

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

2 March 2020

Afghanistan

Agreement signed between the U.S. and the Taliban

On 29.02.20, the U.S. and the Taliban agreed that the U.S. and its coalition partners would gradually withdraw all troops, non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security firms, trainers, advisors and other personnel from Afghanistan over the next 14 months. The agreement also provides for the release of 5,000 prisoners who are to be exchanged for about 1,000 Afghan police officers and soldiers.

In return, the Taliban have promised to provide neither support nor shelter to groups such as al-Qaeda or the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP).

Acting Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stated that the release of prisoners is part of future negotiations, but not a precondition. He said, it needed to be borne in mind that the Afghan Government had not taken part in the previous talks.

According to the U.S. government, talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government are planned to start in Oslo on 10.03.20. However, the Taliban demand that the prisoners be released first.

It remains unclear whether the phase of reduced violence (cf. BN of 17.02.20 and 24.02.20) is to continue. In the seven-day period prior to the signing of the agreement, the number of incidents had fallen by 80% and there were also significantly fewer civilian casualties.

Ghani's inauguration postponed

The inauguration of Muhammad Ashraf Ghani as President, scheduled for 27.02.20, has been postponed by two weeks. The reason for this is that his main election rival Abdullah Abdullah and others do not recognise Ghani's election (cf. BN of 24.02.20). Abdullah is saying he will set up his own government. He has already appointed his own provincial governors in his strongholds. A split in the Afghan government could jeopardise the planned negotiations with the Taliban. It is currently unclear whether a new formation of the national unity government, as the cooperation between Ghani and Abdullah was called, will take place.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnian Serb leader reiterates call for secession

According to the latest media reports, the Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, who together with Šefik Džaferović (Bosniak) and Željko Komšić (Croat) forms the state presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has once again called for the dissolution of the country or the secession of the Bosnian Serb territories and their annexation to Serbia after a meeting held with Bosnian Serb leaders. These reports say that in the West, the politician's statements are seen as a threat to the Dayton Agreement brokered by the U.S. which ended the civil war in Bosnia in 1995 and divided the country into two parts, the Republika Srpska and the Bosniak-Croat Federation. According to media reports, in February 2020, domestic tensions rose significantly following a decision by the Bosnian Constitutional Court which ruled that currently unclaimed farmland is owned by the Bosnian part of the country and not by Republika Srpska. Politicians from the Republika Srpska had given the court 60 days to reverse its decision. After a meeting with Dodik, the U.S. embassy published a post on Twitter saying that it expected full compliance with the Dayton Agreement and the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Cameroon

Results of the parliamentary elections

On 28.02.20, the Constitutional Council announced the results for 167 of a total of 180 parliamentary seats to be allocated in the parliamentary elections held on 09.02.20. The elections scheduled for 26.02.20 had been cancelled due to submissions by the Social Democratic Front (SDF) in eleven constituencies (ten in the Northwest Region and one in the Southwest Region) where 13 seats were to be allocated. A run-off election must be held within 20 to 40 days. Of the 167 parliamentary seats allocated, the ruling party Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) again won a clear majority with 139 seats (2013: 148). In second place came the National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP) with seven seats (2013: five). The number of MPs in the SDF, which until now has held 18 parliamentary seats as the largest parliamentary opposition party, was reduced to five. Since the SDF has its regional stronghold in the two Anglophone regions of Northwest and Southwest, it can be assumed that it will win a few more seats in the by-elections to be held there. The National Reconciliation Party (NRP), which has not yet been represented in the National Assembly, also won five seats and, together with the SDF, ranks third. Four smaller parties received a total of eleven seats.

China

Prison sentence for bookseller

A court in Ningbo (Zhejiang Province) sentenced the bookseller Gui Minhai to ten years imprisonment on 24.02.20 for illegally passing on intelligence overseas. Gui is one of five booksellers in Hong Kong who published and distributed politically undesirable books about China. Four of them disappeared from Hong Kong in 2015 under unexplained circumstances, Gui Minhai disappeared from his holiday home in Thailand. Observers assume that all five booksellers were taken to mainland China by Chinese agents, where they reappeared. With the exception of Gui Minhai, all of them are now at large again.

Gui was arrested again in 2018 when he was on his way to Beijing, accompanied by Swedish diplomats, to attend a medical appointment. The actions of the Chinese authorities has caused tension with Sweden, whose citizenship Gui had taken in 1996. According to the Chinese authorities, while in custody, Gui applied for his Chinese citizenship to be restored in 2018.

Hong Kong: protests

115 people were arrested on 29.02.20 in the Mong Kok district in clashes that have erupted between demonstrators and police since the Covid-19 virus began to spread.

Covid-19 continues to spread

The respiratory illness Covid-19 continues to spread. So far, 80,000 cases have been confirmed in China and more than 2,900 people have died. In total, at least 88,000 cases have been confirmed in about 60 countries on every continent except Antarctica and the death toll due to Covid 19 has reached 3,000 worldwide.

Eritrea/Ethiopia

Eritrea bars Cardinal from entering the country

A high-ranking Ethiopian Catholic delegation headed by Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel has been refused entry into Eritrea. According to church media reports, the Cardinal was detained for hours at the airport of the capital Asmara on 22.02.20 despite having a regular entry visa. He was ultimately forced to return to Addis Ababa. The church representatives had accepted an invitation extended by the Eritrean Catholic Church and wanted to participate in the celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the Archdiocese of Asmara and the construction of the Kidane Mehret Cathedral. Church sources said that the incident demonstrated how unstable the so-called peace process between Ethiopia and Eritrea is.

Although the Catholic Church is authorised in Eritrea, Catholics account for a small minority of around four percent. In April 2019, the Catholic bishops in Eritrea published an open letter in which they described violence and injustice in the country and demanded reforms to stop displacement from Eritrea. Presumably in response, the authorities closed several church-run hospitals and health centres. As a result, it is anticipated that the local

population will bear the brunt of bottlenecks in medical care.

Ethiopia

Several people killed in violent skirmishes

At least 12 people have reportedly been killed and 21 others wounded in an ethnic skirmish in the Nuer zone of the Gambella regional state of western Ethiopia. Over 7,000 people have been displaced and more than 400 houses have been burned down. According to security sources, six suspects have been arrested. The riots are said to have been triggered by the murder of a local official. No further details are known.

Three people are reported to have died in clashes that broke out in the regional state of Benishangul Gumuz in the west of the country. An official statement said that another seven people had been injured and several houses had been destroyed in the clashes which erupted in the village of Dangur in the Metekel zone.

Ethnic violence between members of different ethnic groups in recent months has resulted in hundreds of people being killed and has displaced thousands. Access to land resources is often what triggers the conflict.

Georgia

Leading opposition politician sentenced

On 10.02.20, the Supreme Court sentenced the opposition politician Gigi Ugulava who is a member of the European Georgian Party to three years and two months in prison for embezzling public funds during the time he served as mayor of the capital Tbilisi. Ugulava, mayor of Tbilisi from 2005 to 2013, had already been sentenced to four and a half years in prison for similar offences back in September 2015 for the first time, but was released early in January 2017 after a court reduced his prison sentence. Ugulava said that the sentence was primarily politically motivated.

Guinea

Parliamentary election postponed

On 01.03.20, citizens were to vote for a new parliament and a constitutional amendment that would enable President Alpha Condé, who has been in office since 2010, to run for a third term in the presidential elections planned for this year. The prospect that Condé could remain in office for a longer period of time has repeatedly fuelled sometimes violent protests in the capital since October 2019. The opposition is against a constitutional amendment and against the president serving a third term in office and was planning on boycotting the planned election.

Guinea-Bissau

Dispute over presidential office

On 25.02.20, the National Electoral Commission of Guinea-Bissau (CNE) confirmed the poll win of President Umaro Sissoco Embaló, elected in a run-off election held on 29.12.19, and granted him permission to take over the affairs of state despite facing a Supreme Court challenge from his opponent Domingos Simões Pereira, the defeated candidate of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cabo Verde (PAIGC) and a pending decision by the court. Embaló was sworn in on 27.02.20 and appointed President. The outgoing president José Mário Vaz attended the event held in a hotel lobby in Bissau and placed the president's sash over Embaló's shoulders during the ceremony. Many high-ranking dignitaries, including the Speaker of Parliament, Supreme Court Judges and most foreign diplomats stayed away from the event. "As long as the Supreme Court has not made its decision, Parliament will not recognise Embaló as the legitimate president," Armando Mango, deputy leader of Parliament said.

Despite being defeated in the presidential election, the former ruling party PAIGC, appointed Cipriano Cassamá, the leader of the parliamentary group in parliament, as President. However, Cassamá announced in

the capital Bissau on 01.03.20, that he was withdrawing his claim to the presidency in the interest of the country.

India

Riots in New Delhi last several days

Riots lasting several days broke out in the capital New Delhi on 24.02.20 during a state visit by U.S. President Donald Trump. According to media reports, Hindus targeted people they thought were Muslims. Those protesting against the new citizenship law, which discriminates against Muslims, were particularly affected. As the violence escalated over several days in Muslim neighbourhoods in the north-east around Maujpur and Jafrabad, properties were set on fire, cars were destroyed and buildings were ransacked. At least 36 people died and over 200 were injured in the four-day riots. The situation began to calm down on 27.02.20, after thousands of police officers were deployed to the scene of the riots.

The capital has not experienced violent clashes of this magnitude for decades. Similar riots occurred there in 1984 after the murder of the then incumbent Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by a member of the Sikh religious community.

Critics of the incumbent Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) compare the recent riots with the anti-Muslim violence that erupted in the western state of Gujarat in 2002.

Iran

Three men sentenced to death following November riots

According to a report issued by the Human Rights Activists News Agency (Hrana) on 22.02.20, Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced three men who participated in the protests against petrol price hikes in November 2019 to death, 38 years in prison and 222 lashes for, among other things, taking part in destruction and arson with the intent to fight the regime.

There is still no precise information available about the detainees or the death toll from the violent crackdown on the riots that erupted November 2019.

Spread of Covid-19

Iran is facing a major coronavirus outbreak and has the highest death toll after China. The capital Tehran is severely affected. There are reports that some members of parliament and ministers have contracted the disease. It is not known exactly how many people have contracted the disease. The army and Revolutionary Guards will be drafted in to help fight the epidemic.

Iraq

Government formation fails

Prime Minister-designate Mohammed Taufik Allawi failed to form a new government and resigned on 01.03.20. He did not succeed in gaining sufficient support in parliament for his proposed cabinet. According to Iraq's constitution, President Barham Salih will have to fill the post within 15 days.

Anti-government protests continue

Several clashes have reportedly occurred between demonstrators and security forces in Baghdad, resulting in deaths and injuries.

Kazakhstan

Death of human rights activist triggers protests

The human rights activist Dulat Aghadil was arrested on 24.02.20 on charges of failing to comply with a court order to report to local police and subsequently died while being held in pretrial detention. The police authority of the capital Nur-Sultan declared in a public statement issued on 25.02.20 that the activist had been intoxicated

at the time of his arrest and subsequently died of heart failure. Aghadil's friends and rights defenders, however, have questioned the explanation, saying he did not drink due to a medical condition and that he had no history of heart issues.

In the capital, dozens of demonstrators took to the streets on 25.02.20 and 26.02.20, demanding more detailed information about the activist's death and the release of human rights activists and opposition activists who are being detained. Police officers violently forced several demonstrators onto buses before whisking them away. In Qaraghandy, police arrested at least one person during one such demonstration on 26.02.20. On the same day in the cities of Almaty, Shymkent and Aqtobe, dozens rallied, demanding dissolution of the government over the activist's death and the resignation of ex-President Nursultan Nazarbaev. Following the activist's funeral on 27.02.20, dozens of Aghadil supporters in Nur-Sultan called for the establishment of an independent commission to investigate the activist's death. Police officers violently disbanded the rally and arrested about 20 people. On 01.03.20, security forces arrested dozens of people in connection with the protests.

Mauritania

Members of the AREM movement arrested

During an unauthorised meeting held in Nouakchott on 26.02.20, seven members of the Alliance for the Re-foundation of the Mauritanian State (AREM) were arrested on charges of disregarding the Islamic religion and terrorism. Shortly before, a warrant had been issued for the arrest of three members, who were abroad, on charges of cybercrime. In an audio recording of a conversation that aired on social media, they had ridiculed Islamic teachings.

The movement, which was founded in Paris in early 2020, promotes good governance and fights against injustice and impunity. Its members are suspected of supporting secularism in the country. Some are accused of preaching Christianity.

Montenegro

Feud between drug gangs

According to recent media reports, 37 people have already died in the feud between two rival groups which began in the coastal town of Herceg Novi. On 13.02.20, a 36-year-old gang member was shot dead in Herceg Novi. The reports claim that organised crime in Montenegro still has its deep roots in former Yugoslavia. While it was still part of Yugoslavia, Montenegro was used as a hub for illegal cigarette and drugs smuggling.

Nigeria

Detained IMN members released

On 21.02.20, according to various sources, the Federal High Court in Kaduna acquitted between 87 and 100 members of the Shiite sect Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) of charges including murder, conspiracy and disturbance of the peace, for lack of evidence. They were subsequently released. According to the IMN, all members of the movement who were arrested in connection with the incidents of December 2015 are now free again. On 12.12.15, an IMN procession in Zaria, Kaduna State, blocked the path of a military convoy of the army chief of staff, Lieutenant General Tukur Buratai. The soldiers suspected an assassination attempt. According to the results of the appointed commission of inquiry, a total of 348 civilians, mostly IMN supporters, and one soldier were killed during the counter-offensive because the army used excessive force. IMN leader Ibrahim el-Zakzaky, his wife and more than 200 IMN supporters were arrested. While over a hundred of the arrested IMN supporters were acquitted by the court in 2019, el-Zakzaky and his wife Zeenat, whose trial is still pending, remain in custody. The IMN was banned as a terrorist organisation in Nigeria at the end of July 2019.

Russian Federation

Rallies to commemorate the assassination of Boris Nemtsov

On 29.02.20, during rallies held in several cities across the country, thousands of people commemorated the assassination of the regime critic Boris Nemtsov, who was shot dead in the centre of Moscow five years ago. The demonstrators called on authorities to find the mastermind behind the crime. At the same time, protests formed against the constitutional reform planned by President Vladimir Putin, on which a referendum is to be held on 22.04.20. Critics see it as a strategy on the part of Putin to retain power. According to police, more than 10,000 people gathered at the authorised rally in Moscow. In Vladivostok, eight people were arrested at a rally. The non-governmental organisation OVD-Info reported arrests in St. Petersburg, Moscow and other cities in connection with the rallies.

In 2017, a court sentenced a former Chechen officer to 20 years in prison for the murder of Nemtsov; four other Chechens were sentenced to between 11 and 19 years in prison for complicity in the murder. On 20.02.20, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) released a report calling for a new and full investigation into the crime.

Somalia

Violent fighting in Galgaduud

On 29.02.20, the militia group Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama'a (ASWJ) is reported to have surrendered to the Somali government following two days of clashes in the cities of Dhusamareb and Guriel (Galgaduud region), in which several people were reportedly killed.

ASWJ has played a key role in the fight against al-Shabaab and was to be integrated into the state security forces. However, the presidential elections in Galmudug state in early 2020 have led to tensions, with three rival politicians claiming to have won the election, including a representative of ASWJ. With the capitulation, however, the ASWJ also gave up its political aspirations.

AFRICOM mission leads to civilian deaths

On 24.02.20, the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) carried out an air strike against a suspected al-Shabaab fighter near Jilib in the Middle Juba region. According to his employer, Hormuud Telecom (a major telecommunications company in Somalia), and his family, the deceased had no links to al-Shabaab but was in charge of the Hormuud branch in Jilib. AFRICOM has stated that it will investigate the incident. In recent years, the U.S. has only admitted to the deaths of two civilians during AFRICOM operations, while Amnesty International (AI) has put the figure much higher.

Syria

Idlib: numerous Turkish soldiers killed

An air strike carried out in Idlib on 27.02.20 killed at least 36 Turkish army soldiers and injured more than 30 others. Representatives of the Turkish government blamed the Syrian army for the attack. Coordination between Turkey and Russia, which is acting as protector of the Syrian government's forces, should normally prevent such incidents by communicating Turkish movements in advance. However, a Kremlin spokesperson indicated that Turkish soldiers were outside their observation posts, which Russia had promised to keep out of the line of fire.

The air strike occurred between the towns of al-Bara and Balyoun, south of the provincial capital Idlib.

Russian state media reported Turkish retaliatory strikes against Syrian military positions and allied militias, as well as against Russian military helicopter gunships. According to the Turkish military, 309 Syrian regime soldiers were killed in the retaliatory attacks. The Syrian government confirmed that two of its fighter jets had been shot down by Turkey.

Turkish counter-offensive

On 01.03.20, Turkey for the first time spoke openly of a war against the Syrian government, when the Defence Minister announced a major counter-offensive on Turkish state television. The aim of the operation in northern Syria was to end the war and the Syrian government's offensive against the last rebel-held area in the province of Idlib. At present, there are around 7,000 Turkish troops in Idlib, most of whom were sent to the region in February 2020.

In response to the announcement of the counter-offensive, Moscow announced that it would not be able to guarantee the safety of Turkish aircraft over Syria.

NATO ruled out sending troops but announced that it would support its Turkish partners with information logistics.

The population in the affected province of Idlib is currently estimated at around three million people. About half have come from other parts of Syria, many under so-called reconciliation agreements after the Syrian government gained control over former rebel-held, allowing remaining rebels as well as civilians to flee to Idlib. It is estimated that there are approximately 100,000 armed fighters among those who have fled to Idlib.

Togo

Demonstration banned

The authorities banned a demonstration planned for 28.02.20 by the former Archbishop of Lomé, Philippe Kpodzro, against the result of the presidential elections of 22.02.20. When demonstrators still turned up, the police violently blocked the demonstration.

Tunisia

Parliament accepts government

After months of failed attempts to form a new cabinet, Tunisia's parliament has expressed its confidence in the proposed government. The Tunisian news agency TAP reported that on 27.02.20, 129 MPs voted in favour of the government of Prime Minister-designate Elyes Fakhfakh, with 77 MPs voting against it. This averted the threat of new elections. The Ennahda party, which is considered moderately Islamist and became the strongest force in the election, has been awarded six of the 30 ministerial posts. The cabinet consists of 32 ministers and state secretaries, while only six members of the government are women. At a ceremony held at the presidential palace, Tunisian President Kais Saied took the oath of office from the new head of government and his ministers.

Tunisia elected a new parliament in October 2019. Numerous new parties and independent lists entered parliament, making it difficult to form a government. Prior to the new cabinet announcement, a cabinet of independent technocrats formed by Prime Minister Habib Jemli was clearly rejected.

Turkey

Opening of borders for refugees

After an air raid was carried out on Turkish soldiers in the northern Syrian province of Idlib on 27.02.20, which, according to Turkish sources, claimed the lives of at least 33 soldiers, Turkey demanded assistance from NATO and the international community. At the same time, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan threatened to open the borders to the EU to the refugees in the country. On 28.02.20, the border was opened. Erdoğan declared that his country could no longer handle the numbers fleeing and that Europe had broken its promises to support Turkey. According to media reports, since it was announced that the borders would be opened, thousands of people have already been trying to reach western Europe. According to the UN, there are approximately 13,000 migrants in the Turkish-Greek border area, but Greece is relying on border security. The EU border protection agency Frontex believes that the situation there could worsen in the coming days. Greece also announced that it would not accept any new asylum applications for one month. According to media reports, the situation at Bulgaria's external EU border with Turkey remained calm on 01.03.20. Bulgaria's head of government, Boiko Borisov, will travel to Ankara today to discuss the situation.

Turkmenistan

On 17.02.20, a court in the Dashoguz region sentenced a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses to two years in prison for conscientious objection to military service. Turkmenistan does not offer the option of alternative

civilian service. In recent years, members of the Jehovah's Witnesses who have evaded military service have repeatedly been sentenced to prison terms in state labour camps.

Yemen

Houthi rebels take control in al-Hazm

The Houthi rebels seized the city of al-Hazm, the capital of the northern province of al-Jawf, from the Yemeni government on 01.03.20. The city is of strategic importance because of its proximity to Marib, a hitherto relatively peaceful area under government control. The occupation of al-Hazm took place after weeks of fighting in the area.

Relief organisations threaten to suspend humanitarian aid

Both the UN and USAID have warned that humanitarian aid in the Houthi areas could soon be suspended if the Houthi rebels continue to interfere in the distribution of aid. They are accused of abusing aid programmes for their own benefit. Most people in Yemen live in areas controlled by the Houthi rebels. The UN considers the situation in Yemen to be the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, with an estimated 80 percent of the population requiring some form of humanitarian assistance.

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