



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

COVID-19 pandemic

Despite international deliveries of tens of thousands of personal protective equipment and other medical supplies, hospitals across the country are reporting a shortage of equipment. Particularly affected are disputed areas such as Helmand province, where the United Nations (UN) estimates that 35,000 people are internally displaced. The situation is further aggravated by the destruction or closure of health facilities affecting some 20,000 people.

Attacks, hostilities, civilian victims

On 25 October 2020, at least 30 people died and at least 57 were injured in an attack by the ISKP in Kabul. The victims are mainly Shiite schoolchildren. The attack took place in front of a school centre (Kawsar-e-Danish Education Center) in the Shiite district of Dasht-e-Barchi. Eyewitness report that the assassin wore an army uniform and tried to enter the school, but was stopped. At the same location, the ISKP had carried out an attack in August 2018 with over 50 dead. Members of the Shiite religious community are regularly targeted by ISKP attacks.

On 21 October 2020, an air raid on a mosque killed at least 12 children and injured at least 14 others.

The fighting in southern Helmand province is continuing (see BN of 19 October 2020). However, the provincial governor has stated that the Taliban's attempt to capture the capital Lashkargah has failed.

According to the Afghan ministry of interior, more than 350 Taliban attacks took place last week, killing over 50 civilians. Reports of 21 October 2020 speak of almost 600 Taliban attacks on security forces and government facilities in the month of October, killing 180 civilians and injuring another 375.

According to research by the New York Times, at least 306 pro-government forces and 134 civilians died in security incidents in different provinces in October 2020 (as of 22 October 2020).

Albania

President refuses to sign new election law

Apparently, President Ilir Meta has not signed the electoral law, which was passed by parliament on 5 October 2020 (see BN of 12 October 2020), and instead returned it to parliament. The accompanying presidential decree gives not only formal reasons for the refuse, but also criticise various violations of general electoral principles, such as the equality of the election. The President also stated that on 21 October 2020 he had asked the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe for an opinion on the law.

Armenia / Azerbaijan

Another ceasefire agreed for Nagorno-Karabakh

In the conflict over the South Caucasus region of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan have again agreed to a ceasefire. Since 23 October 2020, US Secretary of State Pompeo has been in Washington negotiating a ceasefire with the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan. On 25 October, a new ceasefire was announced to start in the morning of 26 October. The Minsk Group of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), led by Russia, France and the US, stated that discussions were also held on the possible monitoring of a ceasefire and on key elements for resolving the conflict. Two agreed ceasefires brokered by the Russian foreign ministry have recently been broken. Armenia and Azerbaijan accuse each other of blocking a peaceful solution.

Fatalities and refugee movements

Russia's President Putin has stated that so far, there have been around 2,000 deaths on each side. Putin's figures are much higher than the official figures given by the two conflict parties. The authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh report that 874 soldiers and more than 30 civilians have been killed so far. The Azerbaijani side speaks of 63 civilians killed, but still does not give any death figures for the military.

Apparently, about half of the 150,000 inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh, particularly women and children, are either escaping to the Republic of Armenia or have already found refuge there.

Belarus

Continuing protests against President Lukashenko

Last weekend, protest rallies against President Alexander Lukashenko were staged in several cities for the eleventh consecutive weekend. Security forces used stun grenades and rubber bullets against protesters. The human rights organisation Vyasna reports that more than 120 people were arrested during the protests. In Minsk, more than 100,000 people took part in a protest march on 25 October 2020. President Lukashenko did not respond to the opposition's ultimate demand for his resignation by 25 October. In this case, the opposition had announced a general strike starting on 26 October 2020.

Bolivia

Left-wing candidate Arce wins presidential election

Contrary to most forecasts, the candidate of the Movement for Socialism (MAS) Luis Arce won the presidential election already in the first round. On 23 October 2020, the supreme electoral court stated that he secured 55 percent of votes. Conservative ex-president Carlos Mesa received almost 29 percent, the right-wing conservative candidate Luis Fernando Camacho received 14 percent. To win the first round of voting, a candidate needs either more than 50 percent of votes or at least 40 percent and a ten point lead over the runner-up. Voter turnout was 87 percent, some ten percent higher than in the last elections. In Bolivia, voting is compulsory.

In an impromptu press conference, Arce addressed the citizens of Bolivia: "We have taken an important step forward, we have regained democracy and, above all, we have regained hope". Arce promised to form a government of national unity. He had been minister of economy under Evo Morales, the first indigenous president of Bolivia who had to resign a year ago under pressure from the military. From his exile in Argentina, Morales announced his return to Bolivia.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Charge against the head of the secret service for abuse of authority

Osman Mehmedagić, director of the intelligence and security service (Obavještajno sigurnosna / bezbjednosna agencija BiH, OSA-OBA BiH), and Muhamed Pekić, head of the cyber security unit of OSA-OBA BiH, have both been charged with abuse of authority by the country's public prosecutor's office. Media report that the prosecution

made this public on 22 October 2020. The two officials are accused of having used OSA-OBA BiH resources in various ways to obtain information about an individual who had filed an anonymous criminal complaint against Mehmedagić. The content of the anonymous complaint was not disclosed. The public prosecutor's office demanded the suspension of both officials. The charges still have to be admitted by the competent court.

Burundi

Former President Buyoya convicted of murder

Various sources report that on 19 or 20 October 2020, former President Pierre Buyoya was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment for his participation in the 1993 murder of his successor Melchior Ndadaye by the supreme court. 15 co-defendants, including former high-ranking military officers, also received life sentences; three other defendants were sentenced to 20 years imprisonment each. Only five of the defendants were present at the trial. Ndadaye had won the first democratic elections in Burundi in 1993 and was the first member of the Hutu ethnic group to hold the presidency. Following his assassination in the same year during an attempted coup d'état by Tutsi military personnel, civil war broke out, resulting in some 300,000 deaths by 2006. Buyoya, an ethnic Tutsi, was President from 1987 to 1993 and from 1996 to 2003. He is currently acting as the African Union (AU) representative for Mali and the Sahel. He has described the process as politically motivated.

China

Agreement with Vatican on the appointment of bishops extended

As was stated by representatives of the Vatican and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 22 October 2020, a controversial agreement on the appointment of bishops will be extended for a further two years. The 2018 agreement provides for the appointment of Catholic bishops by mutual agreement and recognition by both sides. Its text is confidential and has not yet been published. Proponents hope for a relaxation of the situation of the Catholic Church in China, which is divided into a state-recognised church and an unrecognised underground church. Critics fear that the agreement will lead to increased pressure on clergy and believers of the underground church from Chinese state authorities to join the official Catholic Church, sometimes accompanied by human rights violations.

Côte d'Ivoire

UN calls for a halt to violence in the run-up to the elections

Media report that on 22 October 2020, the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) condemned the violent events taking place in the run-up to the presidential elections scheduled for 31 October 2020. During the protests, deaths have been registered in several places. State authorities responded to the events by deploying additional security forces, the Secretary-General said. The opponents of Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara are refusing to accept the elections, arguing that Ouattara's candidacy for a third term after two five-year terms is unconstitutional (see BN of 21 September 2020). Ouattara had decided to run for office in the summer of 2020, after the unexpected death of his favourite successor (see BN of 3 August 2020). In the meantime, opposition candidates have withdrawn their candidacies and called on their supporters to engage in an active boycott to prevent the presidential elections.

DR Congo

Attack on prison: hundreds of prisoners escape

In the early morning of 20 October 2020, a coordinated attack took place on Kangbaji prison in the city of Beni (North Kivu province). Apparently, dozens of prisoners managed to escape, with various media reports speaking of several hundred, of over 900 or even over 1,000 prisoners. Some 100 inmates, mostly old and sick individuals, remained in custody; two of the prisoners were killed, the mayor of Beni said. Kangbaji prison houses members of various militias, including fighters of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) who are blamed for the attack, although

no-one has claimed responsibility after the incident. Only one media report indicated that the IS, to which the ADF had sworn allegiance, has claimed responsibility for the attack. Representatives of the Beni civil society accuse the military, who were responsible for guarding the prison, of not having offered any real resistance. Over the last six years, more than 3,000 people have died in massacres in the city; most of the killings were attributed to the ADF. Already in June 2017 there had been an attack on Kangbaji prison, during which the inmates had been freed.

HRW: Parts of the army support NDC-R militia

In a statement published on 20 October 2020, Human Rights Watch (HRW) accuses the country's authorities of not having arrested Guidon Shimiray Mwissa (known as Guidon), leader of a faction of the militia Nduma Defense of Congo-Rénové (NDC-R), despite the fact that an arrest warrant had been issued on 7 June 2019. Before its split in July 2020, the NDC-R apparently controlled more territory than any other armed group in eastern Congo, being effectively in administrative control of much of Walikale, Lubero, Masisi, and Rutshuru territories in North Kivu. Reports say that Guidon was able to control such large areas of the country only with the consent of highly ranked military staff. The NDC-R is accused of numerous killings, torture, rape and displacement in the areas under its control. HRW has not identified any attempt by UN peacekeepers to arrest Guidon. One media report cited an army spokesperson saying that government troops are actively searching for Guidon.

Egypt

Egypt starts voting in parliamentary elections

On 24/25 October 2020, the residents in 14 of the 27 Egyptian provinces were called to vote in the parliamentary elections; in the remaining 13 provinces, including the capital Cairo, voting will take place on 7/8 November 2020. The final results are expected to be announced in mid-December 2020. The 4,000 candidates, most of whom belong to the government camp under head of state Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, are running for a total of 596 seats in the Egyptian lower house. A large number of members of the country's fragmented opposition groups are in prison. Critical voices say that the outcome of the elections with al-Sisi's supporters as victors has already been determined in advance.

Death penalty carried out in 49 cases

Human rights organisations and local media report that the Egyptian authorities carried out 49 death sentences between 3 October and 13 October 2020. A total of 15 of the executed had been sentenced to death for political violence. Although the authorities have not confirmed the information, government-affiliated newspapers reported more than 30 executed death sentences in recent weeks.

Human rights organisations criticise that defendants have only limited access to legal assistance and that confessions coerced by torture are used in court proceedings. In addition, mass trials are repeatedly held in which the individuals concerned are not given a fair trial, the organisations say.

Eritrea

Eritrean President indicted in Sweden for crimes against humanity

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has brought criminal charges in Sweden against Eritrea's President Isaias Afwerki and other senior government officials for holding Swedish-Eritrean journalist Dawit Isaak incommunicado for almost two decades. That makes the victim one of the one of the longest imprisoned reporters in the world.

Dawit had come to Sweden as a refugee in 1987, acquired citizenship there, but returned to his home country after Eritrea's independence in 1993 and worked for Setit newspaper, of which he was a co-founder. In September 2001 he was arrested along with several other government critics; his whereabouts have since been unknown. Reporters Without Borders ranks Eritrea 178th out of 180 countries in the index for press freedom.

Already in 2014 RSF had filed a complaint against the Eritrean President and his closest associates, but the charges were dropped by the Swedish prosecutor's office on the grounds that the Eritrean authorities were unlikely to

cooperate with the investigation. A representative of the Eritrean government described the new charge as ‘absurd and ridiculous’.

Honduras

Journalist critical of government and two environmental activists killed

Media report that on 28 September 2020 the journalist Luis Almendáres died as a result of gunshot wounds in the university hospital of the capital Tegucigalpa. The evening before, two unknown motorcyclists fired at him. Apparently, the journalist had received death threats before that. In recent years, Almendáres had drawn attention to grievances in the country mainly via Facebook. He is the third media representative critical of the government to be killed in 2020. In Reporters Without Borders' latest press freedom index, Honduras ranks 148th. Human rights and environmental activists are also regularly threatened and attacked. The Observatorio de la Violencia de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (OV-UNAH) has already registered more than 130 victims of targeted attacks by armed groups since the beginning of the year. Most recently, killings of environmental activists were reported on 27 September and 13 October 2020.

India

Kashmir: restrictions on freedom of information, expression and the press

On 19 October 2020 the offices of the English language newspaper Kashmir Times in Srinagar were closed. Security forces ordered employees to leave the offices without a court order or a warning.

On 21 October 2020, the government issued a decree for 18 out of 20 districts in Jammu and Kashmir extending its ban on high-speed internet services except for the 2G standard, stating that the measure was absolutely necessary in the interest of Indian sovereignty and integrity.

In its report on internet freedom published on 14 October 2020, Freedom House NGO notes that international online platforms have been pressured to delete all critical comments on the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Hindu nationalist agenda and on the approach of the Indian central government in the mainly Muslim Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

Iran

Woman in central Iran violates religious conventions

A woman cycling without a headscarf has caused a public outcry in the ultra-conservative city of Najafabad in the centre of the country. On 20 October 2020, the local administrative president told IRNA state news agency that the cyclist was subsequently arrested by the police. She was accused of ‘breaking social norms and disrespected the Islamic dress codes’. At the same time, a protest action against the cyclist took place in the city which is strongly influenced by religion.

In autumn 2014, several acid attacks had been carried out against women violating the Islamic dress code in Najafabad. The perpetrators have not yet been prosecuted. In social networks, ultra-conservative circles with connections to radical Islamists are blamed for the attacks.

Women appearing in public without complying with the dress code risk 10 to 60 days in prison or a fine.

Punishment and withdrawal of custody in case of conversion

On 23 October 2020, an appeal court decided that a child of Muslim parents may not grow up with non-Muslim adoptive parents. The adoptive parents had adopted the child at the age of 10 weeks and later converted to Christianity. The adoptive mother Maryam Fallahi and her husband Sam Khosravi had already been arrested in early summer last year on charges of conversion. Fallahi was sentenced to a fine of eight million tomans (currently approx. 215 euros). Khosravi was sentenced to one year's imprisonment and two years' residence ban in the city of Bushehr.

Iraq

Anniversary of the protest movement

On 25 October 2020, people took again to the streets in protest against the country's current political elites, its power-sharing system, Iran's interference in Iraqi politics and the violent approach of the security forces. Numerous clashes with the security forces were registered, including the use of tear gas. The day before, Prime Minister Kadhimi had delivered a speech calling on both protesters and security forces to show moderation and not to use lethal force. Counter-demonstrators, mostly supporters of pro-Iranian parties, accused the protest movement to act in the interests of the US.

Incidents in the disputed areas

Security problems continue to increase in the areas disputed between the Kurdistan Autonomous Region (KR-I) and the Iraqi central government. The incidents are mainly attributed to IS cells. On 17 October 2020, three former Peshmerga members were shot dead and their car set on fire when they were searching for a runaway cow in a remote area near Kirkuk. In Makhmour county, a car carrying five members of a family drove into an improvised booby trap. Four of the five occupants of the car died.

Kosovo

Dissolution of anti-corruption police unit

On 19 October 2020, the government announced the dissolution of the anti-corruption task force, which is part of the Kosovo police force. The reason given for the move was to improve the separation of powers by strengthening the prosecutor's office. On 21 October, the spokesperson of the European Commission expressed her concern about the dissolution of the anti-corruption task force. Exactly on the day of the governmental announcement, the EU Rule of Law Mission EULEX had published its first Justice Monitoring Report. The report, which also deals with other aspects of the rule of law, recommends to strengthen the task force in order to support the fight against corruption, stating that the task force had succeeded in uncovering both complex cases in the financial field and cases involving politically important personalities. With regard to the Special Prosecution of Kosovo (SPRK), the report criticises delays in the opening of formal investigations, partly due to excessive workload and partly because of alleged external pressure. Where there have been judgements in cases connected with politics or with the financial sector, often only low sentences and acquittals have been handed down, the report says.

Kyrgyzstan

Political crisis

In the wake of the violent unrest and political crisis caused by the disputed parliamentary elections, the Central election commission announced a rerun of the parliamentary elections on 20 December 2020 and an early presidential election on 10 January 2021. Interim President Sadyr Shaparov, who had been released from prison during the protests, is constitutionally not allowed to stand for election in this election because of his provisional exercise of the presidential office.

Lebanon

Collapse of the economy

On 20 October 2020 the International Monetary Fund (IMF) published its forecast for the development of the Lebanese economy. For the year 2020, a decline in GDP of 25 percent is assumed. The combination of the economic and currency crisis, which has been worsening since 2018, and the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the explosion on 4 August 2020 will have a massive effect on the economic outlook. Lebanon is expected to become the country with the highest public debt relative to GDP in the world this year.

Formation of Government

After the country's leading political figures have agreed on Saad Hariri as Prime Minister, it was also agreed that the new cabinet will comprise 14 ministers and thus be less than half the size of the previous cabinet. The ministries will be staffed by independent experts appointed by the parties. A list of the individuals nominated will be presented on 26 October 2020, but a confirmation of the names has not yet been received.

Libya

Ceasefire agreed

Military representatives of General Chalifa Haftar and Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj agreed to a cease-fire in Libya during negotiations in Geneva on 23 October 2020. Both parties to the conflict announced to withdraw from the front lines and to demobilize armed groups; foreign fighters are obliged to leave the country within three months. Roads and air links between the regions will also be re-opened.

It remains to be seen how the international supporters of the respective camps will react and whether they are willing to give up their presence in the North African country. The Government of National Unity (GNA) in western Libya is supported by Turkey. In the east of the country, the House of Representatives (HoR), under strong influence of General Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA), is supported by Russia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Further negotiations between the two parties to the conflict are to follow in November 2020 in Tunisia.

Myanmar

Fights in Rakhine State

Apparently, the fighting between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) is claiming more and more victims. Last week, three candidates of the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) party were reportedly kidnapped by the AA. At the beginning of the COVID 19 pandemic, the Myanmar government had concluded a ceasefire with many influential rebel armies, but not with the AA, which was founded in 2009. In April 2020, the AA was declared a terrorist organisation.

Nigeria

Dozens killed in nationwide protests

As of 23 October 2020, the ongoing protests against police violence and state arbitrariness have claimed 69 deaths (51 civilians, eleven police officers and seven soldiers), media report say citing Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari. The protests called #EndSARS in Africa's largest economy have been going on since 8 October 2020 (see BN of 19 October 2020). Apparently in connection with the protests, one of the largest prisons in Nigeria was set on fire on 22 October 2020. The situation in the economic metropolis of Lagos was described as chaotic and particularly violent in the time period 20-22 October 2020. The protests were triggered by a video showing a member of the meanwhile disbanded elite Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) killing a young man, media reports say.

Pakistan

Pakistan remains on FATF watch list for terrorist financing

Pakistan remains on the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) grey watch list, as reported by the FATF on 23 October 2020. Although Pakistan has implemented 21 out of 27 measures to stop the financing of terrorism, these steps are still insufficient, FATF stated. In August 2020, various sanctions had been imposed on several banned groups.

Explosion in Karachi

On 20 October 2020, an explosion in a building near a prominent traffic junction in the most densely populated and largest city of Karachi (Sindh) killed at least five people and injured two dozen more. There is no information on the

background to the incident. In the past, the southern metropolis has repeatedly been the scene of political, ethnic and criminal violence.

Serbia

Announcement of new elections even before the appointment of the current government

On 20 October 2020, president Aleksandar Vučić announced that the next parliamentary elections will be held in April 2022, at the same time as both the regular presidential election and the local elections in the capital Belgrade. The last parliamentary elections had been held only on 21 June 2020 and were boycotted by opposition parties (see BN of 22 June 2020). President Vučić's Serbian Progress Party (SNS) won 188 of the 250 seats. Three and a half months later, on 5 October 2000, the President appointed former Prime Minister Ana Brnabić to form a government. On 22 October 2020, parliament met for the first time and elected former foreign minister Ivica Dadić (Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS) as parliamentary president. On 25 October 2020, Brnabić announced the composition of her new government which is supported by SNS, SPS and the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS) and consists of 23 ministers, 11 of them women.

Brnabić is the first Serbian political leader to reveal her homosexuality. Politically, she is considered close to Aleksandar Vučić, who has been determining the country's politics in various positions since 2012. For political scientist Vujo Ilić, the early elections are an attempt to increase the President's democratic credibility both in Serbia and abroad after the opposition's boycott of the elections. At the same time, the merging of the election dates allows the ruling party to exercise greater control over the agenda, the observer says. In the June elections, voter turnout had been as low as 35 percent in Belgrade, which was seen as a clear sign of dissatisfaction with the ruling SNS party.

COVID-19 pandemic

On 16 October 2020, the government prohibited municipalities from granting permits for meetings of more than 30 people. The government intends to treat corona patients in temporary hospitals in order to keep hospitals open for other patients. In particular, a Belgrade sports arena is planned to be converted.

Since July 2020, an open letter from the ad-hoc platform United Against Covid of medical personnel has been circulating, calling for the replacement of the pandemic crisis team. Originally, the letter had about 350 signatories; media report that the number of signatories was 2,827 as of 14 October 2020. Criticism is levelled at the secrecy of data on the pandemic as well as political interference and intimidation at the expense of medical staff. The platform complains about pressure on staff who are critical of government policy regarding the crisis, including degradations and dismissals. According to a media report, seven senior doctors of a military hospital were also dismissed after signing the open letter.

On 22 June 2020, a report by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) revealed that the published infection and death figures for COVID-19 were well below the actual figures. For example, in the four days prior to the parliamentary elections held on 21 June 2020 the number of new infections had exceeded 300, whereas the highest official daily value for the time period 17 June – 20 June 2020 was put at 97. Initially, the government denied the accusations. At the end of September 2020, however, a member of the crisis unit admitted that the true number of deaths during a certain period in June 2020 was three times higher than the official figures. He blamed a problem with the central information system at the point when death figures were entered into the system. On 1 October 2020, President Vučić announced an investigation of the figures, but added that he did not expect any major discrepancies. The authorities had not concealed anything and would continue to work transparently in the future, he said.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) counts 38,872 confirmed infections and 789 deaths related to COVID-19 (as of 25 October 2020). In the last 14 days, 4,187 people have been newly infected, the Centre reports.

Sudan

Removal from the US terrorist list and normalisation of relations with Israel

On 23 October 2020, US President Donald Trump announced that Sudan would be removed from the governmental sanctions list of terror supporting states. This is seen as an important step towards improving Sudan's financial situation. The announcement comes after the Sudanese Interim Government transferred more than \$300 million to American victims of terrorist attacks.

At the same time, President Trump stated that Sudan and Israel have agreed to normalise their relations. Sudan will thus be the third Arab country to normalise relations with Israel this year. However, the agreement has met with resistance in Sudan. Several political parties have opposed the agreement and dozens of people have taken to the streets in protest against the agreement.

Protests

On 21 October 2020, protests took place in Khartoum and other cities across the country. Demonstrators criticised that after a year in power, the transitional government has not been able to improve peoples' living conditions. The demonstrators also demanded results of an investigation into the dissolution of the protests in 2019, in which protesters were killed. Apparently, there were also some riots in which at least one protester was killed and several others injured. The security forces used tear gas and allegedly attacked journalists covering the protests.

Syria

Turkish army evacuates military post

The Turkish military has reportedly cleared the southernmost of its twelve outposts in north-western Syria. The Turkish military post Morek is also one of the largest Turkish positions in the region.

These observation posts had been set up in 2018 to avert an escalation between Syrian-Arab rebels and government troops. However, after continued fighting and the advance of government troops in 2019, several of the Turkish outposts suddenly found themselves surrounded by the Syrian military.

It cannot be said at this stage whether the current withdrawal only heralds a retreat into rebel-controlled territory or a general decline in Turkish troop strength. Apart from Morek, three more of the twelve observation posts are currently surrounded by Syrian government troops.

High-ranking cleric killed

On 22 October 2020, a bomb placed at the roadside killed the Mufti of Damascus Mohammed Adnan Afiouni. The death of the spiritual leader was confirmed by the Syrian state ministry for religious foundations. The attack occurred in Qudsaya, a town west of the capital.

Afiouni had played a key role in many reconciliation agreements between rebels and the government, in which the former gave up embattled neighbourhoods around Damascus; in turn, they were given free passage to the last remaining rebel stronghold in and around Idlib.

The political importance of spiritual leaders such as Afiouni grew during the civil war years, after the government entrusted them with the task of combating Islamist tendencies. It was only in 2019 that Afiouni was appointed by President Assad to head the newly founded Islamic al-Sham Centre to combat extremism.

Tanzania

Several fatalities in the south of the country

On 22 October 2020, Tanzanian security forces confirmed an attack by more than 300 armed men from Mozambique on a village in the Mtwara region of southern Tanzania, in which several inhabitants were killed a week earlier. Some of the attackers were arrested. The Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) has claimed responsibility for the attack. A video distributed in the social media shows the decapitation of a man. This is the first time that the Tanzanian authorities have publicly confirmed the presence of Mozambican militants in the country. The border region is of particular interest to investors because of its gas resources. In general, no connection was seen with the upcoming elections in Tanzania on 28 October 2020.

Thailand

Further protests

On 21 October 2020, protests were staged in the capital for the seventh day in a row; the situation has escalated in the last two weeks. Police used water cannons, rubber bullets and chemical liquids against the protesters. Dozens were injured, among them children. The protesters are demanding an end to royal nepotism; for the royalists this demand is an outrage.

On 22 October 2020, Prime Minister Prayuth lifted the emergency law which had been in force for a week.

Turkey

Warning of terrorist attacks

On 23 October 2020, the US called for increased vigilance by all US citizens in Turkey, in view of credible reports of possible terrorist attacks. Kidnappings of US citizens or members of other nationalities in Istanbul and other places in Turkey were also considered possible. All diplomatic services in Turkey, including visa issuance, were temporarily suspended. US representations in Turkey have been the target of attacks or threats of attacks on several occasions in recent years.

Other judges and prosecutors dismissed

On 19 October 2020, Anadolu state news agency Anadolu that eleven more judges and prosecutors were dismissed for possible links to the Gülen movement and the attempted coup d'état of 2016. The decision had been taken by the Council of Judges and Prosecutors, the agency said.

Ukraine

Local elections

On 24 October 2020, local elections were held in Ukraine. More than 1,400 mayors as well as over 40,000 members of regional and local parliaments stood for election. Kiev's mayor Vitali Klitschko, who took over office in 2014, failed to secure absolute majority for direct re-election and will therefore probably have to face a run-off vote on 15 November 2020. Initial forecasts say that in the first round of voting, the incumbent failed to achieve the necessary absolute majority, securing only 45 percent of votes in the first round. More precise counting results are not expected to be available before the course of 25 October 2020. The head of Kiev's municipal administration Alexander Popov (pro-Russian party Opposition Platform), who had held office until 2013, came in second behind Klitschko with around nine percent and thus will possibly enter the run-off vote. The candidates of President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's party were unable to win or enter the run-off vote in any major city in the country. Observers therefore see the current results as a defeat for Zelenskiy who took over power in May 2019.

Venezuela

Opposition leader Leopoldo López in exile

As was reported on 24 October 2020, opposition leader Leopoldo López has been able to go to exile. He is the head of Venezuela's largest opposition party, of which Juan Guaidó is a member. López had been detained in 2015 and sentenced to 13 years imprisonment for his role in the 2014 protests. In 2019, the secret service agents who were guarding him while under house arrest defected to the opposition and freed him. After the failed attempt to seize power, he found refuge in the Spanish embassy. López holds both Venezuelan and Spanish citizenship.