections, however. As in the case of all elections held to date, international observers again classified the present parliamentary election as neither free nor fair. President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in office since 1994, rules along authoritarian lines, exercising executive power by means of presidential decrees.

Benin

Laws on elections and political parties signed off

On 15.11.19 president Patrice Talon signed the bills passed by parliament on elections and political parties. The legislation includes provisions for the introduction of the office of vice-president and for the number of seats in parliament to be raised from 83 to 109, 24 of which are reserved for women. Rules pertaining to participation in parliamentary elections remain in force, including financial requirements on parties. These rules were introduced prior to the parliamentary elections in April 2019. To all intents and purposes, this excluded the opposition from the elections.

Bolivia

Violent protests after interim president takes up office

Bolivia has witnessed violent protests leading to deaths and injuries since the resignation of president Evo Morales (cf. BN of 11.11.19) Nine people have reportedly died near Cochabamba alone - one of Morales' strongholds.

The crisis was sparked by the controversial presidential election of 20 October 2019, in which Morales - Bolivia's first indigenous head of state - claimed victory. The opposition spoke of fraud, however, and was backed up by the security forces. Following Morales' resignation, the senator and opposition politician Jeanine Añez declared herself interim president. The supporters of the two camps have since been at loggerheads. Morales, who is currently in Mexico, is accusing Añez of having staged a coup, while she is threatening him with legal proceedings on corruption charges, should he return to his native country.

China

Xinjiang: Forced labour in the cotton and textiles industry

Various reports indicate a likelihood that forced labour is being used to a certain extent in the manufacture of cotton products in Xinjiang, some of which are traded internationally. Production facilities of various sectors, including the textile industry, are reportedly affiliated to the re-education camps in which, according to various sources, around one to one and a half million people - primarily members of Muslim minorities - are imprisoned. Inmates of these camps are allegedly being forced to work in these production facilities. People are also being released from the camps on an unknown scale to work in factories, including plants belonging to the cotton and textile industry, which are presently being built in large numbers in the region. Observers describe the working conditions there as forced labour. China accounts for some 22 % of the worldwide cotton output, of which around 84 % originated from Xinjiang in 2018.

Xinjiang: Internal documents

According to internal documents of the Chinese government which recently became known, president Xi Jinping called for tough action against extremist activities among the Uighur minority in a speech before party officials back in 2014. The speech was held during Xi Jinping's first and only visit to Xinjiang. Attacks by

Uighur extremists were prevalent at the time. The documents do not indicate any express order by the president to set up re-education camps.

Hong Kong: Protests

Violent clashes between students and the police occurred at the Chinese University on the night of 12.11.19, subsequently spreading to other areas of Hong Kong. The following days witnessed the most violent clashes since the protests began in June 2019. These clashes continued from 16. to 18.11.19. Focal points of the confrontation were several universities where students barricaded themselves in. The police were attacked with incendiaries and with bows and arrows. They threatened to use live ammunition if attacks using life-endangering weapons continued. On 18.11.19 the police attempted to storm the polytechnic, which had been occupied by students, but they were stopped by incendiaries. Joshua Wong, a well-known representative of Hong Kong's democracy movement, defended the protesters' use of violence.

An unknown number of people were arrested and a number of injured people were taken to hospital. A man who was hit on the head by a paving stone during clashes between demonstrators and residents died of his injuries on 13.11.19. The authorities ordered teaching at schools and child care at all nursery schools in the special administrative region to be suspended on 14.11.19. The facilities were to remain open, however. Several universities ended teaching for the current term prematurely. Chinese soldiers stationed in Hong Kong left their barracks for the first time on 16.11.19, in order to take part in clearing-up operations. Their deployment caused a stir, as there is a fear in Hong Kong that China could deploy its more than 10,000 soldiers stationed there to crush the protests by force.

On 18.11.19 Hong Kong's supreme court annulled the ban on face coverings which was imposed at the beginning of October.

DR Congo

ADF rebels kill civilians

According to official information, rebels belonging to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) killed at least 15 civilians in the village of Mbau (eastern province of North Kivu, Beni region) and its surrounding area on the night of 15.11.19. They reportedly killed over 40 civilians in the preceding week, according to civil activists. The attacks are seen as reprisals for the offensive launched by the army on 30.10.19 with the aim of driving the ADF - an Islamist group originating from Uganda - out of the woodland close to the Ugandan border.

Georgia

Opposition demonstrations in Tbilisi

On 17.11.19 some 20,000 demonstrators in the capital, Tbilisi, called for the government to step down and fresh elections to be held. The anti-government demonstrators came together to protest against a failed reform of electoral law, locking the gates to the parliamentary building. The opposition parties had called on people to protest. The interior ministry stated that any attempt to storm or blockade public buildings would be prevented. No violent clashes occurred, however.

Protests against the government first occurred back in the summer of 2019. To appease its opponents, the ruling Georgian Dream party promised a reform of electoral law which would see the composition of parliament determined entirely by proportional representation, with no election threshold. This reform was supposed to be implemented in time for the planned parliamentary elections in 2020. To date, numerous seats have been allocated by way of direct mandates, which the opposition sees as favouring the ruling party. The reform of electoral law failed to gain the necessary majority in a vote held in the Georgian parliament on 14.11.19, however, as a number of MPs from the ruling party voted against it.

Iraq

Protests

Protests continue in Iraq. At least 320 people have reportedly been killed and more than 15,000 injured in Baghdad since the protests began on 01.10.19. An unknown number of people are said to have been arrested. Internet access remains restricted.

Syrian refugees

IOM reports that a total of 15,842 people crossed the border into Iraq between 14.10.19 and 17.11.19. All new arrivals are currently being bussed to the Bardarash camp in Ninive province. The refugees are being sheltered at the camps in Bardarash, Domiz and Gawilan.

Iran

Protests against increase in petrol prices

The state news agency, IRNA, has reported disturbances in several Iranian cities on the night of 15.11.19, following the rationing of petrol and an increase in petrol prices. Under the rationing, 60 litres of petrol are to be allowed per car per month, at a price of 15,000 rials (just under 12 cents) per litre. Those with higher levels of consumption are to pay 30,000 rials per litre beyond this limit. The price of a litre of petrol previously stood at 10,000 rials.

The resultant additional income for the government is to be paid out as financial support to people in need. According to Iranian government spokesman Ali Rabiee, 60 million people – almost two thirds of the Iranian population – are now reliant on state support.

The towns and cities of Ghom, Karaj, Ilam, Khorramabad, Shiraz, Gorgan, Sanandaj, Doroud, Ghazvin, Mehdishahr, Garmsar und Shahroud were cited as places in which disturbances broke out. Farsi-language foreign media also reported protests in Mashhad, Ahvaz, Teheran, Urmia and Isfahan and widespread road blocks. The government saw itself compelled to shut down the internet. The measure was limited to 24 hours. While most of the protests ended without any major incidents, clashes with police units occurred in several cities. One person was reportedly killed and dozens injured in the disturbances.

Planned censorship of school books comes in for criticism

Iran intends to remove various works by famous poets and authors from the school curriculum. Critics warn of an ideological cleansing of the curriculum, while those responsible consider the texts concerned to be irreconcilable with the Islamic Republic's fundamental values. Among the works to be removed is the first ever novel by a female Iranian writer: "Savushun" ("Mourners of Siyâvash") by Simin Daneshvar. The short story "Her eyes" by the famous author Bozorg Alavi is also to be removed. Alavi was a co-founder of the Marxist-Leninist Tudeh party in Iran and also held an assistant professor's post at Berlin's Humboldt University. Works by the renowned poet Iraj Mirza will also be missing from school books in future. Mirza criticised traditions in his works and was a proponent of emancipation. In contrast, the so-called "literature of resistance" ('resistance' relates in this context to Iran's anti-Western and anti-Israeli activities) and the topic of martyrdom are acquiring an ever more central role in Iranian school books.

Substantial increase in child marriages in the province of East Azerbaijan

The province in north-western Iran has the second-highest rate of child marriages nationwide. According to the deputy director of the Behzisti state welfare association in the province of East Azerbaijan, Fargol Sahaf, the brides in some 12,500 out of a total of around 29,800 marriages in 2018 were under age. The deputy director stated that 1,266 marriages involving minor males were registered in the same period. According to Sahaf, 7 % of the marriages registered in 2009 were so-called child marriages. The corresponding figure for 2019 to date stands at 11 %. The highest number of child marriages applies in the province of Zanjan (north-west Iran). According to information from the province's vice-governor, 1,400 children under the age of 14 were married there in 2018, while the nationwide total stood at 37,000. Iran signed up to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, but with the proviso that Islamic law was to take precedence. Section 1014 of the Islamic Civil Code permits parents to marry off girls from the age of 13 and boys from the age of 15. Parents of girls aged under 13 can have a judge affirm that their daughters are of "marriageable maturity".

Unrest in south-western Iran following death of a poet

The sudden death of dissident poet and cultural activist Hassan Heydari has sparked serious unrest in south-western Iran and speculation on the networks. 29 year-old Heydari belonged to the country's Arab minority, which makes up around one third of the population in Iran's south-western province of Khuzestan. Heydari's works address the poor situation of the people in the region and criticise the regime's politics. They are well received by the discontent strata of society in the region. Heydari was not permitted to publish in Iran. He was arrested on account of his poems critical of the regime in 2018. He was released on bail until the set date for his trial, however. Heydari died in a hospital in Ahvaz on 10.11.19. According to the official version, he had suffered a stroke at his family's home on the day before. Heydar's protesting supporters believe that the poet was killed by poisoning. The poet's body was buried without an autopsy on 11.11.19.

UN resolution criticises human rights situation in Iran

The Third Committee of the UN General Assembly passed a resolution on 14.11.19 condemning the increase in executions and torture in Iran. The resolution is based on the reports by Javid Rahman, the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran. In his reports, Rahman has expressed concern over executions of juveniles and the increasing pressure on minorities in Iran. Iran's deputy ambassador, Eshaq Alle-Habib, promptly rejected the critical UN resolution, describing it as hypocritical.

Israel / Palestinian territories

Gaza Strip: Two days of air raids and rocket attacks

On the night of 11.11.19 the Israeli security forces reported the targeted killing of Baha Abu al-Atta in the Gaza Strip. The high-ranking member of Islamic Jihad (IJ) was the leader of the Quds Force and is believed to have trained several commandos in penetrating into Israel.

The Islamic militia responded by subjecting Israel to massive rocket fire. The Israeli forces subsequently attacked dozens of targets in the Gaza Strip. A ceasefire eventually took place on the afternoon of 14.11.19, which has since only been broken by isolated rockets from the Gaza Strip. Around 450 rockets were fired at Israel. The country's missile defence system (Iron Dome) is believed to have intercepted up to 90 % of these rockets.

34 Palestinians died under Israeli bombardment of positions in the Gaza Strip. The health ministry in Gaza has documented 16 civilians among the dead.

Notably, the violence only occurred between Israel and IJ. The dominant group in the Gaza Strip, Hamas, did not participate in the fighting, but expressed its solidarity with IJ. In the recent months of relative peace, Hamas has benefited from a peaceful border and the import of large sums of cash from Qatar, which the Israelis are permitting in exchange for Hamas laying down its arms.

Jordan

Refugee figures

According to the UNHCR, a total of 745,192 refugees were registered in Jordan as per 15.11.19, including 67,225 Iraqi refugees.

Lebanon

Ex-finance minister withdraws candidacy for prime minister's office

On 17.11.19 the former finance minister, Mohammad Safada, withdrew his candidacy for the office of Lebanon's prime minister. Safadi had only been appointed as a compromise candidate to succeed the present Sunni prime minister and politician Saad al-Hariri on 14.11.19, following an agreement with the Shiite Hezbollah and Amal groups. He stated that he had decided against running because it would be difficult to form a harmonious government which was supported by all political sides.

Protests following death of a demonstrator

Following the death of a demonstrator in the protests on 12.11.19, demonstrators blocked the roads in the capital, Beirut, and roads linking the capital with the surrounding area on 13.11.19. The protests broke out around a month ago, sparked by the widespread corruption in the country and its poor economic situation.

Moldova

Reform government fails

The pro-European head of the government, Maia Sandu, was ousted by a vote of no confidence on 12.11.19. This marks the failure of the government comprising the pro-Western ACUM alliance and the pro-Russian Socialist Party (PSRM) after only five months. Sandu's coalition partner, PSRM, withdrew its support for her. The rift resulted from a row over the filling of the post of director of public prosecutions. The vote of no confidence was supported by the Democratic Party (PDM) led by oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, whose removal was the original reason for the unusual coalition between PSRM and ACUM (cf. BN of 01.07.19). Parliament has since approved a minority PSRM government under president Igor Dodon, with independent former finance minister Ion Chicu as prime minister.

The alliance between the different camps was considered fragile from the outset. Relations within the coalition deteriorated markedly after the PSRM put in a better showing in the local government elections in October 2019 and its candidate for the mayor's office in Chisinau defeated ACUM's candidate, Andrei Nastase. Campaigning for the elections was conducted rigorously and drove a wedge between the two ideologically disparate governing parties. Sandu represents the anti-corruption ACUM alliance, which arose from a civil protest movement in 2014/2015 and which champions close ties with the EU. The socialists derive from the post-Soviet political establishment and maintain close relations with Russia.

Many observers now expect the Republic of Moldova to distance itself from the EU once again and move closer to Russia. The EU has expressed concern over whether Moldova will continue its urgently needed reforms. As recently as October, the EU approved additional funds to support the government in pursuing the urgently needed reforms (cf. BN of 28.10.19).

Nigeria

Violent action against supporters of Sowore

On 12.11.19 members of the DSS state security service deployed tear gas and shot at peaceful demonstrators who were protesting outside the DSS headquarters in Abuja for the immediate release of Omoyele Sowore, who is imprisoned at the headquarters. Sowore is a human rights activist, founder of the Nigerian online news portal Sahara Reporters, and was the presidential candidate of the AAC party – African Action Congress – in the election in February 2019. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that there are online video recordings showing protesters running away while shots are to be heard in the background. A number of protesters, including several journalists, were beaten by members of the DSS. The security services deny having shot at the demonstrators. Sowore was arrested by the DSS on 03.08.19 after calling for nationwide protest demonstrations against the government on 05.08.19 under the hashtag #RevolutionNow and describing the presidential election of February 2019 as implausible. On 20.09.19 the public prosecutor's office brought charges against Sowore on seven points, including treason, embezzlement and cyber-stalking of president Buhari. A judge ruled that Sowore should be released on bail at the end of September 2019, but the DDS failed to comply. On 06.11.19 another judge again ruled that Sowore should be released, the conditions for bail having been met. The DSS claims that his release did not take place because his bailors did not collect him from custody. Sowore's camp claims that this did not form part of the bail conditions, however. According to HRW, Sowore's arrest represents just one of numerous recent arrests of journalists and activists, which it sees as indicating a trend towards the increasing suppression of freedom of speech.

Pakistan

Nationwide protests

The demonstrations led by the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party under the leadership of Fazal-ur-Rehman (JUI-F) against the government have continued for two weeks at a protest camp in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. On 13.11.19, supporters began blocking sections of road as part of a previously announced second phase of the protest. They are calling for the resignation of prime minister Imran Khan from the Tehreek-e-Insaf party (PTI) and fresh elections (cf. BN of 04.11.09).

Sri Lanka

Elections

Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the presidential election of 16.11.19. According to varying media reports, Gotabaya Rajapaksa won between 49.6 and 52.3 % of the vote. Sajith Premadasa, the candidate of the incumbent ruling United National Party (UNP), won between 42 and 44.4 % of the vote. The majority of his support came from Tamil and Muslim minorities. In his election campaign the winning candidate, Rajapaksa, focused in particular on shortcomings in measures to prevent terrorism, advocated bolstering the security apparatus and pushed for a solution to the problem of extremism in Sri Lanka. He enjoys the support of the Buddhist Sinhalese majority. Turnout was in the order of 84 %. Rajapaksa is to be sworn in on 18.11.19. 80 election monitors from the European Union oversaw the ballot in Sri Lanka. Violent incidents occurred on 16.11.19 when unknown attackers shot at buses carrying Muslim voters. The defeated candidate, Premadasa, urged Rajapaksa not to take any reprisals against political opponents.

Syria

Turkish-Russian accord implemented

Under the terms of the Turkish-Russian accord, the territory between the towns of Jawadiyah (Çil Axa) and Malikiyah (Dêrika Hemko) is to be controlled by the Syrian army. Syrian army units took up their positions at the Turkish border on 14.11.19. The soldiers are to be deployed across six outposts to protect the border.

Displaced persons in Hassakah

According to Syrian state media, more than 19,776 families have been displaced in the governorate of Hassakah since the Turkish offensive began on 09.10.19. The United Nations report that 190,000 people have been displaced throughout the whole of north-eastern Syria, including 48,134 from Hassakah, 19,471 from Raqqa and 6,778 from Aleppo. According to the UN, many of these displaced persons have taken refuge with relatives or host families, in addition to which 48 short-term shelters have been set up in Hassakah. More than 14,000 people have reportedly fled to Iraq.

Fighting in Idlib

The UN reported on 14.11.19 that bombing of the last rebel stronghold in Idlib has been stepped up once again. More than 100 air raids reportedly took place on the two days preceding the bulletin alone. At least nine people were reportedly killed in air raids on Mallaja and Saraqeb on 17.11.19.

Attack in Al-Bab

A car bomb exploded in Al-Bab, Aleppo, on 16.11.19, killing at least 18 people. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights documented 19 deaths, including 13 civilians. Al-Bab has been under the control of the Turkish military and its allied Syrian Arab militias since 2016.

On 17.11.19 the Turkish authorities announced that a Kurdish Syrian YPG fighter who is suspected of being responsible for the attack had been taken into custody. No-one has publicly claimed responsibility for the attack.

Following the announcement of the arrest, an incensed crowd outside the police station called for the suspect to be executed immediately. When the protesters attempted to enter the station by force, the security forces opened fire, killing one protester.

Tanzania/Mozambique

Six killed in attack near border with Mozambique

Six farmers were killed and seven injured in an attack in southern Tanzania in the area of the border with Mozambique on 12.11.19. The attackers escaped without being recognised. Attacks by jihadists are a regular occurrence in the region, particularly in the Mozambique province of Cabo Delgado at the border with Tanzania, and have claimed more than a hundred lives since 2017. There are major gas deposits in this area.

Tunisia

Formation of a new government

Six weeks after the parliamentary election in Tunisia, the moderate Islamist Ennahda party has nominated former undersecretary Habib Jemli for the office of prime minister. Despite massive losses, Ennahda polled the most votes in the election at the beginning of October 2019, but does not have a majority. Tunisia's new president, Kais Saied, gave Habib Jemli the formal mandate to form a government last Friday. Jemli now has two months to assemble a cabinet. Observers fear that forming a government will prove difficult, because the established parties suffered serious losses in the election and various new parties and voter communities have entered parliament.

Turkey

Mayors dismissed

According to information from the opposition, the Turkish government has dismissed 30 mayors belonging to the pro-Kurdish HDP party since the local government elections in March of this year. 24 of the elected chief town officers in the south-east of the country, which has a majority Kurd population, have reportedly been replaced by administrators loyal to the government and by successors from the AKP. According to reports from the state news agency, Anadolu, the mayors have been discharged from office on charges of membership of an armed terrorist group. Almost half of the dismissed mayors are believed to be in prison on terrorism charges on account of their ties to the PKK.

Uganda

LGBTI people arrested

Around 120 people were arrested in a raid on a bar known to belong to the LGBTI scene in the capital, Kampala, on 10.11.19. The police claim that the operation targeted suspected drug use, while critics see it as an attack on the LGBTI scene, claiming that the bar is a meeting place for LGBTI people and also serves as an advice centre on health matters.

67 people, including six women, were reportedly charged with harassment on 12.11.19 and remain in custody. The others were released. Human Rights Watch believes that 58 people are still in state custody.

Ukraine

Russia to return seized Ukrainian vessels

According to media reports on 17.11.19, Russia intends to return the three Ukrainian navy vessels on 18.11.19 which were seized in the Kerch Strait in November 2018. The vessels have already been seen being transported by tugs through the Kerch Strait to the place of handover agreed with Kiev. 24 Ukrainian seamen were also detained in November 2018. These were subsequently freed in an exchange of prisoners in September 2019. The announcement that the vessels are to be returned, which can be seen as a gesture of goodwill by Russia, came shortly after the announcement of a Ukraine summit which is planned for 09.12.19. This date has not been confirmed by the Russian side, however.

Vietnam

Prison terms for activists

On 15.11.19 a court in the province of Nghe An sentenced music teacher Nguyen Nang Tinh to eleven years in prison for criticising Vietnam's government on the internet.

On 11.11.19 a court in Ho Chi Minh City sentenced three men to prison terms of between ten and twelve years for terrorist activities. Nguyen Van Vien, Tran Van Quyen and Australian national Chau Van Kham were arrested in January 2019. They were charged with belonging to the banned opposition party Viet Tan, which is based in the United States. Vietnam classified the party as a terrorist organisation in 2016. Nguyen Van Vien is a member of the Brotherhood for Democracy, which champions human rights and which protested against the severe pollution of Vietnamese coastal waters caused by a Taiwanese company in 2016.

Yemen

Rocket attack on military base

According to information from the military, at least five people were killed and ten injured in a rocket attack on a military base in Marib province on 13.11.19. The army holds the Iran-backed Shiite Houthi rebels responsible for the attack. There has been no comment from the rebels as yet.