

Briefing Notes

Group 62 - Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

25 May 2020

Afghanistan

Hostilities, attacks, civilian casualties

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has reported a 29 % drop in the number of civilian casualties in the first quarter of 2020 compared to the first quarter of 2019. 1,293 civilian casualties (533 dead and 760 injured) represent the lowest toll for a single quarter since 2012. Provisional figures for April indicate a renewed increase in the numbers of casualties, however, with a rise in both the toll for which the Taliban are responsible (208 people) and in the corresponding toll attributed to the security forces (172 people). UNAMA also expresses concern at the number of acts of violence committed against medical personnel in the first half of May (cf. BN of 18.05.20). Apart from the attack on a maternity hospital (cf. BN of 18.05.20), UNAMA has also recorded the abduction of 15 health service employees by the Taliban since 01.04.20, as well as threats and confiscations of medical supplies by security forces. The number of civilians abducted by the Taliban in the first quarter of 2020 was also relatively high (282).

The NATO Resolute Support mission reports similar figures for the first quarter of 2020 (1,268 civilian casualties), additionally identifying Kabul, Kunduz, Helmand, Nangarhar and Herat as the provinces with the most casualties. On 23.05.20 the Taliban offered a three-day ceasefire during the celebrations to mark the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, which the government accepted. As far as can be seen, all parties upheld the ceasefire. On 24.05.20 president Ghani announced that a further 2,000 Taliban were to be released.

COVID-19 pandemic

The number of confirmed cases continues to rise. People have tested positive for coronavirus in all 34 provinces. Kabul has the highest number of cases, followed by Herat, Kandahar and Balkh.

A strict lockdown was imposed on the city of Kabul during the holidays to mark the end of Ramadan (Eid). Gradual relaxations are to be introduced three days after the end of Ramadan. More shops are to be allowed to open at certain times and smaller vehicles will be allowed on the road on different days of the week, according to whether their number plates end in an even or uneven number. Public transport and vehicles with more than three occupants remain forbidden. A number of other provinces, such as Kandahar, Helmand, Ghazni, Badakhshan, Nangarhar, Balkh, Khost, Paktya, Kunduz and Takhar, have already approved relaxations.

Domestic commercial flights are to remain suspended on the whole until the end of June 2020. The airlines Kam Air and Ariana Afghan Airlines are operating isolated services to Herat, Mazar-e Sharif and Kandahar.

Albania

EU alarmed by suspected erosion of judicial reforms

According to current media reports, on 21.05.20 the diplomatic missions of the EU and the USA condemned suspected moves by Albania to undermine and water down the judicial reform process which was jointly agreed in

2016. Four years after the reform programme to combat corruption and an inefficient judiciary was adopted, Albanian parties have allegedly entered into unofficial negotiations which could erode the foundations of the judicial reform. Official representatives of the Albanian parties have reportedly rejected these accusations.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Elections postponed due to budget dispute over consequences of COVID-19 pandemic

The electoral commission has postponed the impending local government elections by six weeks to the middle of November 2020, citing delays in passing the national budget. According to current media reports, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Milorad Dodik, has condemned the commission's decision as illegitimate, on the grounds that the recent appointment of new Serbian members of the electoral commission was illegal. The adoption of the budget is reportedly being delayed by prime minister Zoran Tegeltija and other Bosnian Serb ministers, because these are calling for foreign judges to leave the constitutional court and for the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic to receive greater consideration in the budget.

Burundi

Presidential and parliamentary elections

Presidential and parliamentary elections took place on 20.05.20, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to social media was prevented during the election period and no international election observers were allowed. Observers consider it unlikely that the elections were free and fair. The incumbent president, Pierre Nkurunziza, who has held office since 2005, did not run for re-election. In 2018, a referendum endorsed amendments to the constitution which would have enabled Nkurunziza to have held office for two more terms, until 2034. He stated most recently in January 2020 that he did not intend to run again, however. Evariste Ndayishimiye, a Nkurunziza acolyte and secretary-general of the ruling party Conseil National de Défense de la Démocratie – Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie (CNDD-FDD), ran in his place. He is seen as a favourite among the seven candidates, along with the opposition representative Agathon Rwaso (Congrès National pour la Liberté – CNL).

Provisional election results are to be released on 25.05.20. Burundian observers report of election fraud. Ahead of the results, Rwaso has announced that he does not intend to recognise a “stolen” election. In this case, observers consider a violent escalation possible, which could contribute towards the instability in the region.

Since the beginning of election campaigning at the end of April 2020 there have been various incidents involving clashes between opponents to the government on the one hand and government supporters, police and the military on the other. According to official information, two people have died in this unrest. Dozens of members of the opposition CNL party have been arrested.

In 2015, Burundi experienced an internal political crisis marked by violence when Nkurunziza was elected for a third term in office, contrary to the constitution. Critics of the government, journalists and opposition figures became the target of measures imposed by the state and of attacks by the Imbonerakure - the ruling party's youth militia. More than 1,000 people were killed and some 400,000 fled the country. According to information from the UNHCR, some 330,000 refugees are still living in neighbouring countries. Around 300,000 of these fled Burundi in 2015. A UN commission of inquiry accused the government of crimes against humanity. In 2017, Burundi became the first country to end its cooperation with the International Criminal Court in The Hague when the latter initiated investigations into the Burundian government. The violence continues. The Burundian human rights organisation Ligue Iteka has documented 67 killings in the period between January and March 2020 alone, for example.

COVID-19 pandemic

The government has largely ignored the threat posed by coronavirus to date. Mass events are allowed. 42 infections and one death have been recorded to date. Representatives of the World Health Organisation (WHO) were expelled from the country without explanation in mid-May 2020.

Cameroon

SCSI activists released from custody

The six activists of the fund-raising initiative Survie Cameroon Survival Initiative (SCSI) who were arrested while distributing free face masks and hand gel to combat coronavirus at Mokolo market in Jaunde on 11.05.20. (cf. BN of 18.05.20) were released from custody at Mokolo police station on 15.05.20.

China

Hong Kong: Security law

The annual conference of the National People's Congress began on 22.05.20. The agenda included a move to mandate the Standing Committee to issue a security law for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Back in 2003, resistance from the opposition and civil society thwarted an attempt by the Hong Kong government to introduce a corresponding law. Observers see the fact that China's central government now aims to bypass the Hong Kong parliament and install this legislation in the Special Administrative Region itself as evidence of its intention to step up its direct control over Hong Kong in future. This could lead to markedly more severe punishment for the activities of Hong Kong's democracy movement than has applied to date.

Among other things, the security law is to allow central state security agencies to operate in Hong Kong for the first time. Actions undermining the power of the state and interference by foreign forces are to be punishable under this law.

The former British colony has been governed autonomously according to the principle of "one country, two systems" since it was handed over to China in 1997. Peking's measure goes against this principle, which has been guaranteed until 2047 and is enshrined in international law. There have been growing indications that China's central government is intent on curbing Hong Kong's autonomy for some years.

According to varying reports, hundreds or thousands of people demonstrated against the planned security law in Hong Kong's Causeway Bay district on 24.05.20. The police used tear gas against the demonstrators. The police report that at least 180 people were arrested. Gatherings of more than eight people are banned because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Egypt

President pardons prison inmates

On 24.05.20 president Abd al-Fattah as-Sisi pardoned more than 3,100 prisoners to mark the Eid al-Fitr holidays at the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. The pardoned prisoners do not include any activists, journalists or political prisoners, however.

India

Kashmir: Rebel leader killed

A commander of Hizbul Mujahideen, one of the largest resistance movements active in the Indian part of Kashmir, was killed in Srinagar on 19.05.20 following several hours of fighting with the military. At least three soldiers were wounded. The central government troops are accused of having set fire to nearby houses during the operation and having stolen objects of value from houses in the neighbourhood. The operation sparked protests against the central government and disturbances.

Iran

Ramadan: Further easing of corona restrictions

President Rohani is planning further relaxations of corona restrictions after the end of Ramadan. From 23.05.20, mausoleums are to open twice daily for three hours, subject to compliance with hygiene regulations. Restaurants, cafés, beauty parlours and hair salons will also be allowed to re-open. Universities will re-open on 06.06.20. Sporting events are to resume in mid-June 2020, though initially without spectators. Schools are to remain officially closed. Museums and historical sites were re-opened on 04.05.20, subject to health-related restrictions. Rohani has not indicated whether Friday prayers will be permitted again in Teheran and other cities. The Fitr prayer to mark the end of Ramadan at the large prayer site in Teheran on 24.05.20 was cancelled. Festival prayers were held in 110 mosques in the capital, however, observing strict health rules. The mass demonstrations against Israel on Quds Day (meaning 'Jerusalem Day'), which have taken place annually since 1979 on the final Friday of Ramadan, were cancelled due to the pandemic.

Iraq

Rocket lands near to Green Zone

A rocket landed close to the American embassy in Baghdad once again on 19.05.20. This was the first rocket attack on the so-called Green Zone for several weeks. No-one has claimed responsibility for the attack. In the past, the American government has always blamed pro-Iranian militias for attacks on the Green Zone.

Kosovo

Protest staged despite COVID-19 restrictions

According to media reports, supporters of the ruling Vetevendosje party and its leader, Albin Kurti, are intending to stage further public protests in the future, despite the ban on public assembly imposed because of COVID-19. On 12.05.20, 500 activists from the party formed a square composed of people standing stationary in the centre of Pristina for the first time, observing the mandatory distancing. Their declared aim is for a government to be formed without fresh elections.

Lebanon

Closure of illegal border crossing points into Syria

According to a report from the Lebanese army, over 90 % of the irregular border crossing points between Lebanon and Syria have now been closed, with 215,000 litres of fuel and 71 tonnes of flour confiscated in the week from 07.05. to 14.05.20 alone. These items, which are highly subsidised in the country, are commonly smuggled to Syria. The measures are to be seen in the context of efforts to curb the spread of coronavirus, which is also to be contained as far as possible in the area of cross-border transport. They also come in response to political demands in Lebanon, a stance against the admission of Syrian refugees having become established throughout broad sections of Lebanese society in recent years.

Libya

GNA troops capture air base, further territorial gains reported

The Government of National Accord (GNA) has reported that its troops have captured the strategically important Al-Watiya air base after a battle. General Haftar's troops had been using the air base located south-west of Tripoli since April 2019 for their offensive on the Libyan capital.

The GNA's military spokesperson additionally reported on 23.05.20 that troops allied with the GNA had driven Haftar's units from two military camps south of Tripoli. According to media reports, the units have withdrawn to Bani Walid and the Jufra district.

Morocco

COVID-19 pandemic: Expansion of testing capacities

On 20.05.20 the health minister announced that 1.8 million corona tests would be carried out, with the aim of subsequently ending the public health emergency. The plans are primarily for screening tests and early detection tests to be carried out up to the end of July 2020. The number of new infections stood at 27 on 24.05.20, as compared to 100 on 22.05.20.

King grants pardons

King Mohammed Ben Al-Hassan granted pardons for 483 convicts to mark this year's Eid al-Fitr. In 378 cases the prison terms are to be reduced, while the other beneficiaries are to have their fines or remaining sentences waived.

Niger

Attack on military base

The Blabrine army base in the south-east of the country (Diffa region) was reportedly attacked by suspected Boko Haram fighters on the night of 18.05.20. According to the defence ministry, twelve soldiers were killed and at least ten injured. The base is situated close to the border with Nigeria and has been attacked on numerous occasions in the past.

Nigeria

Gajiganna: Attack by Boko Haram claims lives

On 17.05.20 suspected Boko Haram fighters attacked the village of Gajiganna (Magumeri Local Government Area, federal state of Borno) as the villagers were preparing the Ramadan fast-breaking festivities. The terrorists fired rockets at the village from a number of vehicles. At least 20 civilians were allegedly killed and 24 people injured in the attack.

Russian Federation

New laws signed off

On 23.05.20 president Putin signed off a new law enabling elections at all levels and referendums to also be carried out by post and via the internet. The corresponding bill was passed in the дума on 13.05.20 and endorsed by the federation council a week later. The new law will not enter into force in time for the planned national ballot on the proposed amendments to the constitution, which include a provision which would enable Putin to run for presidential office two more times. This ballot was originally planned for 22.04.20, but had to be postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. A new date has yet to be set.

Putin also signed a bill into law which prohibits persons who receive a prison sentence for minor offences from running for public office for a period of five years after serving their prison sentence. To date, this has only applied to people convicted of serious criminal offences. The new legislation is presumably aimed at further restricting the opposition's activities and participation in politics.

Somalia

Explosion in Baidoa

Several people, including children, were killed or injured when a bomb exploded in Baidoa on 24.05.20. The explosion reportedly occurred on a field near to a camp for internally displaced people, who were celebrating the end of the fasting month of Ramadan with traditional dancing. Al-Shabaab is suspected of being behind the attack.

South Sudan

Break-out of violence in federal state of Jonglei

Fighting reportedly broke out again between members of the Murle and Lou Nuer ethnic groups in and around the town of Pieri (federal state of Jonglei) on 16.05.20. According to varying reports in the media, over 300 people were killed and hundreds injured. There has been an increased incidence of violent clashes in the federal state of Jonglei in recent months, with hundreds of people allegedly having died and many houses destroyed.

Syria

Indications of partial withdrawal by Iranians

An Israeli military spokesman stated on 21.05.20 that a partial scaling down of the Iranian presence in Syria was observable. He said that although the movements were not pronounced, a clear trend was discernible.

This trend was indirectly confirmed some weeks ago in an address by Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Lebanese Hezbollah. While Nasrallah claimed that the drawback resulted from a decline in the strategic necessity for the Iranian presence, the Israeli military suspects that the Iranians have been forced to scale down their involvement in Syria in the face of growing economic problems and the COVID-19 pandemic at home, as well as the successful Israeli military operations in Syria.

Tunisia

COVID-19 pandemic: Easing of counter-measures

The authorities announced on 21.05.20 that Tunisia will be opening mosques, restaurants, cafés and hotels, which have been closed since 22.03.20, on 04.06.20, as the spread of coronavirus in the country has slowed down. Day nurseries will re-open at the end of the month, schools will remain closed until September 2020, preparations for high school leaving examinations will take place for one month, beginning at the end of May 2020. Universities will open on 08.06.20.

Travel between the provinces remains prohibited and security checks were stepped up last weekend due to the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. It is planned to lift all restrictions on movement on 14.06.20; the wearing of masks will continue to be compulsory and distancing rules will remain in place.

In a television address on 20.05.20, prime minister Elyes Fakhfakh referred to the poverty in the country, the weak economy and the underfinanced public infrastructure, citing the health system as his greatest concern. He said he will focus on reducing bureaucracy, further developing digitisation, preserving jobs and fighting corruption.

Turkey

COVID-19 pandemic: Protective measures

The government has imposed a nationwide four-day lockdown for the first time, covering the holidays at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. The lockdown began on the eve of the so-called Sugar Feast, extending from the night of 22.05.20 to 26.05.20. The travel restrictions for 15 cities, including Ankara and Istanbul, were additionally extended by 15 days, until 03.06.20. In the fight against COVID-19, Turkey has been imposing extensive lockdowns for some weeks now, but only in selected cities or provinces to date. President Erdogan appealed to the public to adapt their habits to the rules and threatened harsher measures, should the situation worsen. He also declared the school year over. Schools in the country, which have been closed since 16.03.20, will not open again until September 2020. Prayers are to be permitted again in selected mosques as of 29.05.20.

HDP mayors removed from office

According to reports in the media, on 15.05.20 five more mayors belonging to the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) were removed from office and replaced by state administrators. They are accused of having supported

the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The HDP emerged as the winner of the local government elections in 65 cities and towns in the south-east of the country in March 2019. Only 12 of the party's mayors now remain in office.

Venezuela

DirectTV

The announcement by television broadcaster AT&T, parent company of the local pay TV station DirectTV, that it would be discontinuing operations in Venezuela as a result of the US sanctions sparked protests in the form of so-called 'caceroladas'. This is a form of protest which is widespread in South America, involving residents banging on pots with spoons in their homes, thereby generating a substantial noise outside. According to various reports, the protests covered all districts of Caracas. As one of the last accessible pay TV stations, DirectTV is highly popular and has become the sole alternative to the state-run stations during the national lockdown. As US sanctions prohibit cooperation with Venezuelan authorities, the company saw itself compelled to discontinue its service in the country. A ruling by Venezuela's Supreme Court on 22.05.20 required operations to be resumed immediately and authorised the police and army to seize any equipment from the broadcaster which was necessary for this purpose.

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