



# Briefing Notes

Group 62 - Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

14 September 2020

## Afghanistan

### COVID-19 pandemic

All of the 34 provinces are reporting infections. Kabul continues to be the most severely affected, followed by Herat, Balkh, Kandahar and Nangarhar (as of 13 September 2020). Probably out of fear of infection, a general decline of 30% to 40 % in the use of essential health services was noted.

### Cost of living

In its weekly national market price bulletin the World Health Organization (WHO) records no significant change in prices compared to the previous week (as of 02 September 2020) for the first week of September. However, almost all prices for the most important foodstuffs are significantly higher than before the Corona outbreak (data of 14 March 2020). Unskilled workers earn between AFG 300 and AFG 400 per day. The number of days per week on which work is available ranges from two (Kabul) to six (Bamyan).

### Peace Talks

On 12 September 2020 delegations of the Afghan government and the Taliban met for the first time in Doha (Qatar) to negotiate a peace solution. First priority is given to talks on a ceasefire. In the opening speeches, Abdullah Abdullah, as head of the government delegation, praised the achievements made so far and enshrined in the constitution, and Mullah Baradar repeated for the Taliban that there must be an "Islamic order" in Afghanistan.

### Attacks, hostilities, civilian victims

Despite the upcoming peace negotiations Taliban attacks continued in 18 provinces until 12 September 2020, the most serious incidents took place in Balkh, Jawzjan, Faryab, Ghor, Badghis, Herat, Ghazni and Uruzgan. According to research by the New York Times, 81 pro-government forces and 65 civilians died in September (as of 11 September 2020) in security-related incidents in various provinces, mostly in Taliban attacks.

A serious attack took place on 09 September 2020 in Kabul when the convoy of Vice President Amrullah Saleh was attacked in the 4th police district (Taimani Square). At least ten civilians were killed and 15 others injured, including some of Saleh's bodyguards. The Vice President himself remained unharmed. The Taliban deny any involvement.

## Albania

### Criticised media law about to enter into force

According to recent media reports, 15 organisations of Albanian civil society are warning that the majority of the government of Prime Minister Edi Rama is about to put into force a law already adopted in December 2019 without any amendments. At that time, President Ilir Meta refused to sign the law because of concerns about its conformity with the constitution and its compatibility with international conventions. In response, the government of Edi Rama

declared that it would seek and wait for an opinion of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. The Venice Commission concluded in June 2020 that the law should not be adopted in its current form, as it would have a chilling effect on free discussion and political expression on Albanian websites. The Law on Strengthening the Albanian Media Authority (AMA), is part of an "anti-defamation package", and according to the government, designed to prevent irresponsible behaviour on the internet, such as spreading harmful rumours or slanderous attacks on public figures.

## **India/ China**

### **Ladakh: Troop withdrawal agreed**

On the fringes of the Foreign Ministers' Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Moscow on 10 September 2020, Indian and Chinese government representatives agreed on a gradual withdrawal of troops at the border line in the Himalayas, which is disputed between the two countries, in order to further de-escalate the situation and to seek a diplomatic solution to the border issue.

## **Iran**

### **Execution of the death sentence against Navid Afkari**

Despite international protests, the death sentence against 27-year-old wrestler Navid Afkari was executed on 12 September 2020 in Adel-Abad prison in the southern Iranian city of Shiraz, as reported by the Iranian authorities. According to the judiciary, the athlete allegedly killed a security guard during a demonstration in Shiraz in 2018. The family of the killed man had also opted for the principle of retribution (blood revenge), which is anchored in Islamic law. Several media reports allege that Afkari's confession was extracted under torture.

Human rights organizations and representatives from politics and sports associations urged the Iranian government to give in and also called on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to increase pressure on Iran. The government rejected criticism from abroad as interference with internal affairs. According to media reports, even donations recently collected from the population in Shiraz as compensation for the victim's family (blood money) were unsuccessful.

The human rights organisation Amnesty International (AI) described the execution of Afkari as the result of an unfair trial and called for immediate international action. According to media reports, Afkari was buried under strict security measures on the night of 13 September 2020, excluding the public and his family.

A planned visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to Berlin this week has been postponed until further notice, according to media reports.

### **Concern about human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh**

The coronavirus is spreading in Iran's prisons, but political prisoners remain in custody. Imprisoned lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh (58) is protesting against the prison conditions by going on hunger strike. According to her family, her state of health has deteriorated rapidly in recent days. The lawyer, who has received international awards, has been imprisoned in Evin prison in Tehran for more than two years. She went on a hunger strike on 11 August 2020. Her last arrest was in June 2018 and nine months later she was sentenced to 38 years imprisonment and 148 lashes. She is accused of violations of national security and "encouragement to prostitution", as she had defended women who had taken part in the protests against the compulsory wearing of headscarves.

### **RSF: Increasing state persecution of journalists**

The human rights organisation Reporters Without Borders (RSF) addressed the UN Human Rights Council with a statement dated 08 September 2020, calling on the Council to take action on behalf of Iranian journalists who have been sentenced to long prison terms in recent months.

According to RSF, the riots of the past two years, when parts of the population repeatedly took to the streets to protest against grievances, have contributed to this aggravation. "Numerous journalists are subject to censorship, threatened, arrested and confronted with psychological violence in solitary confinement already during criminal proceedings." As an example, the report describes five recent cases of journalists which resulted in prison sentences of several years.

Iran ranks 173rd out of 180 countries in the latest World Press Freedom Index.

## **Israel/Palestinian Autonomous Areas**

### **COVID-19 pandemic**

According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) of 08 September 2020, a decline in the gross domestic product of 3% to 4.5% is predicted for the Palestinian Autonomous Areas. The primary reason for this are the consequences of the pandemic-related lockdown.

Unemployment was already at 33% in the previous year and the income of the Autonomy Agency from foreign donations is at its lowest level for more than a decade, according to UNCTAD. Income from trade, tourism and individual remittances from Palestinians working abroad is at its lowest level for more than 20 years.

Until 08 September 2020, more than 35,000 infections and 215 deaths related to COVID-19 were registered throughout the autonomous regions.

## **Yemen**

### **Houthis recruit male and female youth**

The United Nations (UN) have found that the Houthi rebels have recruited at least 24 girls aged between 13 and 17 years. The girls were used as spies, guards, paramedics, to recruit other children or for a special female combat force.

Boys from the age of seven were also recruited. The recruiting often took place in schools, poor urban areas or prisons.

The children are either abducted or the Houthis use financial incentives, indoctrination or persuasion from peers to recruit children.

### **Eight million children do not go to school**

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), eight million Yemeni children do not attend school. Before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the number was about two million. One school in eight is unusable, either because it was destroyed in the conflict or because it is used for military purposes, as shelter for internally displaced persons or to isolate suspected coronavirus patients.

### **Houthis ban humanitarian flights**

Since 09 September 2020, humanitarian flights and UN flights at Sanaa airport have been banned by the Houthi rebels. Since they took control of Sanaa in 2014, only such flights had been allowed at the airport. The rebel group blames the blockade of the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the resulting lack of fuel for the suspension.

### **Houthis confiscate and destroy property**

On 06 September 2020 a Houthi court in Sanaa decided that the possessions of 75 prominent military officers of the government troops should be confiscated.

The Houthis have reportedly destroyed hundreds of houses belonging to alleged opposition members since the outbreak of war. The destruction was particularly intensive in the governorates of Taizz, al-Bayda and Ibb.

### **Air raids on the capital Sanaa**

The coalition led by Saudi Arabia carried out eleven air raids on Houthi bases in the capital Sanaa on 13 September 2020. The raids targeted the vicinity of the airport and central and northern parts of the city.

## **Colombia**

### **More former FARC members killed**

According to media reports, three former members of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP or just FARC) , among them Jorge Iván Ramoson, died a violent death over the last weekend

of August 2020. The ex-guerrillero, also known as Mario Morales, was a member of the leadership of the Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común, a party also abbreviated as FARC and successor to the FARC-EP. Ramos was a supporter of the peace agreement between the FARC-EP and the Colombian government of November 2016 and, in the context of the negotiations at the time, he also agreed to the demobilization of the guerrilla organization. Most recently, he was in charge of the implementation of a programme agreed upon during these negotiations, by which farmers are offered alternatives to the cultivation of coca plants. According to media reports, fighters of the still active guerilla Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) are presumably responsible for his death, while the other two ex-FARC-EP members killed at the end of August 2020 are said to have been victims of paramilitary groups. Observers have by now counted killings of well over 200 former guerrilla fighters since the peace agreement was signed. The Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (INDEPAZ) reports that only since the beginning of the year, more than 40 former FARC-EP members who had explicitly supported the peace agreement of 2016, have been killed.

### **Deaths at protests against police violence**

Since 09 September 2020 people have been killed and wounded in Colombian cities during several days of protests against police violence and state repression. In the capital Bogotá, according to media reports, demonstrators attacked police stations and banks, threw stones and firebombs and blocked roads. At least ten people died in connection with the riots. The media reported, citing information from Bogotá's mayor, Claudia López, that more than 390 civilians and police officers were injured in the capital. More than 50 police stations, dozens of cars and buses, shops and banks were damaged and in some cases set on fire. The police used tear gas and stun grenades. Violent clashes also occurred in other cities, including Medellín and Cali. The protests were triggered by the violent death of a lawyer in connection with a police check in Bogotá on 8 September 2020.

## **Lebanon**

### **Investigations into the explosion disaster**

On 08 September 2020, the transport minister in office at the time of the disaster and the presidents of two security authorities were summoned for questioning by the investigating court.

### **Casualties during attempted arrest**

On 14 September 2020, three Lebanese soldiers were killed and another injured when they attempted to arrest a wanted terrorist suspect. The soldiers were allegedly met with rifle and shell fire. According to media reports, the incident might be linked to the murder of two police officers and the son of a mayor in the region on 31 August 2020.

### **Protests**

There are also protests against and to a lesser extent for the government. On 12 September 2020 two groups clashed near the presidential palace. Security forces separated the camps, at times stones were thrown and rubber bullets fired, but no serious injuries were reported.

### **COVID-19 pandemic**

Since the explosion disaster of 04 August 2020, Lebanon has experienced a considerable increase in new cases. At present, about 700 new infections are reported daily in a total population estimated at about seven million. The increase is mainly attributed to the major damage to several hospitals in Beirut (Beirut is home to about a quarter of Lebanon's population) and the destruction of considerable amounts of housing, which has led to significantly fewer opportunities for social distancing.

## **Montenegro**

### **Victorious party alliances agree on a pro-European course**

According to recent media reports, the three opposition alliances victorious in the parliamentary elections in Montenegro on 30 August 2020 have agreed to continue a pro-European and pro-Western policy in a coalition

agreement for the future joint government. Zdravko Krivokapic, leader of the pro-Serbian bloc "For the Future of Montenegro" (27 seats), Aleksa Becic, leader of the bloc "Peace is our Nation" (10 seats) and Dritan Abazovic, leader of the coalition "Black on White" (4 seats) promised at a joint press conference on 09 September 2020 not to revoke the recognition of Kosovo, not to change the national symbols of the state and to comply with all current international obligations, including NATO membership. According to Becic, this would not change Montenegro's foreign policy course, but rather strengthen it. According to Abazovic, the future new government will, in addition to focussing on the economy and European integration, depoliticise key state institutions to ensure an uncompromising fight against crime and corruption. According to Krivokapic, the so-called Law on Religious Freedom, which had led to considerable tensions between the state, the Serbian community and the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as to mass demonstrations, will also be revoked.

## **Myanmar**

### **Soldiers describe massacre of Rohingya**

In videos recorded by the rebel organization Arakan Army, two soldiers of the Myanmar armed forces describe how they committed massacres in Rohingya villages in Rakhine State, burying victims in mass graves and burning down Rohingya villages, on orders of their superiors in 2017. The soldiers' statements support reports of such incidents by Rohingya refugees. The two soldiers fled Myanmar to Bangladesh in August 2020. The soldiers were transferred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague on 07 September 2020. The ICC is investigating the Myanmar military for alleged crimes in connection with the expulsion of the Rohingya.

In 2017, at least 6,700 people died when the Myanmar military forcibly drove more than 700,000 Rohingya from their villages in Rakhine State to neighbouring Bangladesh, where they have been living in a camp near the border ever since. According to the UN, some 200 Rohingya villages in Rakhine State were destroyed between 2017 and 2019.

## **Nigeria**

### **State of Kaduna: Castration as punishment for rape**

On 09 September 2020, the parliament of the northern state of Kaduna decided to tighten the penal code by introducing the punishment of court-ordered surgical castration of convicted rapists of children under the age of 14. The maximum penalty for rape in Kaduna is 21 years imprisonment, for the rape of children it is life imprisonment. The law has yet to be signed by the governor of Kaduna to be effective.

## **North Macedonia**

### **Returnees from IS areas arrested under suspicion of terrorism**

Recent media reports say that security officials, in cooperation with the National Security Agency and the Public Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime, arrested three suspected IS sympathizers and returnees from conflict areas in the Middle East on 01 September 2020. According to the Ministry of the Interior, the three men, all of them citizens of Northern Macedonia, have already served sentences for previous crimes and come from the north-eastern city of Kumanovo. They are suspected of terrorism, as the police confiscated firearms, ammunition, hand grenades, tactical vests, a flag with Arabic writing and a stockpile of explosives during the arrest. The head of the National Security Agency of Northern Macedonia, Viktor Dimovski, informed journalists that the weapons and explosives found in an arsenal in the village of Biljanovce near Kumanovo were, according to preliminary information, intended for terrorist attacks on institutions in Northern Macedonia.

## **Pakistan**

### **Christian convicted of blasphemy**

On 08 September 2020 a court in Lahore, Punjab, sentenced a Christian to death for blasphemy. The man is said to have insulted the Prophet Mohammed in text messages. Because of the increase in blasphemy accusations Amnesty International (AI) called for the repeal of the relevant laws, which mostly affect religious minorities and marginalized social groups, in August 2020.

### **Situation of women in Balochistan**

On 08 September 2020, civil society organisations expressed concern about the situation of women in the province of Balochistan in view of their increasing mortality rate. The organisations criticised the discrimination of women by society and the state, such as lack of access to education and the obstacles for the issuing of identity documents.

## **Russian Federation**

### **Irregularities in regional elections**

Overshadowed by the poison attack on Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny and the Corona crisis, regional elections have taken place in Russia. On the main election day of 13 September 2020, citizens in 41 regions of the country cast their votes and in four by-elections the allocation of seats in the Russian parliament was also voted on. In total there were more than 9,000 different elections at different levels. In some cases the voting process took three days, having started on 11 September 2020.

After the first results had come in in the night of 14 September 2020, it became apparent that the party of President Putin, United Russia, maintained its majority, as expected. In some regions, such as Chelyabinsk in the Urals, there was an indication that in future more parties might be represented in the local parliaments. According to preliminary data, two co-workers of the Russian opposition politician Navalny have won two city council seats in the Siberian city of Tomsk, while the Kremlin party United Russia has suffered losses in Tomsk and only achieved just under 25% of the vote.

Observers noted irregularities in many polling stations. According to the independent election observation group Golos, more than 1,000 reports of possible violations have already been received. Election observers had reported obstructions to their work and election fraud. Violence had also been used and there were reports of compulsory voting and bribery from many regions, they said.

## **Somalia**

### **Attacks**

On 11 September 2020, an al-Shabaab suicide bomber blew himself up in front of a mosque in Kismayo after Friday prayers. Six dead and 20 injured were reported. Among the dead was the chairman of the Jubaland Chamber of Commerce. It is assumed that the attack was targeting him.

On 10 September 2020 a landmine exploded near a tea shop in the border town of Elwak in Gedo region. According to reports, two civilians were killed and three or four people were injured.

On 09 September 2020 an al-Shabaab suicide bomber blew himself up in a restaurant in Mogadishu. Three people were lost their lives, including a child. Seven people were wounded.

On 8 September 2020, both police officers and al-Shabaab fighters were killed when al-Shabaab attacked a police station in the city of Balcad in Middle Shabelle region. Several civilians were injured as well.

On 07 September 2020, a car bomb attack on a military base in the village of Jana Abdalla, about 60 km from Kismayo, claimed the lives of Somali soldiers and seriously wounded an American military adviser.

## **Sudan**

### **State of emergency declared due to flooding**

On 07 September 2020, the Sudanese government declared the country a natural disaster area and a national emergency for three months. Heavy rainfall has caused severe flooding and affected the lives of 500,000 people. At least 100 people are reported to have been killed and more than 100,000 houses damaged or destroyed. This is said to be one of the worst natural disasters the country has experienced for decades.

## **Syria**

### **Plans for economic agreements with Russia**

During his visit to Damascus Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borissov declared on 07 September 2020 that Russia and Syria intended to conclude an economic agreement to circumvent US sanctions. This agreement would cover 40 new projects in the energy sector, the reconstruction of several power plants and offshore oil production. He expects to sign the agreement during his next visit in December 2020, Borissov said.

## **Turkey**

### **COVID-19 measures**

According to the Turkish news agency Anadolu, the government will make wearing of masks compulsory nationwide on 08 September 2020. This applies in all 81 provinces and affects almost all public areas such as streets, parks, public gardens, picnic areas, factories and the workplace. Also public beaches are explicitly included. However, no mask has to be worn on hotel beaches.

Minister of Education Ziya Selcuk declared on 09 September 2020 that due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, normal classroom instruction will only be available for pre-school children and first graders for the time being. For the older pupils or higher classes online instruction will be continued. Schools were supposed to reopen on 21 September 2020 for all children of school age.

### **Journalists convicted of betrayal of secrets**

On 09 September 2020, a court in Istanbul sentenced five journalists to several years in prison, among other things for leaking state secrets, according to media reports. Among them was Baris Pehlivan, editor-in-chief of the Turkish opposition online platform Oda TV, who was sentenced to three years and nine months in prison. The journalists were accused of revealing the identity of an employee of the Turkish secret service MIT who was killed in Libya, thus betraying state secrets. Oda TV had rejected the accusations and stated that the man's identity had already been known previously. The journalist Hülya Kilinc received the same punishment as Pehlivan. Murat Agirel, a columnist for the Turkish newspaper Yenicag, was sentenced to four years and eight months in prison. The three accused had been held in pre-trial detention since March 2020 and were conditionally released after the sentence was passed. The court also sentenced two journalists from the pro-Kurdish newspaper Yeni Yasam, Ferhat Celik and Aydin Keser, to four years and eight months in prison for revealing the identity of two MIT employees. The public prosecutor's office had demanded sentences of up to 19 years in prison. The defendants stated that they had only worked as journalists.

### **Arrests of ESP members**

According to media reports, raids of the HDP member party Socialist Party of the Oppressed (ESP) took place in several cities in Turkey on 08 September 2020. During these raids, 14 people were arrested on suspicion of membership in a terrorist organisation. In the evening of the same day, a protest against the arrests was held in Istanbul-Kadıköy.

## Tunisia

### **Attack on security forces**

A police officer was killed and another injured in an attack on security forces in Sousse in eastern Tunisia on 08 September 2020. Three attackers were killed and seven people close to the attackers were arrested. IS claimed responsibility for the attack.

## Venezuela

### **Guaidó pays out bonus for health workers**

Since 10 September 2020, a few thousand employees of medical facilities have received the first instalment of a total of three planned payments of 100 dollars each, which corresponds to approximately five times the monthly salary of a nurse. Several anonymous sources confirmed the receipt of the money.

The payment was made on instructions by the parallel government under President Juan Guaidó, which holds hardly any real power, but whose party alliance still dominates the disempowered parliament. The money comes from Venezuelan government accounts in the USA, to which the Maduro government has no access due to the sanctions, but which were made available to Guaidó. However, it is still unclear how the Maduro government will react to the acceptance of the money. In the first phase, the payments mainly went to employees in the border states with Colombia, such as Maracaibo, which are particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, the Maduro government has also received a considerable amount of medical aid from abroad, especially from Cuba. In addition, the Russian vaccine Sputnik V is to be tested in Venezuela, but this has provoked very mixed reactions, as the risks are still unclear and from a medical point of view its widespread use is mostly considered premature.

## Belarus

### **New protests and hundreds of arrests**

More than 400 people were arrested during the new mass protests against head of state Alexander Lukashenko in the capital Minsk on 13 September 2020, 250 of them even before the protest march began. This was announced by the Ministry of the Interior in the capital. In Minsk alone, tens of thousands of people participated ignoring the ban on demonstrations. The Belarusian human rights organization Viasna even put the figure at more than 150,000 participants. This time the democracy movement called for a "march of heroes", which was to be dedicated to the opposition leader Maria Kolesnikova, who had been imprisoned last week. More protests were held in other cities throughout the country, including Vitebsk and Grodno, with police in Vitebsk advancing brutally against peaceful protesters.

The protests against incumbent Lukashenko have been ongoing since the controversial presidential elections of 09 August 2020. Lukashenko had recently replaced the head of the security apparatus and called for tougher action against protesters. During the traditional women's protests on Saturday, 12 September 2020, women protesters were seriously attacked by masked men in uniforms without identification badges. Over 100 arrests were made.

Lukashenko has repeatedly stressed that even after 26 years in office he will do everything possible to remain in power, in this he is supported this by Russia's President Putin. According to the constitution, the inauguration must take place within two months of the election, i.e. by 09 October 2020. Lukashenko's opponents, however, consider the 38-year-old opposition politician Svetlana Tikhonovskaya the winner of the presidential elections.