



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

18 May 2020

Afghanistan

Hostilities, attacks, civilian casualties

An analysis of confirmed reports of security incidents by the New York Times has revealed that 128 government forces and 92 civilians have died in May 2020 (as per 14.05.20). In addition to direct military clashes, attacks are a regular occurrence, as illustrated by the following examples:

On 12.05.20 three men in police uniform who were armed with rifles and hand grenades attacked a maternity hospital in the western district of Dashte Barchi in Kabul. According to varying reports, between 24 and 40 people were killed and at least 19 injured. The victims included new-born babies, mothers and nurses. No-one has claimed responsibility for the attack to date. The Taliban have distanced themselves from the crime. The fact that the Dashte Barchi district has a majority Shiite Hazara population and The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) has previously carried out various attacks on Shiites/Hazara there point to ISKP at being behind the atrocity.

Also on 12.05.20, a suicide bomber blew himself up during the funeral of a police commander in Kuzkunar district (Chewa) in the eastern province of Nangarhar, killing at least 32 people and injuring at least 130. ISKP, which suffered serious losses in the province last year and has been largely driven out of Nangarhar, has claimed responsibility for this attack.

Although the Taliban were probably not responsible for the attacks of 12.05.20, president Ashraf Ghani declared on the same day that the Afghan military was switching from a “defensive mode” to an offensive stance.

A further serious attack took place in the eastern province of Paktia on 14.05.20. A car bomb exploded outside a military courthouse in the provincial capital, Gardez, killing at least five people and injuring at least 24. The Taliban have claimed responsibility for the attack.

At least seven people were killed and 40 injured in a Taliban suicide attack on a secret service building in the south-eastern province of Ghazni on the morning of 18.05.20. The majority of the victims were secret service staff.

Government crisis ended

President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah reached an agreement on cooperation and power sharing on 17.05.20, eight months after the presidential election and three months after the result of the election was announced. The agreement followed massive pressure from the USA. Abdullah had refused to accept the election result, instead having his supporters declare him president at the same time as Ghani. Abdullah’s camp is now to take up half of the ministerial posts and Abdullah is to head the peace talks with the Taliban.

COVID-19 pandemic

The United Nations (UN) expects the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 to continue rising. Kabul still has the highest number of cases, followed by Herat, Kandahar and Balkh. Relief organisations are training medical personnel and providing medical equipment.

The nationwide travel restrictions are to remain in force until 24.05.20 at least. Domestic air travel also remains suspended on the whole, apart from flights from Kabul to Herat, Mazar-e Sharif and Kandahar which the Afghan company Kam Air has been offering on specific days since 07.05.20.

Bangladesh/Myanmar

COVID-19 pandemic

According to official information released on 14.05.20, the first Rohingya has tested positive for coronavirus in Kutupalong, the world's largest refugee camp, as has a native resident of the Cox's Bazar district. According to the Red Cross, some 900,000 Muslim Rohingya who have fled from Myanmar are currently living here in a total of 34 settlements. Around 440,000 natives are believed to live in the neighbouring districts. Kutupalong reportedly has a population density of between 40,000 and 70,000 per square kilometre, with up to 12 people forced to share a single hut. The entire district was sealed off at the beginning of April 2020 and 80 % of aid workers were withdrawn from the camp. Emergency medical care and food distribution continue to be provided, however.

Cameroon

SCSI activists arrested for handing out protective equipment and hygiene products

Six activists of the fund-raising initiative Survie Cameroon Survival Initiative (SCSI) were arrested while distributing free face masks and hand gel to combat coronavirus at a market in Jaunde on 11.05.20. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on 14.05.20 that they have been charged with rebellion. This is punishable with a four-year prison term. The SCSI was founded at the beginning of April 2020 by Maurice Kamto, leader of the main opposition party Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Cameroun (MRC), to combat coronavirus in Cameroon. The government is of the view that the SCSI was not founded in accordance with the law. On 09.04.20 banks were ordered to freeze the SCSI's accounts. HRW accuses the authorities with being more concerned with crushing the opposition than with protecting public health. In all, as per 14.05.20 3,105 infections and 140 deaths had been reported in Cameroon since the first confirmed case of corona infection on 06.03.20.

China

Tibet: Campaign against organised crime

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that authorities in Tibet are using a nationwide campaign against gang crime to pursue activists and dissidents. According to HRW, the authorities are targeting environmental activists, people committed to preserving the Tibetan language and culture and fighting corruption in the administration, and suspected supporters of the Dalai Lama. HRW alleges that action is also being taken against religious activities which are not approved by the state and Tibetan civil servants who engage in religious activities. At least 51 Tibetans have reportedly received prison terms of up to nine years in the stated contexts during the campaign which has been in progress since January 2018

DR Congo

Attack in the north-east, numerous civilian casualties

At least 21 people have reportedly been killed and 17 injured in an attack by suspected militias in Ituri province. The attack took place on the night of 16.05.20. According to a local tribal chief, women and children were among the victims. The local authorities are blaming the attack on the Codeco militia. No-one has claimed responsibility for the attack to date.

Egypt

Government broadens emergency powers

On 10.05.20 president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi approved amendments to the emergency legislation to contain coronavirus. This means that the president can now suspend teaching at schools and universities, for example, order quarantine for people returning from abroad and ban public and private gatherings, protests and celebrations. Human Rights Watch (HRW) has criticised the change in the law, stating that only five of the amendments are clearly related to health matters.

A state of emergency has been in force in the country since April 2017. It is extended by the government at regular three-monthly intervals, most recently on 28.04.20.

Journalist arrested

Lina Attalah, editor-in-chief of the independent news portal Mada Masr, was arrested by security forces in Cairo on 17.05.20 and released on bail after being questioned by a state prosecutor. Attalah was arrested while interviewing the mother of imprisoned activist Alaa Abdel Fattah outside Cairo's Tora prison. The authorities have not stated any grounds for her arrest. Numerous media representatives have been arrested in recent weeks and charged with disseminating fake news, misusing social media and supporting terrorist organisations (cf. BN of 04.05.20).

Egypt/Ethiopia

Egypt criticises Ethiopian dam plans

Ethiopia's announcement on 11.05.20 that it intends to fill the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) with water as of July 2020, despite the lack of any agreements with Egypt and Sudan, both of which border on the Nile, has met with criticism from Egypt, which accuses Ethiopia of lacking any willingness to seek a peaceful solution. The foreign ministers of the Arab League (AL) have endorsed a resolution tabled by Egypt which threatens Ethiopia with sanctions, should it put the dam into service without a corresponding agreement.

With the hydroelectric power station, Ethiopia aims to become Africa's largest exporter of electricity. Egypt fears negative effects on the course of the Nile, which is the country's most important source of water by far.

Eritrea

COVID-19 pandemic

On 15.05.20 the health ministry announced that the country was free of the COVID-19 virus, after the last of 39 patients was discharged from hospital following successful treatment. No more new cases have been reported since 18.04.20. More than 1,000 people are currently still in quarantine, however. The ministry stated that random testing was being carried out in Asmara and the border regions, in order to track the spread of coronavirus in the country more comprehensively and reliably. Health workers are also being tested regularly for the virus, the ministry claims.

Eritrea / European Union

Eritrean exiles bring action against EU for supporting forced labour

A group of Dutch Eritrean exiles has brought an action against the European Union (EU) before an Amsterdam district court on the grounds that the EU is supporting the use of forced labour in a road construction project in Eritrea.

The EU is financing an improved road link between Ethiopia and the Eritrean port of Massawa to the tune of 80 million euros as part of the Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF). However, according to the complaint filed by the Foundation Human Rights for Eritreans (FHRE), conscripts performing their national service are being deployed on the road construction work. The UN Human Rights Council considers national service in the country to be tantamount to forced labour, due to its commonly indefinite duration. FHRE thus concludes that the EU is

breaching its own Charter of Fundamental Rights, which stipulates that no-one may be compelled to perform forced labour.

A statement from the EU is expected in mid-June. In the course of the dispute with the Eritrean exiles, the EU, which has no means of controlling or monitoring how the payments are used, stated last year that its aid is intended solely for materials and machinery and not for paying workers, however. The Eritrean government does not deny that people on national service are deployed in road building.

Guinea

Protesters killed

Protests against restrictions imposed in connection with COVID-19 claimed five lives near Conakry in the prefecture of Coyah on the night of 11.05.20 and one person died in the prefecture of Dubréka. A police spokesperson stated that demonstrators there had been protesting against the installation of road blocks in Kamsar, near to the mining town of Boké, one person reportedly died in protests against the widespread power failures.

COVID-19 continues to spread in West Africa. With a total of 2,658 confirmed cases, 16 deaths and 1,133 recovered patients, Guinea ranks third behind Ghana and Nigeria.

India

COVID-19 pandemic

The nationwide lockdown to combat the COVID-19 pandemic has been extended by an additional two weeks, until 31.05.20. The government has announced a financial aid package for the severely afflicted economy. In addition, millions of migrant workers who have become unemployed are to be supplied with food parcels. The numbers of infections in the country rose again last week. One third of the cases registered to date have been reported in the federal state of Maharashtra in western India. Hospitals have been overstretched in some instances. The situation in the slums of Mumbai is tense (cf. BN of 04.05.20).

Kashmir: New protests against central government

On 13.05.20 a civilian was shot dead in his car by security forces at a checkpoint to the west of Srinagar. The police stated that the man had been driving too fast and it was to be assumed that he was planning an attack on the checkpoint. News of the incident sparked protests.

Iran

Parliament waives contentious anti-Israel bill

According to official information released on 17.05.20, the Iranian Majlis (parliament) has shelved a contentious bill to prohibit Iranian athletes from participating in international competitions, try-outs and test matches with Israeli opponents. The bill formed part of a legislative package to combat “hostile actions” by Israel and may now be assumed to be off the table on the advice of the sports ministry. The bill prompted heated debates last week. There was a realistic danger of the international associations imposing an international suspension on the Iranian sports associations.

Iran does not recognise Israel as a sovereign state and shuns contact with the country out of solidarity with the Palestinians.

Abadan: Quarantine imposed

On 10.05.20 the governor of the port city of Abadan in the extreme south-west of the country instructed the city’s inhabitants to stay at home for several days in order to break the coronavirus chain of infection. He stated that government authorities and banks would remain closed until the end of the week. Abadan has been in the news for some days with one of the highest COVID-19 infection rates in the country.

Kenya

Borders with Somalia and Tanzania closed

President Uhuru Kenyatta ordered the borders with Somalia and Tanzania to be closed on 16.05.20 in order to contain the spread of coronavirus. He stated that this measure was necessary because a total of 43 infected persons had entered Kenya from the neighbouring countries in the previous week. The border closure is to apply for an initial period of three weeks. Entry into Kenya is only possible for people who test negative. Kenya's most recently reported figures in connection with COVID-19 stand at 830 infections, a death toll of 50 and 301 people who have recovered from the virus.

Libya

Fighting in and around Tripoli continues

According to media reports, on 08.05.20 troops of the Government of National Accord (GNA) bombarded the Al-Witija air base, which is controlled by the Libyan National Army (LNA) under general Khalifa Haftar, killing 15 fighters allied with the LNA and destroying a number of military vehicles.

In a further incident, the Libya's sole operational airport, Mitiga, was reportedly shelled by LNA troops, damaging several aircraft and the airport's infrastructure. In the course of the shelling, several rockets allegedly hit residential areas in the vicinity of the airport, killing and injuring civilians.

Following a loss of ground by the LNA troops in the fighting around Tripoli and the surrounding area in recent weeks, heavy fighting with units allied to the GNA occurred in the southern outlying districts of the Libyan capital on the night of 10.05.20. Armed men additionally stormed an important water supply facility for north-western Libya.

Shelter for displaced persons shelled

According to the health ministry of the Tripoli-based GNA, at least seven people were killed and 17 injured when LNA units shelled a shelter for displaced persons in Tripoli's Furnaj district on 18.05.20. The ministry's statement did not mention which side was responsible for shelling the shelter, however.

Montenegro

COVID-19 pandemic heightens conflict between church and state

According to current media reports, on 13.05.20 violent protests occurred in various towns and cities in response to the provisional detention of Serbian Orthodox bishop Joanikeje von Nikosic and other priests during a procession led by the clergy on 12.05.20. While there were reports in the media of the use of excessive force by the police, police spokespersons have stated that 22 police officers were injured. The arrested clergy were released on 16.05.20. According to the authorities, the procession was staged despite the ban on public assembly imposed on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. The opposition party Democratic Montenegro criticised the authorities' actions as an attack on the constitution and human rights. Discord arose between the Serbian Orthodox church and the authorities over the contentious new law on religion prior to the outbreak of the pandemic (cf. BN of 16.03.20). The latest incident was reportedly the most recent of various breaches of restrictions imposed in connection with COVID-19 which have been committed by church dignitaries since March 2020.

Nicaragua

Prisoners released

According to official information released on 13.05.20, 2,815 prisoners were discharged from the country's prisons on Mother's Day. There are allegedly no political prisoners among those released. Officially, there are no links between the measure and any spread of COVID-19 in prisons. There are various reports of coronavirus spreading in prisons, however. The official figures stating 25 infections and eight deaths nationwide are also believed to be

far too low. The government has barely undertaken any measures to combat the pandemic to date. No restrictions have been imposed on working life and state schools remain open.

Pakistan

Nationwide holidays to mark end of Ramadan

Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interior ministry has declared the period from 22.05.20 to 27.05.20 a one-off national holiday to tie in with the fast-breaking to mark the end of Ramadan on 23./24.05.20. Offices and shops are to remain closed during this period and markets and public places are to be avoided. Shops selling food and pharmaceutical outlets are allowed to remain open.

Ahmadiyya unrepresented in new minorities commission

On 05.05.20, parliament resolved to establish a commission for minorities. The new commission is to be responsible for overseeing the rights of religious minorities in the Muslim country and is to serve as a contact point for complaints. The commission is also authorised to table parliamentary bills. Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and members of the polytheistic Kalasha religion are represented on the commission. Members of the Ahmadiyya community, which are estimated to number up to five million in the country, have not been admitted, however.

Christians disadvantaged in distribution of relief supplies

The National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP) claims that there have been numerous instances during the COVID-19 pandemic in which Christians and other religious minorities have been disadvantaged in the distribution of protective equipment and humanitarian aid. There are reports of Islamic organisations and mosque communities turning Christians away from hand-outs of food and other emergency supplies in rural areas of Punjab province, for example. In one village alone, 100 Christian families have allegedly been excluded from the distribution of food. The Muslim communities justify this by pointing out that the relief supplies are financed by the Islamic tax for the poor and should thus only benefit Muslims.

The majority of Christians living in Pakistan belong to particularly vulnerable categories of people. Many of them live below the poverty line as day labourers and have lost their livelihoods as a result of the pandemic, or they are exposed to an increased risk of infection as domestic staff or as employees at brickworks or in refuse or sewage disposal.

Russian Federation

COVID-19 pandemic

President Putin's measures to combat coronavirus included nationwide lockdowns imposed at the end of March 2020. These were eased as of 12.05.20, to enable people to go to work again. People aged over 65 and anyone with a chronic illness must continue to remain at home, however. The number of infections has soared since the end of March 2020 and Russia now ranks second worldwide behind the USA with regard to the absolute number of people infected with coronavirus. As per 15.05.20, the official number of confirmed infections stood at around 252,000. In the capital city of Moscow alone, which is the principal focus of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people infected with the coronavirus stood at 68,600 according to the official figures released by the authorities as per 03.05.20. Since the beginning of May 2020, the number of infections nationwide has risen by some 10,000 people daily. At 2,300 (as per 15.05.20), the official death toll appears relatively low and experts doubt that the number of deaths from COVID-19 have been recorded correctly.

Officially, the necessary supply of hospital beds in Moscow is ensured. The virus is spreading fast, however. While the main focus to date has been on the cities of Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Nizhny Novgorod, the number of infections is now also rising in the Russian regions. There is commonly a shortage of hospital beds in the predominantly rural regions. The Russian healthcare system as a whole is stretched to its limits, due to a shortage of personnel and a lack of protective equipment and medication.

Rwanda / France

Genocide suspect arrested

Félicien Kabuga was arrested in Asnières-sur-Seine near Paris on 16.05.20. According to the French gendarmerie, he was living there under a false name. Kabuga, who has been the subject of an international arrest warrant for many years, is accused of being one of the leading organisers and bankrollers of the genocide on up to one million Tutsi and moderate Hutu in 1994. He allegedly built up the Interahamwe militia, which is held responsible for the majority of the murders. He is also alleged to have been responsible for the broadcasting station Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), which incited the murders.

Somalia

Regional governor killed

The governor of the Mudug region in Puntland, Ahmed Muse Nur, was killed together with three of his bodyguards in an Al-Shabaab suicide attack in Galkayo on 17.05.20.

Only in March 2020, the governor of the Nugal region in Puntland died in a suicide attack by Al-Shabaab.

South Sudan

First cases of COVID-19 in refugee camps

On 12.05.20 a United Nations (UN) spokesperson confirmed that two people had tested positive at a refugee camp accommodating more than 32,000 in the capital, Juba. A further case has been confirmed at a refugee camp holding almost 120,000 people near the town of Bentiu. The Doctors Without Borders relief organisation has expressed concern about this development. South Sudan has one of the weakest healthcare systems in the world.

Syria

IS supporters escape from prison

A spokesperson of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has confirmed that seven inmates escaped from a small prison near the town of Al-Hawl on 17.05.20. A camp holding tens of thousands of family members of (alleged) IS supporters is also located near Al-Hawl.

The security forces have captured four of the escaped prisoners, while the other three remain at large. The nationalities of those who have escaped has not been revealed.

The SDF are currently holding some 10,000 (alleged) IS supporters in around two dozen prisons. These are believed to include around 2,000 non-Syrian nationals, some 800 of whom originate from Europe.

Tanzania

COVID-19 pandemic: Hospitals may be overstretched

The US embassy in Tanzania has warned of a steep rise in COVID-19 cases in the east African country. While there is no current information on the precise number of cases, it sees an extremely high risk of infection with COVID-19 in Dar es Salaam, noting that there is every indication that the virus is spreading apace, and not only in the city. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has also expressed concern regarding the government's strategy.

President John Magufuli has repeatedly called on the public to attend services in churches and mosques, stating that prayer can defeat the virus. Markets, pubs and shopping centres remain open, with buckets of water and soap at the entrances for people to use to wash their hands before entering. Many people wear face masks to protect themselves, however.

Turkey

COVID-19 pandemic

As per last week, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases stood at more than 148,000. According to the official figures, approx. 4,090 infected people have died to date and over 100,000 people have recovered. Alongside numerous relaxations, Turkey has currently imposed a renewed four-day lockdown in 15 cities and provinces which began on 16.05.20 and is to end after 19.05.20, which is a national holiday. Medical centres, pharmacies, bakeries and other service providers classified as important remain open. The government is additionally considering possible measures, including a four-day nationwide lockdown, during the Bayram festival from 24.05. to 26.05.20, which marks the end of the Ramadan fasting month.

Hunger strike ends in death

The musician Ibrahim Gökçek died after more than 300 days on hunger strike on 14.05.20. He was fasting in an effort to have the ban on his band performing lifted and to secure the release of imprisoned members of his band. His bandmate Helin Bölek died some two weeks ago, after being on hunger strike for 288 days. The two began their hunger strike in prison last year. They were released in November 2019, but continued their hunger strike. The group Yorum was established in Istanbul in 1985. The popular band is well-known for its anti-government protest songs in the Turkish and Kurdish languages, and is comprised of alternating members. The government accuses the band of having links to the banned militant radical left-wing underground organisation Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C), which carried out numerous attacks in Turkey particularly in the 1980s and which is classified as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the USA and the EU. Two members of the Yorum group, including Gökçek's wife, are still in prison.

Ukraine

Blockage of Russian internet portals extended

On the evening of 14.05.20 president Zelenskyy extended the blockage of a number of Russian internet portals for a further three years. On the previous day, the Ukrainian parliament had called on Zelenskyy to extend the existing sanctions. The ban was originally imposed for three years by former president Poroshenko. The blockage applies to the vkontakte and Odnoklassniki networks, which are similar in structure to Facebook, e-mail programmes such as mail.ru and yandex, which will not be accessible in Ukraine in future, the yandex.Maps and Yandex.Translate sites, which are comparable in quality to Google, and the antivirus software of the Kaspersky company, whose regular updates are not available in Ukraine. The ban has led to the Opera or Tor browsers being used in Ukraine. Poroshenko praised Zelenskyy's action, stating that it deprived Russia of an important instrument in the hybrid war against Ukraine and made it more difficult for the Russian secret services to collect personal data.

Venezuela

Fuel crisis

The availability of fuel is becoming an increasingly serious problem. The shortage of fuel is severely exacerbating the country's economic problems and is impacting in particular on the agricultural sector, which is highly reliant on diesel for harvesting and distribution. According to varying reports, waiting times of up to 12 hours apply at filling stations in the Caracas region. While there have been reports of protests, they appear to have remained on a small scale overall and have been stopped by the security forces without any major escalations against the backdrop of efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The protests focus on the specific shortages and appear to be only vaguely linked to the opposition. The fuel crisis is being exacerbated by the sanctions imposed by the USA, which affect the import of replacement parts and chemical input materials which are required at the few operational Venezuelan refineries.

Yemen

Fighting between STC and government troops

Last week witnessed clashes between armed forces allied to the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and troops loyal to the Yemeni government near Zinjibar, capital of the administrative district of Abyan, some 60 kilometres from Aden. There were fatalities on both sides. The fighting represents the first major confrontation since the STC declared home rule for southern Yemen in April 2020.

COVID-19 pandemic: Numerous deaths

Hundreds of people with symptoms which could be attributable to coronavirus died in Aden last week. However, the official number of people infected stands at only 106 in southern Yemen, which is controlled by the government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), and two cases in Houthi-controlled northern Yemen. There are reports of hospitals in Aden which have been closed or which have refused to admit patients suspected of having coronavirus. The STC's declaration of home rule in April 2020 has worsened the situation in the south, as now neither the STC nor the Yemeni government appear to be responsible for the health sector. The Houthi rebels who rule northern Yemen are suspected of concealing the actual number of infections and deaths and intimidating people who attempt to talk about the virus. There are reports of a number of markets having been closed in Sana'a and a lockdown having been imposed in selected city districts.

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