



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

Attacks, hostilities, civilian victims

On 18 October 2020, a car bomb exploded near the police headquarters in Firozkoh, capital of central Ghor province. Victim figures range from 12 to 15 killed civilians and another 100 to 151 injured. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Also on 18 October, security forces reported that after days of fighting, the Taliban took control of the 8th police district of Faizabad, capital of north-eastern Badakhshan province. Further attacks in two districts of southern Kandahar province were fended off.

On 15 October 2020, the governor of southern Helmand province reported continued fighting in the province since 10 October, the main targets being the capital Lashkargah and parts of Nawa, Nahr-e-Saraj and Nad-e-Ali districts. Apparently, the Taliban are receiving support from al-Qaida, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Lashkar-e-Taiba and other groups. There are reports of massive damage to the province's infrastructure. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), thousands of civilians have fled (official figures put the number at over 5,000 families; local sources speak a total of 35,000 people); there are first reports of civilians killed and injured. Two clinics and seven other health facilities have been closed, as have over 40 schools, UNAMA says.

Research by the New York Times indicates a death toll of at least 161 pro-government forces and 77 civilians in security incidents in different provinces so far in October (as of 15 October 2020).

Armenia/Azerbaijan

Fragile ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh

In the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, Armenia and Azerbaijan have accused each other of breaking the ceasefire agreed only on 17 October 2020. The ceasefire was to come into force at midnight (10.00 pm Central European Time). Already a week before, Armenia and Azerbaijan had agreed on a ceasefire with Russian mediation. However, this agreement was broken shortly after its entry into force, for which both states blamed each other.

Both sides have now accused each other of renewed violations of the ceasefire and reported fighting taking place on 18 October 2020. The Azerbaijani defence ministry said that the area around the town of Djabrail was attacked with mortars and artillery, followed by appropriate retaliatory measures. Armenia, in turn, reported rocket attacks by the Azerbaijani side in Nagorno-Karabakh including its capital Stepanakert, injuring at least three civilians. However, information from the conflict region cannot be verified independently. Both Russia's foreign minister Lavrov and EU representatives have urged both sides to observe the agreed ceasefire.

Belarus

Continuing protests against President Lukashenko

Last weekend saw new protest rallies against President Alexander Lukashenko in several cities. Before, the deputy minister of interior had announced to use firearms against protesters, if necessary. In the presence of police and soldiers, tens of thousands of people gathered in Minsk on 18 October 2020. Vyasna human rights organisation reports the arrest of at least 200 people. Already a day before, hundreds of women and students gathered in the country to protest against the President. Since Lukashenko's officially declared victory in the presidential elections held on 9 August 2020, protests against his continued presidency have been taking place regularly throughout the country. The opposition accuses the political leadership of electoral fraud and considers civil rights activist Svetlana Tikhonovskaya as the true winner of the elections.

Bolivia

Presidential elections in Bolivia

On 18 October 2020, presidential elections were held in Bolivia. Luis Arce of the Movement for Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo - MAS) is considered the favourite, with polls forecasting up to 44 percent for him. He was minister of economics under Evo Morales, the country's first indigenous president who had ruled Bolivia since 2006, but was forced to resign due to pressure from the military following accusations of irregularities in the presidential elections in October 2019 (see BN of 11 November 2019). Observers expect a second round of voting against moderately conservative former president Carlos Mesa. Also of importance are the parliamentary elections taking place at the same time, in which the chamber of deputies and the senate will be re-elected. Forecasts say that MAS will lose its absolute majority.

Burkina Faso

Numerous civilians killed in attacks by armed groups

On 14 October 2020, unspecified armed groups attacked the northern villages of Demniol, Bombofa and Peteguere, killing about 20 people, the government stated. The following day two people, a school headmaster and a farmer, were killed in what appears to be a terrorist attack in Oudalan province, the governor of Sahel region reported. The perpetrators have not yet been identified. Already in the night of 4 October to 5 October 2020, a total of 25 people were killed in an attack on a convoy of internally displaced people, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports. The convoy was intended to bring a total of 46 people back to their homes from the town of Pissila (Centre-North region, Sanmatenga province). The remaining survivors, women and children, were released by the armed group who then fled the scene.

Burkina Faso, where presidential elections are scheduled to take place on 22 November 2020, is facing a growing wave of violence, UNHCR says. Since 2018, Islamist groups have been trying to fuel ethnic conflicts. Armed groups have carried out numerous attacks on civilians (see inter alia BN of 13 January 2020, 27 January 2020, 3 February 2020, 24 February 2020, 16 March 2020, 8 June 2020, 10 August 2020). According to UNHCR, Burkina Faso is currently the country with the largest increase in the proportion of internally displaced people in the total population. Over one million people are currently affected, which is more than 5% of the population. The conflicts also further undermine the already difficult food security situation in the country.

China

Xinjiang: Uighur children in internment camps

On 15 October 2020, scientist Adrian Zenz published an analysis of secret government documents concluding that in Yarkand County (also spelled Yarkant; Kashgar Prefecture) alone, more than 10,000 predominantly Uighur children are growing up with one parent at most; about 1,000 of them live entirely without parents. Some of the children are housed in state boarding schools or orphanages. Hence, a large proportion of the parents are either in

re-education camps or in detention. Between 2017 and 2019, the number of children living in internment camps throughout Xinjiang rose by 380,000 to almost 900,000, the analysis says.

Colombia

Indigenous people start protest march to Bogotá

Media report that thousands of Cali indigenous people started a five-day demonstration march to the capital on 15 October 2020 with the aim to exert pressure on the Colombian government in the face of violent attacks. Media and indigenous organisations provided different figures on the number of participants, ranging between 5,000 and 12,000. Indigenous organisations say that the march is in protest against killings of social activists and massacres in Colombia's rural areas where many indigenous people live. Media report that 1.9 million of Colombia's 50 million inhabitants consider themselves indigenous.

DR Congo

50,000 IDPs after new fighting in North Kivu

On 9 October 2020, a spokeswoman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said at a press conference that more than 50,000 people have recently been newly displaced as a result of increased fighting in North Kivu, many of them children including numerous unaccompanied children. At least 13 people were killed in an attack on the village of Mbau on 21 September 2020, she added; the following day, the village of Musuku was looted and burned to the ground. Many people have been missing since. Both attacks are attributed to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). Most of the displaced people have fled to the town of Mangina, the spokeswoman said. In other regions of North Kivu and Ituri provinces, particularly around Irumu, there has also been a recent sharp increase in violence by new armed groups, the UNHCR spokeswoman said, with all these groups using looting and pillaging methods. As a result, the 3.4 million internally displaced people in the two provinces have been joined by others, she added, with the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the country reaching about 5.5 million.

Ecuador

Ecuador Indigenous group sues government

The national indigenous umbrella organisation Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE) has filed a lawsuit against the Ecuadorian government for crimes against humanity, media reports say. The complaint, filed on 12 October 2020, also names government representatives, including the current President of Ecuador, Lenín Moreno. The charge is based on violence against protesters in October 2019, who had demonstrated against the abolition of state fuel subsidies, among other things. In the events, violent clashes between protesters and police had occurred especially in the capital Quito, killing at least eleven people and seriously injuring more than 300 others, CONAIE stated. On the day the lawsuit was filed, members of the indigenous community carried out a number of other actions, including an ancestral ritual in honour of those killed in the October 2019 protests.

Egypt

Satirist released after two years in custody

On 17 October 2020, a court in Giza ordered the release of Shady Abu Zeid from pre-trial detention with probationary measures in place. Zeid, who is known for his satirical channel in the social media and who had spoken out on topics critical of the regime and society, had been arrested in May 2018 on charges of spreading false news and membership of a terrorist organisation.

Iran

New AI report: systematic torture in Iran

According to current information collected by Amnesty International (AI), torture is used in Iran to punish, intimidate and humiliate prisoners. These methods also include interrogation tactics to extract self-incriminating statements and confessions, e.g. admitting not only participation in anti-government protests, but also testifying alleged connections to opposition groups, human rights activists, journalists and media outside Iran and to foreign governments, AI says.

Child marriages in the Islamic Republic

In Iran, thousands of underage children are forced to marry every year. The Iranian vice president for women and families, Massoumeh Ebtekar, has told IRNA state news agency that 30,000 girls under 14 are married every year. Iranian marriage law is governed by the Sharia rules, saying that girls are eligible for marriage at the age of 9 and boys at 15. A girl's marriage is decided by her father or her paternal grandfather; in certain cases, also a judge can decide on this matter.

Jury participation in political trials for the first time

For the first time since the introduction of Sharia law 41 years ago, the presence of a jury is envisaged for some political trials. On 13 October 2020, Tehran's prosecutor Ali Alghassi Mehr declared that for the first time, two political trials with five defendants were to be conducted in the presence of a jury; a further 18 political trials will also be attended by a jury. In this context, the head of justice Ebrahim Raisi stated that political trials shall be separated from so-called security trials in future. This has not been the case so far, although Article 168 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic stipulates that political and press trials must take place in public and in the presence of a jury.

Aid for four million people halted

On 15 October 2020, the United Nations (UN) announced that humanitarian aid to four million Yemenis had to be halted due to a funding shortage. The aid now reaches only 9 million people instead of 13 million, as was the case at the beginning of 2020. The UN has repeatedly warned of the consequences of the lack of funding for aid programmes (see BN of 24 August and 28 September 2020).

Kyrgyzstan

Political crisis

In the wake of violent unrest following the parliamentary elections on 4 October 2020, President Sooronbai Sheenbekov announced his resignation on 15 October. After two parties close to the government were declared the victors of the parliamentary elections, violent unrest erupted as a result of protests against vote rigging. Hundreds of people were injured in clashes between security forces and protesters. On 16 October 2020, the parliament approved the transfer of presidential powers to Prime Minister Sadyr Shaparov. He had been released from prison during the protests and elected Prime Minister by parliament. The parliament also lifted the state of emergency previously imposed on the capital Bishkek. The central election commission announced 17 January 2021 as the provisional date for new elections.

Lebanon

Anniversary of the protest movement

19 October 2020 marked the first anniversary of the beginning of the comprehensive protest movement in Lebanon. Assemblies and protest marches took place in several cities. Initially, the protests had been sparked mainly by the publication of plans for a new tax on voice messages in messenger services which in Lebanon replace normal telephone calls for most people for reasons of cost. Soon, the protests turned into a fundamental movement against the prevailing system of sectarian power distribution, which ultimately allows a very limited number of actors access to key positions which they have held for decades.

An early success was seen in the overthrow of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his government. However, protests dwindled sharply due to both the economic crisis and the COVID-19 crisis, combined with a resolute approach by the security forces. Massive protests were again held after the explosion in the port of Beirut.

Formation of government

After the attempt to form a government failed, Prime Minister-designate Mustapha Diab resigned. Now, Saad Hariri is trying to form a new government coalition. On 17 October 2020, the two largest Christian parties, the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces, announced that they were not prepared to support Hariri, leaving him only with the option to form a government with the two largest Shiite parties AMAL and Hezbollah. The chairman of the Free Patriotic Movement had announced this at party celebrations on 13 October in commemoration of 13 October 1990, when Syrian forces had stormed Beirut's Baabda Palace, the official residence of the Lebanese President, held at the time by warlord Michel Aoun, thus sealing the end of the civil war. Today, Michel Aoun is again President of the country and resides in the Baabda Palace.

Montenegro

Ombudsman criticises conditions of detention for arrested clergymen

Media report that the ombudsman is accusing the police of degrading detention conditions in the case of seven Serbian Orthodox clergymen. In May 2020, they had been held in custody for 72 hours in the city of Nikšić for having organised a religious procession in honour of Saint Vasilije despite the ban on assemblies in place at that time due to the Corona pandemic. Among other things, the ombudsman criticises the fact that a priest was not given a place to sleep. The NGO Council for Civil Control of Police has generally criticised the detention conditions following non-compliance with the lockdown regulations in the time period March-May 2020. Montenegro's criminal law provides for fines or imprisonment of up to one year for violation of orders to prevent the spread of a dangerous infectious disease.

The arrest of the clergymen on 12 May 2020 had led to violent protests in connection with the controversial religious law (see BN of 18 May 2020). The new government majority appears to be divided on the continued application of the law on religion which had been passed by the previous government. The smallest coalition partner Black on White, having initially announced to repeal the law (see BN of 14 September 2020), has now spoken out in favour of an amendment instead, media say.

Nicaragua

Law on the regulation of foreign agents adopted

On 15 October 2020, the parliament adopted by 70 votes to 17 a controversial law allowing the monitoring of foreign-funded individuals and organisations operating in Nicaragua, who in future will be required to register as foreign agents. They will also have to report their spending to the authorities and will not be allowed to be politically active. With this move, the ruling party Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) intends to prevent foreign interference in national politics. The opposition has criticised the law, saying that it violates human rights, is in contradiction to the constitution and serves to limit the opposition's ability to act.

Nigeria

Continuing protests against police violence

Since 8 October 2020 there have been demonstrations against police violence in Nigeria with thousands of participants. The nationwide protests were initially directed primarily against the elite Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), which has since been dissolved. In the past, SARS had been criticised on several occasions for their harsh measures against civilians. For example, a video appeared online on 3 October 2020 showing the killing of a young man by a SARS member in the federal state of Delta, media reports say. Under the hashtag #EndSARS, the protests spread rapidly in social media, leading to expressions of solidarity at home and abroad. Meanwhile, the demonstrators are demanding far-reaching police reforms. Citing information from Amnesty International (AI),

media report that at least ten people have died in connection with the protests so far. On 17 October 2020, the Governor of Osun State reported to have been physically attacked during a protest action.

Pakistan

Rallies of the new opposition movement

The opposition movement Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), founded in September 2020 and consisting of a coalition of the largest and other smaller opposition parties (see BN of 28 September 2020), organised large-scale rallies in Gujranwala (Punjab) on 16 October 2020 and in Karachi (Sindh) on 18 October 2020, each with tens of thousands of participants. Further nationwide protests are planned.

Attack in Balochistan

On 15 October 2020, armed perpetrators attacked vehicles of an oil and gas company, which were accompanied by security forces on their way from the port city of Gwadar to Karachi near Ormara in Balochistan province. At least 14 people were killed, including members of the security forces. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the attack. In the past, Baloch separatist groups have carried out similar attacks.

Christ acquitted of blasphemy accusations

On 6 October 2020, a Christian sentenced to death for blasphemy was acquitted by a higher court in Lahore, Punjab, after six years in prison. This is the second court decision of this kind: In 2018, Christian woman Asia Bibi, who had been sentenced to death for blasphemy, was acquitted.

Ahmadi shot dead in Peshawar

On 5 October 2020, a university professor belonging to the Ahmadiyya faith community was presumably shot dead by a colleague in a dispute over religious issues in the north-western city of Peshawar, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Two months earlier, an Ahmadi accused of blasphemy had been shot dead in a courtroom in Peshawar.

Somalia

Armed conflicts and attacks

At least eight soldiers were killed following an attack on a military convoy between Afgoye and Wanlaweyn on 15 October 2020.

On 14 October 2020 several soldiers and al-Shabaab fighters were killed in fighting near Afgoye.

Suspected al-Shabaab militants attacked the house of the mayor of Jalalaqsi City, Hiran Region, and a police station in this city on 11 October 2020. The mayor was not injured, but at least one individual was killed and two others were injured in the attack on the police station.

Military court sentences

Last week, several people were sentenced to life imprisonment or death by military courts:

A military court in Jubaland sentenced a man to death for involvement in a terrorist attack in Kismayo in 2019.

Two other men were sentenced to life imprisonment by a military tribunal in Puntland after being found guilty of having links to al-Shabaab.

In addition, two men were sentenced to life imprisonment by a military court in Mogadishu for involvement in an attack on a military base near Mogadishu in 2019.

Syria

Wildfire ravage in some provinces

Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian Territories have been hit by a heat wave untypical for this time of year. In Syria, the provinces of Latakia, Tartus and Homs were affected, where heavy fires broke out. Three people died in

the fires on 9 October and 10 October 2020. Early estimates suggest that 28,000 households and 140,000 people are affected by the damage caused. Apparently, up to 25,000 have become homeless.

On 13 October, SANA state news agency published pictures of President Assad travelling to Latakia where he met with residents affected by fire damage. Public appearances of this kind are still considered a rarity in the civil war country. Assad's home town Qardaha, also in Latakia, was particularly badly affected by the fires.

SDF grant amnesty to hundreds of IS fighters

On 15 October 2020, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced to release a total of 631 inmates from detention centres in the north-east of the country and to halve the prison sentences of another 253 prisoners. Amina Omar, co-chairwoman of the Syrian Democratic Council, said the released prisoners had not been involved in any violent crimes and were meanwhile regretting to have joined the jihadist militia.

The amnesty was granted following reconciliation agreements with Arab family groups in north-eastern and eastern Syria.

The SDF are currently maintaining more than two dozen prisons with about 10,000 (ex-) IS fighters, including about 2,000 foreigners, 800 of them from Europe.

Thailand

Protests against government

On 18 October 2020, tens of thousands demonstrated against the government in Bangkok for the fourth day in a row despite the ban on assemblies in place, shouting 'down with the dictatorship' and 'reform the monarchy'. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, former head of the military junta, whose resignation the demonstrators are demanding, showed willingness to talk, but refused to resign. For about three months now, thousands have been protesting against the government of Prayut Chan-o-cha, demanding his resignation. Media report that on 15 October most of the protest leaders were arrested including Anon Nampa, who is considered the leader of the movement. Meanwhile, criticism is also directed against the monarchy, which is an absolute taboo break in Thailand where insulting the monarchy is punishable with up to 15 years imprisonment. Some demonstrators have demanded a limitation of King Maha Vajiralongkorn's power.

Turkey

Further arrests of Gülen followers

Anadolu state news agency reports new arrests of suspected Gülen supporters on 13 October 2020. At least 136 people were arrested in several provinces including Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir; a total of 192 search orders were issued and further suspects are being sought, the report says. The operations were targeted, inter alia, against members of the Turkish coast guard and air force. The Turkish government blames the Gülen movement for the attempted coup in 2016 and had classified the movement as a terrorist organisation in that year.

New arrests of HDP politicians

After several politicians of the pro-Kurdish opposition party HDP had been detained in recent weeks, there were further arrests last week. On 15 October 2020, for instance, Sevin Alaca, co-mayor of the eastern city of Kars, was arrested, as was Cengiz Anli, provincial chairman of the HDP in Kars.

Military operations extended

On 7 October 2020, the Turkish parliament approved a draft law to extend the mandate for cross-border military operations in both Iraq and Syria for another year. With the exception of the pro-Kurdish HDP, all major Turkish government and opposition parties voted in favour of the draft law which extends the mandate until 30 October 2021.

COVID-19: counting of patients instead of infections

Under pressure from the opposition, the Turkish government has admitted that the COVID-19 statistics have been embellished, media reports say. Estimates by the Turkish medical association suggest that the government had

concealed about 350,000 infections in recent months. At a press conference, Turkish health minister Fahrettin Koca had stated that since 29 July 2020, COVID-19 figures included only people who have tested positive and are showing symptoms. Thus, all figures released since that date refer to patients and no longer to infections, he said. The minister concluded that COVID-19 infected people with asymptomatic disease courses who did not need medical treatment were no longer included in the statistics.

Uganda

Raid on the office of an opposition party

On 14 October 2020, security forces searched the offices of the opposition party National Unity Platform (NUP) led by Bobi Wine (civil name: Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu) in Kampala. Apparently, 82 people were arrested. Wine intends to challenge President Museveni in the 2021 elections. Security forces are reported to have confiscated, among other things, money and documents with signatures required for Wine's registration as a presidential candidate. The security forces have denied this, stating that the raid was aimed at seizing military clothing suspected of being used illegally by civilians. Wine and his supporters often use a red beret, which is also worn by some of the military.

Yemen

Exchange of Prisoners

On 15 and 16 October 2020, the Yemeni government supported by Saudi Arabia and the Houthi rebels exchanged over 1,000, as was agreed in September (see BN of 28 September 2020). This is the largest prisoner exchange since the outbreak of the conflict. Already in 2018 the parties had agreed to exchange 15,000 prisoners, but this has not been implemented so far.

On 14 October 2020, two Americans detained by the Houthi rebels were exchanged for about 240 Houthi fighters detained in Oman.