



# Briefing Notes

## Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

21 December 2020

### Afghanistan

#### Attacks, fighting, civilian victims

On 15 December 2020, the deputy governor of Kabul province and his secretary were killed and two bodyguards injured in a bomb attack in the capital's 9th police district (PD 9, Macroryan). On the same day, a policeman was shot dead and another wounded in PD 12. In Ghor province, the vice-chairman of the provincial council was killed by a magnetic bomb attached to his car. Another provincial council member and his son were injured.

On 16 December 2020, another bombing occurred in Kabul's PD 15, injuring two people.

On 17 December 2020, government employees were targeted in Nangarhar province, as yet unknown perpetrators shot dead an employee of the Afghan intelligence service and injured two of his colleagues.

On 18 December 2020, at least 15 civilians died and 20 were injured in a bomb attack in Ghazni province (Gilan district). The victims had gathered for a religious ceremony.

On 19 December 2020, another intelligence officer was killed in a bomb blast in Balkh province.

On 20 December 2020, a car bomb attack was carried out on a member of parliament in Kabul's PD 5, leaving at least ten people dead and at least 52 injured.

Fighting and attacks continued to be reported in various provinces including Baghlan, Balkh, Parwan, Kabul, Uruzgan, Helmand, Kandahar, Kunduz, Laghman, Nangarhar, Takhar, Farah, Herat, Ghazni, Badghis and Paktika.

#### Number of female journalists decreases

An Afghan media organisation has informed that the number of female journalists has dropped from 2,500 in 2014 to about 1,000. The reasons for this are fear of targeted killings, discrimination and low wages. In many cases, families do not agree with the choice of profession because of the dangers, the organisation stated. In addition, many media companies have come under financial pressure due of the Covid-19 pandemic and have laid off employees.

### Albania

#### Criticism of fundamental rights record in the year of the OSCE chairmanship

In 2020, Albania held the chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE's comprehensive understanding of security also includes respect for fundamental and human rights. Six Albanian civil society and media organisations (Albanian Helsinki Committee/AHC, Civil Rights Defenders/CRD, Institute for Political Studies/IPS, BIRN Albania, the Center for Legal Civic Initiatives/CLCI and Tirana Legal Aid Society/TLAS) take the end of the chairmanship as an opportunity to give the authorities poor marks. In particular, freedom of speech and freedom of the press suffered in 2020, the organisations stated. They cite physical and verbal attacks on media workers (also by Prime Minister Edi Rama himself), the closure of websites and attempts by the government to control and contain online media. At the same time, the transparency of official bodies has been

decreasing, they said, with important legislative changes, for example in criminal, electoral and tax law, being passed without public participation. The same applies to the demolition of the National Theatre on 17 May 2020. The necessary reform of the judiciary has not yet brought the intended improvements in 2020 here, too, a lack of both transparency and progress in the appointment of officials was criticized by the organisations.

Independently of this, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Dunja Mijatović, stated on 16 December 2020 on the occasion of protests against police violence (see BN of 14 December 2020) that the Albanian authorities must maintain proportionality in restrictions on freedom of assembly even in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. A lockdown to protect public health does not justify a blanket ban or violent dispersal of assemblies, she said. Ms Mijatović also expressed concern about related reports of arrests and attacks on journalists.

## **Belarus**

### **Arrests during ongoing protests**

More than four months after the disputed presidential election in Belarus, thousands of government opponents have again demonstrated against President Alexander Lukashenko. On 20 December, more than 100 people were arrested during decentralised protests throughout the country. Protest groups of different sizes formed in the capital Minsk; in some cases only a few dozen people took part in the rallies, in others there were several hundred. The interior ministry in Minsk said that the demonstrators had violated the ban on assemblies.

Opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who escaped to the European Union (EU), has called for further EU and US sanctions against Lukashenko's regime. She said that existing EU sanctions are already succeeding in curbing the flow of money to Lukashenko.

### **National borders closed**

Meanwhile, the government temporarily closed the country's borders. Since 20 December 2020, Belarusian citizens can no longer leave the country via the border crossings to the neighbouring countries. The regulation also affects foreigners living temporarily or permanently in Belarus. The authorities present the border closure as a measure to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. Opposition activists, however, consider this move as another means of repression.

## **Bosnia and Herzegovina**

### **Defamation suits undermine independence of journalism**

A recent media analysis by Balkan Insight (BIRN) informs that media and legal experts such as the Eastern Bosnian lawyer Biljana Radulovic or the judge at the district court in Sarajevo Adi Isakovic have voiced criticism that libel suits are increasingly being used to intimidate journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina. With each election campaign, the number of such cases increases and with it their importance for independent journalism, the critics said. Often, civil servants and public figures who have previously been in the focus of journalists' critical-investigative reporting, are behind such lawsuits, which usually entail long and costly legal proceedings, it was noted. The director of the business portal Capital, Sinisa Vukelic, who is also a member of the journalists' club of Banja Luka in northern Bosnia, said that such defamation suits are deliberately 'abused to systematically prevent journalists from investigating certain topics or certain people'. Expensive and lengthy legal proceedings have already led to the closure or existential crises of a number of media companies in recent years, including Sarajevo's newspaper "Slobodna Bosna" and the weekly newspaper "Respekt" in Banja Luka, Ms Vukelic stated.

## **China**

### **Hong Kong: Charges of illegal border crossing**

Ten of the twelve people who had been arrested by the Chinese coast guard in August 2020 while trying to flee from Hong Kong to Taiwan by speedboat (see BN of 31 August 2020) were charged on 16 December 2020 with illegal border crossing. Two of them are accused of organising the border crossing, which is punishable with up to seven years in prison. Eight people face a maximum of one year in prison each for crossing the border. The

defendants are held in pre-trial detention in Shenzhen (Guangdong Province). Most of them have already been charged in Hong Kong in connection with their involvement in the protest movement.

### **Xinjiang: Forced labour in the cotton harvest**

A report by researcher Adrian Zenz published on 14 December 2020 by the American think tank Center for Global Policy (CGP) says that forced labourers are being used on a large scale for the cotton harvest in Xinjiang. Analysis of government documents and media reports had revealed that at least 570,000 Uighurs and members of other Muslim minorities were used to pick cotton by hand in three predominantly Uighur settlement areas in 2018. Across Xinjiang, the actual number of people affected is likely to be several hundred thousand higher, the report says. These labourers are increasingly replacing the seasonal work of Chinese migrant workers that used to be the norm. The workers are mobilised within the framework of a state programme to fight poverty striving to bring farmers and herders without a regular measurable income into wage labour (see BN of 30 November 2020). Pressure is exerted by the state to force people to participate, the report continues. The pickers are brought to the sites in supervised groups and are monitored by government officials and sometimes by police officers. Ideological training sessions are also held there (for similar measures in Tibet see BN of 28 September 2020). There seems to be no direct connection to the internment camps for members of Muslim minorities, but those released from the camps could also be affected by this measure, the report concludes.

Xinjiang produces 85 percent of China's cotton and a fifth of the world's cotton; in 2019, about 70 percent of the cotton had to be harvested by hand. Cotton products from China are an important part of the Asian garment industry.

## **Cameroon**

### **Abduction of several traditional village leaders**

Media report that at least four traditional village leaders have been abducted in the Anglophone regions of South West and North West following the regional elections held on 6 December 2020. Two of them were released a short time later, while one remains missing; one village leader was killed. Separatist groups are suspected to be behind the abductions. Separatists had called for a boycott of the regional elections and threatened the candidates.

## **Ethiopia**

### **Ethiopia rejects independent enquiry into Tigray conflict**

The Ethiopian government has rejected calls from the international community for an independent investigation into possible human rights violations in the Tigray conflict. A government official said that Ethiopia's own human rights commission was itself independent and capable of investigating abuses.

Regarding the current situation, a government representative stated that the armed forces were 'controlling every village in Tigray' and that the situation is safe. The conflict had not been about an ethnic dispute, he said, rejecting again recent claims by the USA of military aid from neighbouring Eritrea (see BN 14 December 2020). In contrast, other sources report looting and attacks on the civilian population in Tigray by Eritrean soldiers. However, access for media professionals is still restricted, and any information can hardly be verified.

### **Reward offered for the capture of TPLF leadership**

The Ethiopian government has offered a reward of ten million Birr (210,000 EUR) for information leading to the arrest of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) leadership. According to the latest information, the TPLF chairman and former regional president of Tigray, Debretsion Gebremichael, appears to be staying in South Sudan (see BN of 7 December 2020).

### **First aid deliveries to refugee camps**

Although negotiations are still ongoing between the United Nations (UN) and the Ethiopian government on full and unhindered access to the refugee camps in Tigray, a first shipment of food aid has arrived in Adi Harush and Mai Ayni camps which are mainly inhabited by Eritrean refugees. Nevertheless, the situation there is worrying, as there is still a lack of running water and access to health services.

## **Ghana**

### **Protest march dispersed**

On 17 December 2020, supporters of the opposition party National Democratic Congress (NDC) demonstrated in front of the headquarters of the National Electoral Commission in Accra, demanding the recognition of NDC candidate John Dramani Mahama as the winner of the presidential election of 7 December (see BN of 14 December 2020). Security forces broke up the unauthorised demonstration using tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets. Several people were injured; several people were arrested.

## **Guinea**

### **Swearing-in of Alpha Condé; action against the opposition**

82-year-old President Alpha Condé was sworn in again on 15 December 2020 after being re-elected for a third term on 18 December. After the presidential elections, some violent protests had broken out, triggered by the adoption of a constitutional amendment that allowed Condé to run for a third term. The defence and security forces responded to the protests with violence and numerous arrests. According to the opposition, dozens of people have been killed in politically motivated violence in recent weeks. The opposition and human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) have blamed security forces, while the government in turn has accused the opposition for being responsible for the violence. Several opposition leaders have been arrested since the election.

## **India**

### **Protests against liberalisation of the agricultural sector claim lives**

Government officials have informed that at least two dozen people have died since 26 November 2020 in the ongoing protests against the liberalisation of the agricultural sector (see BN of 7 December 2020).

## **Iran**

### **Long prison sentences for women's rights activists**

Media reports say that a court in Tehran has sentenced a sociologist and a lawyer to seven and eight years in prison, respectively, and to a two-year professional ban. The two women are accused of organising workshops for women to educate them about their rights on the subject of equal rights in marriage and the family. Both women were accused of endangering national security and advocating the normalisation of same-sex relationships.

## **Iraq**

### **Rockets hit near Green Zone**

Both the Iraqi military and media sources have reported that at least three rockets exploded not far from the US embassy in the so-called Green Zone, and two others in residential areas. The Iraqi security forces have registered no casualties. Since October 2019, there have been dozens of rocket and bomb attacks on foreign facilities. The US government has repeatedly blamed pro-Iranian militias for the attacks.

### **Christmas to be recognized as a public holiday**

Following a unanimous decision by the Iraqi parliament, there will be an official Christmas holiday in Iraq in the future. A draft law to this effect has been introduced after talks between President Barham Salih and Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael Sako.

## **Montenegro**

### **Montenegro amends controversial religion law**

According to recent media reports, the new Montenegrin government has amended the controversial Law on 'Freedom of Religion and Legal Status of Churches and Religious Communities', removing all aspects that had been rejected as unacceptable by the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro (SPC). The obligation for religious communities to provide clear proof of ownership in order to retain their property (including real estate) was also removed. On 18 December 2020, the new minister of justice, human rights and minority rights Vladimir Leposavic stated that the changes were proposed after extensive consultations with all religious communities. The originally planned obligation of the religious communities to re-register was also withdrawn in the proposed amendment. Among other things, the SPC had pointed out that its religious community has existed for eight centuries in Montenegro.

## **Mozambique / Zimbabwe**

### **Zimbabwe prepares for possible intervention in Mozambique**

On the fringes of a working meeting of presidents and vice-presidents of Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Tanzania held on 14 December 2020 in Mozambique's capital Maputo, details emerged indicating that Zimbabwe is preparing for a possible intervention of its own security forces in the conflict in Cabo Delgado (see for example BN of 2 November, 9 November, 30 November and 7 December 2020). If such an intervention were decided, it would take place within the framework of the SADC (Southern African Development Community) brigade.

Media report that Mozambique's government is seeking international support in the conflict in the north-eastern province, but is also concerned about outside influence and the spotlight this crisis brings to its own governance failures. The government essentially blames transnational terrorism for the conflict. In the view of a representative of UNHCR's Southern Africa office, the conflict is fuelled not only by local frustrations, for example, about the lack of future prospects despite large deposits of raw materials, but also by the behaviour of international mining companies active in the country.

## **Nigeria**

### **Hundreds of abducted schoolboys released**

On 17 December 2020, Nigerian state television reported the release of over 300 abducted boarding school students. The pupils had been abducted on 11 December 2020 during an attack by gunmen on a boys' boarding school in the town of Kankara in Katsina State in northern Nigeria (see BN of 14 December 2020). Meanwhile Boko Haram insurgents who usually operate hundreds of kilometres further east, have claimed responsibility for the abduction. In an audio message released on 17 December 2020, the Islamists justified the abduction with the Western education of the children which is un-Islamic in Boko Haram's view. The place where the boys were released is more than 80 kilometres from their boarding school. Media reports of 20 December 2020 inform that the pupils said they were beaten by the kidnapppers, hardly allowed to sleep and had to march for days. It remained uncertain at first whether all of the kidnap victims were released. The reasons for the sudden release also remain unclear. Observers suspect that there was some kind of cooperation between local criminal gangs and Boko Haram in the abduction, and that in return for the release of the children there might have been a consideration from the authorities that has not been made public.

## **Pakistan**

### **Kashmir: Gunfight at the Line of Control claims two lives**

On 16 December 2020, two Pakistani soldiers were killed in an exchange of fire between the Pakistani and Indian militaries on the Line of Control between the Pakistani-administered and Indian-administered parts of Kashmir. According to Pakistani figures, there have been nearly 3,000 ceasefire violations at the Line of Control in 2020. On

the Pakistani side, more than two dozen people have been killed and over 200 injured this year due to border clashes.

## **Somalia**

### **Attacks in Mudug**

On 18 December 2020 an al-Shabaab suicide bomber blew himself up near a stadium in Galkayo, Mudug region, killing at least 14 people, including members of the Prime Minister's security team and senior army personnel. The Prime Minister was due to address the upcoming elections at the stadium.

On 13 December 2020, a landmine was laid in front of the Galkayo District Commissioner's office. The commissioner was injured in the attack and several civilians nearby were killed. It is suspected that al-Shabaab insurgents are behind the attack.

## **Togo**

### **Opposition members on conditional release**

On 17 December 2020 Brigitte Kafui Adjamagbo-Johnson, coordinator of the opposition organisation Dynamique Mgr Kpodzro (DMK), and Gérard Djossou (DMK) were granted conditional release. Both had been arrested at the end of November (see BN of 30 November 2020).

## **Tunisia**

### **Civilian abducted and killed by Islamist militants**

The Tunisian authorities have informed that on 20 December 2020, a shepherd was kidnapped and beheaded by Islamist militants in the central-western province of Kasserine. The mountainous region around the city of Kasserine on the border with Algeria has been considered a retreat for militant Islamist groups for several years. There are repeated armed clashes between Tunisian security forces and the militant Islamist groups operating there.

## **Vietnam**

### **Dissident sentenced to prison**

On 15 December 2020, a court in Nghe An province sentenced dissident blogger Tran Duc Thach to twelve years imprisonment for undermining state power. The blogger, a member of the dissident group Brotherhood for Democracy, had been arrested in April 2020 after criticising government corruption and human rights violations on social media.

## **Yemen**

### **Yemeni government and STC form new government**

The Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) have implemented the Riyadh Agreement providing for power sharing, which had been agreed between the two parties already in November 2019. In line with the agreement, the Yemeni government has announced the formation of a new cabinet, which will include ministers from the STC. Troops from both sides have been redeployed from Aden and Abyan governorates, where they were fighting each other. Although both parties are nominal allies in the fight against the Houthis, they have been fighting battles for control of the southern parts of Yemen.

## Zimbabwe

### **World Food Programme warns of hunger crisis**

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has warned that large parts of the country's population will face hunger in the coming months. The reasons are a drought that has lasted for three years, economic instability as well as restrictions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. 7.6 million people (i.e. almost half of the population) are affected by poverty, which is one million more than in 2019, WFP stated. Many people are already forced to skip meals.

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