



# Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

25 January 2021

## Afghanistan

### Returns

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), almost 868,000 undocumented Afghans returned to Afghanistan from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan last year. Iran accounted for the majority of returns (about 860,000), while fewer came from Pakistan (about 7,900). Around 6,000 Afghans have been deported from Turkey. A spokesperson for the Afghan Ministry for Refugees and Returnees estimates that the total number of returnees from Iran is 850,000 and from Pakistan around 250,000. Furthermore, he says that 12,000 people have returned from Turkey and 270 have been deported to Afghanistan from European countries, while 665 people have returned home voluntarily.

According to UN figures, 18.4 million Afghans, almost half the population, will probably require humanitarian assistance this year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic combined with the ongoing conflict and natural disasters. Afghanistan currently has the world's second-highest number of persons (5.5 million) facing acute food insecurity, almost one in two children under the age of five will be affected by acute malnutrition in 2021.

### Attacks, hostilities, civilian casualties

According to research conducted by the New York Times, 206 government troops and 64 civilians were killed in January 2021 (as of 21.01.21). On 25.01.21, the news channel TOLONews put the number of security-related incidents in Kabul in the last 100 days at 177, with the same number of deaths and 360 casualties.

The victims of targeted attacks in the past week were off-duty military personnel (in Kandahar and Kabul) and a director of Da Afghanistan Bank (in Kabul). On 25.01.21, a vehicle belonging to the Italian Embassy was hit by an IED blast in Kabul. One of the Afghan occupants who worked for the embassy was injured.

### Taliban extort millions from reconstruction projects

According to press reports, the Taliban is not only collecting millions of afghanis (EUR 1 : AFN 93.90, as of 25.01.21) through checkpoints and "taxes" in areas under their control, but also from development and construction projects. Companies working in the construction or telecommunications industries, for instance, are susceptible to extortion by the Taliban.

## Belarus

### Protests against President Lukashenko

Approximately 100 persons taking part in protests against President Alexander Lukashenko were detained on 23.01.21. Police reported that they had formed several human chains in Minsk, calling on the president to resign. Protest rallies against Lukashenko have been taking place regularly since the authorities announced his victory in the presidential election held on 09.08.20. The opposition is accusing the authorities of electoral fraud.

## **Central African Republic**

### **Touadéra's election victory confirmed**

On 18.01.21, the Constitutional Court confirmed incumbent Faustin-Archange Touadéra as the new president. He had won the presidential election held on 27.12.20 (cf. BN of 11.01.21), garnering 53.16 % of the votes.

### **State of emergency declared**

The government imposed a nationwide 15-day state of emergency on 21.01.21 in response to recent rebel attacks in the country (cf. BN of 18.01.21).

### **Rebel leader surrendered to the ICC**

On 24.01.21, Mahamat Said Abdel Kani, the leader of a group of Séléka rebels surrendered to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. He was arrested on account of an ICC arrest warrant issued in January 2019. He is suspected of being responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the capital Bangui in 2013. The predominantly Muslim rebel alliance Séléka conquered large parts of the country in 2012/2013 and overthrew the then President François Bozizé. In March 2013, it seized control of Bangui.

## **Colombia**

### **The High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, calls for measures to contain ongoing violence**

In a written statement dated 12.01.21, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, called on the Colombian government to take structural measures to protect human rights defenders, social activists and environmentalists. The background to the appeal is the ongoing violence against these groups of people and against former FARC fighters. According to media reports, ten persons were killed in Colombia in the first half of January 2021 alone because of their social activism. Observers say that most of the violence is taking place in remote regions and is being perpetrated by actors seeking territorial control (cf. BN of 31.08.20).

## **Democratic Republic of the Congo**

### **Former head of the Independent Electoral Commission (Ceni) detained**

According to a media report, the former head of the Independent Electoral Commission (Ceni) Daniel Ngoy Mulunda was detained on 18.01.21. Mulunda is said to have made disparaging remarks during the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the assassination of former President Laurent Désiré Kabila on 16.01.21 and to have accused the current government of President Félix Tshisekedi of "dictatorial behaviour". Under Mulunda, as head of the Independent Electoral Commission, the son and successor of the assassinated president, Joseph Kabila, had, according to official results in Kabila's home constituency, received 100% of the votes in the 2011 presidential election which saw a turnout of 99.46%. In his sermon delivered on 16.01.21, Ngoy Mulunda warned of a secession of the Katanga region with its capital Lumumbashi, the second-largest city in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, from the rest of the country. Katanga is considered to be the region with the largest mineral deposits and a power base for the still influential Joseph Kabila. President Tshisekedi's and Kabila's party coalitions, which had previously ruled together, split on 06.12.20 (cf. BN of 14.12.20).

## **Ethiopia**

### **NGOs fear starvation in Tigray**

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), thousands of Eritrean refugees in Tigray where there is a lack of food, water and healthcare services are in urgent need of assistance. Caritas International described the humanitarian situation as catastrophic. Some persons have already died of starvation, and children in particular are seriously malnourished. Almost all of the region's 4.5 million inhabitants are in need of humanitarian assistance, especially the population in central and eastern Tigray. UNHCR has regained access to

the refugee camps in Mai Aini and Adi Harush in the south of Tigray, where around 25,000 Eritrean refugees are living, but not to the refugee camps in Shimelba and Hitsats in the north. Satellite images show that some of the refugee camps have been destroyed. It is therefore assumed that there are now few, if any, refugees left in these camps. The Ethiopian government has not responded to UNHCR enquiries. Aid intended for Tigray is reportedly being diverted to the neighbouring province of Amhara. The Ethiopian government is being accused of using “hunger as a weapon” against the people of Tigray.

### **Ethiopia and Somalia deny deployment of Somali troops in Tigray**

In response to rumours claiming that hundreds of Somali troops had died in fighting in Tigray following military training in Eritrea, the Ethiopian government flatly denied any involvement of Somali soldiers in the conflict in the Tigray region, as did Somalia’s Information Minister Osman Dubbe shortly before.

## **Ghana**

### **COVID-19 pandemic: rising infection rates; arrests**

According to statistics published by Ghana Health Service (GHS), the number of infections has risen from around 100 per day to 635 at last count (as of 19.01.21) since the end of December 2020. In response to the rising numbers, President Nana Akufo-Addo announced on 17.01.21 that he had instructed the police to enforce existing regulations on wearing nose masks in public places. Since then, several hundred persons have been arrested, some temporarily, in Accra, Cape Coast, Koforidua and Tema, among other places, for violating these regulations. Anyone flouting the rules may face fines of between GHS 12,000 and GHS 60,000 (approx. EUR 1,688 and EUR 8,439, as of 25.01.21) and/or imprisonment of four to 10 years.

## **India**

### **Incident at the Line of Actual Control**

On 20.01.21, another incident occurred at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between China and India on the Naku La mountain pass in the north-eastern state of Sikkim involving military personnel from both countries. According to Indian military sources, a unit of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was forced back after trying to enter territory claimed by India. Satellite images also show that China has established a village-sized settlement about five kilometres beyond the border line in Indian territory in the north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh.

### **Ongoing protests against liberalisation of the agricultural sector**

On 21.01.21, during the ongoing protests against the proposed privatisation of the agricultural sector (cf. BN of 07.12.20), farmers’ organisations rejected a concession offered by the Indian government to suspend the new legislation for 18 months and instead continue to demand its complete repeal. Another large-scale protest will take place in the Indian capital New Delhi this week after the military parade marking Delhi Republic Day (held each year on 26 January).

## **Iran**

### **Freedom of religion**

According to reports by human rights organisations, two female followers of the Baha’i religion were sentenced to five years in prison by a revolutionary court in Tehran on 21.01. 21. Both women had already been arrested in 2017 but were initially released after posting bail. In a preliminary trial, the women were sentenced to 10 and five years’ imprisonment respectively and to community service, on charges of impairing national security for leading a Baha’i organisation. This sentence was reduced to five years for one of the two defendants in the latest ruling by a Court of Appeal.

### **Wave of arrests in Kurdish provinces continues**

The wave of arrests that began a fortnight ago in the provinces of Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan and Alborz continues unabated (cf. BN of 18.01.21). According to the Kurdish Hengaw Organisation for Human Rights and the Network for Human Rights in Kurdistan, between 50 and 67 persons have been arrested by the Iranian intelligence service. The persons concerned are currently in pre-trial detention in Urumiye and have not yet been able to speak to their lawyers.

## **Iraq**

### **Suicide bombings in Baghdad**

On 21.01.21, twin suicide bombings took place on Tayaran Square in Baghdad at a market where mainly second-hand clothing is sold. The first bomber rushed into the market and gathered a crowd around him by claiming to feel sick and detonated an explosive belt when bystanders tried to help him; shortly afterwards, a second attacker detonated an explosive belt after others rushed to help the wounded. In total, 32 persons were killed and a large number of persons were injured. ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attack, the first of its kind to be carried out in Baghdad in almost three years.

In the early hours of 23.01.21, an attack was also carried out at Baghdad airport. Three Katjusha missiles were fired, causing minor damage to buildings. There were no casualties.

### **Ambush near Tikrit**

In the early hours of 24.01.21, an ambush involving ISIS and units of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) occurred east of Tikrit. At least 11 militiamen were killed; no ISIS casualties have been reported. According to various sources on social media, the militia involved belonged to the Badr organisation.

## **Kosovo**

### **Parliamentary election: Kurti to be excluded from parliamentary election**

According to media reports, the Central Election Commission has excluded leading opposition politician Albin Kurti from the snap elections to be held on 14.02.21. They say a total of 47 candidates from 15 of the 28 lists submitted are also to be excluded. The Central Election Commission itself has not yet given the names of politicians to be barred from the election. Kurti led a coalition government comprising his social-democratic national party Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination Movement) and the conservative Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) between 03.02.20 and 25.03.20. After the rapid break-up of the coalition, Kurti remained in office on a caretaker basis until parliament finally replaced him by electing LDK politician Avdullah Hoti as prime minister (cf. BN of 08.06.20).

In the ruling handed down by the Constitutional Court, which necessitated the early elections (cf. BN of 11.01.21), the Constitutional Court insisted on the application of a provision set forth in the Law on General Elections according to which anyone who has been found guilty of a criminal charge in the past three years cannot run as an MP. Together with three other MPs who are members of the Vetëvendosje party, Kurti had been given a suspended sentence on 03.01.18 for throwing tear gas in parliament. According to media reports, those barred from running could submit a challenge to the Election Complaints and Appeals Panel and if the outcome is still negative, the Supreme Court is the final instance to decide the contest. Six parties, including Vetëvendosje and the conservative Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), are said to have already appealed against the Central Election Commission's decision. Vetëvendosje accused the Chairperson of the Central Election Commission of partisanship.

### **Trial on alleged abuse of authority in connection with war pensions**

On 19.01.21, a court in Pristina acquitted twelve defendants of charges of misuse of authority owing to lack of evidence. They had been accused of adding names to an official list of veterans of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK) who had not fought in the war against Serbia in 1998-1999. Among the accused was Agim Çeku, Prime Minister of Kosovo which was still under the administration of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) from March 2006 to January 2008. Çeku had served as Minister of Security Forces in Kosovo from February 2011 to December 2014. From September 2012 onwards, Çeku was the head of the commission

tasked with verifying the status of Kosovo Liberation Army veterans in order to enable them to receive welfare payments. The other accused, including former members of parliament, were also members of this commission. Veterans of the Kosovo Liberation Army as well as relatives of deceased veterans or veterans in need of care are entitled to pensions that significantly exceed benefits from other entitlements and social welfare. In the course of the proceedings, it was said illegal payments were made to around 19,000 fake war veterans. The public prosecutor originally in charge of the investigation resigned on 15.08.18, claiming he was doing so because of the ongoing threats against him. The public prosecutor's office has said it will file an appeal against the acquittals. Other proceedings against further defendants in the same context have led to guilty verdicts or are still pending.

## **Lebanon**

### **COVID-19 pandemic**

The total lockdown of the country is beginning to have an effect. The number of new infections has fallen from over 5,000 to around 3,000. Fifty deaths were reported on 24.01.21. The occupancy rate of the hospitals in Beirut is reported to be 98%, and the average age of the patients has dropped significantly. In the meantime, the World Bank has pledged a loan of US\$ 32 million to help finance a portion of the vaccinations for Lebanon; the World Bank wants to fully finance 750,000 vaccinations for the country that has a population of approx. 6.8 million.

## **Mali**

### **Civilians killed in air strike**

Twenty civilians, including women and children, were reportedly killed in an air strike in Mopti Region on 03.01.21. An unidentified helicopter allegedly opened fire on guests attending a wedding reception in the village of Bounti (Mopti region). On 03.01.21, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) treated eight persons who were seriously injured in an attack in the villages of Bounti and Kikara (Mopti region) in central Mali.

The French military announced on 05.01.21 that it had killed dozens of jihadists in a military attack carried out in central Mali on 03.01.21. The French and Malian military denied that a wedding was involved. The air strike, they said, was a precision attack on a jihadist group, carried out following close surveillance.

Three weeks after the incident, the circumstances surrounding the attack on the village remain unclear. An investigation into the incident has not yet taken place.

### **Malian troops killed in attacks**

On 24.01.21, two simultaneous attacks were carried out against the Malian military in central Mali near the border with Burkina Faso, killing six Malian soldiers and injuring 18. It is alleged that the coordinated attacks on military bases in the towns of Boulkessi and Mondoro were carried out by suspected jihadists. Around 30 suspected jihadists were reportedly killed. Military equipment and motorbikes were seized from the attackers.

On 21.01.21, three Malian soldiers were killed by a bomb in the Mondoro area. So far no one has claimed responsibility for the attacks.

## **Moldova**

### **Constitutional Court overturns language law**

On 21.01.21, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova declared unconstitutional a controversial law that had officially recognised the Russian language as the language for communication between ethnic communities. The court argued that the law would give the Russian language a status similar to that of Romanian, which is the only state language provided for in the constitution. The law had only been adopted by a parliamentary majority in a fast-track procedure in December 2020 and without the support of the newly-elected President Maia Sandu.

## Montenegro

### Parliament votes again to reform law on religion

After Montenegro's President Milo Đukanović refused to sign the amendment to the controversial "Law on the Freedom of Religion and Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities" in early January 2021 (cf. BN of 11.01.21), Parliament voted for the second time on 20.01.21, approving the amendments. The vote was boycotted by the opposition. Critics saw the original version of the law as a state attack on the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, whose property rights to buildings and land were called into question. This led to massive protests against the government at the end of 2019, as well as a loss of votes for Milo Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) in the parliamentary election in August 2020. The amendment legally protects the church's property. According to the constitution, the President cannot refuse to sign the law again after it has been passed a second time.

### ANB launches internal inquiry following critical reports in the media

According to recent media reports, the new acting head of the National Security Agency (ANB), Dejan Vuksic, announced on 20.01.21 that he would investigate media reports claiming that individual ANB officials had destroyed incriminating documents on illegal wiretapping and surveillance. He says an internal enquiry has already been launched. Vuksic told the daily newspaper Vijesti that there were reasonable grounds for suspicion that the destruction of the secret files in question had been a grossly unconstitutional act that had not been agreed in advance with the legislator. According to the law, surveillance and wiretapping, as well as the subsequent destruction of documents created in this regard, are only possible if ordered by the head of the National Security Council or the public prosecutor. Vuksic, a lawyer and functionary of the pro-Serbian coalition "For the Future of Montenegro", was elected acting head of the ANB by the new government on 17.12.20 after his predecessor, who had been close to the previous government, had been dismissed. The final appointment to the post had been announced for February 2021.

## Niger

### Troops killed in attack

At least four troops were killed in a terrorist attack carried out in Diffa region in the South-East of the country on 18.01.21 and eight soldiers were seriously wounded. According to a statement issued by the Ministry of Defence, the incident is related to an attack carried out on a military post in the region the previous day. The exact circumstances are not known.

## Nigeria

### Nigeria remains the continent's largest economy

Nigeria remains the largest economy in Africa. According to media reports, this is indicated by the latest figures issued by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Nigeria currently occupies 26th place in the global ranking. However, IMF representatives also made it clear that Nigeria faces various economic challenges, such as high inflation, significant capital outflows abroad and uncertainty over the COVID-19 pandemic. It said the low oil prices were also exacting a heavy toll on the economy of the oil-rich country.

### Human rights record 2020

The difficult security situation in the northeast as well as harassment and attacks by security forces against protestors are among the greatest current challenges with regard to the human rights situation. This is the conclusion drawn in the Annual Report on the 2020 human rights situation published by Human Rights Watch (HRW) on 13.01.21. The security situation in the northeast is particularly concerning, as Boko Haram and its faction Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) continue to attack civilian, humanitarian and military targets. It says in the report that cases involving police violence that have become known in many places in Nigeria call for a reform of the security sector. Nationwide protests by the End SARS movement opposing police violence and state arbitrariness attracted international attention in October 2020 (cf. BN of 26.10.20).

## North Macedonia

### **Procurement of vaccines against COVID-19 delayed**

According to a recent media report issued by the investigative platform Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) on 21.01.21, the country is lagging behind Europe and even some of its neighbours in terms of vaccination strategy. According to official announcements, vaccinations were supposed to start in February 2021. The Ministry of Health had told BIRN in response to its query that the country had not had the opportunity to negotiate directly with the manufacturers of the vaccine once it became available, as this was only possible for EU Member States. However, direct talks with the manufacturer were immediately initiated as soon as this option became available. According to the Ministry of Health, the direct procurement process as well as a contract with the vaccine manufacturer Pfizer are now in the final stages. Relevant amendments to the law will be put to a vote in Parliament on 25.01.21. Separately, the EU's COVAX distribution mechanism (fair allocation mechanism) is to be implemented from February 2021 onwards, with the first doses of vaccine expected in March 2021.

## Pakistan

### **COVID-19 pandemic: plans for upcoming vaccinations**

Pakistani government sources said on 21.01.21 that China is willing to donate half a million of its coronavirus vaccine doses to Pakistan. The first persons to get the vaccine free of charge would be frontline healthcare workers, elderly citizens and persons suffering from chronic diseases such as diabetes or heart disease. In addition, a vaccination campaign is to be carried out by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

### **Successful test of a nuclear-capable medium-range missile**

According to a statement issued on 20.01.21, the Pakistani military has successfully tested a medium-range missile armed with nuclear warheads. The surface-to-surface missile with a range of 2,750 km landed in the Arabian Sea. The Shaheen III surface-to-surface missile could thus reach targets in neighbouring India and in the Middle East.

### **Protests of the opposition movement reach Islamabad**

On 19.01.21, thousands of supporters of the opposition Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a grouping of several Pakistani opposition parties founded in 2020 (cf. BN of 12.10.20), protested in the Pakistani capital Islamabad against the incumbent Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government led by Prime Minister Imran Khan.

## Russian Federation

### **Nationwide protests for the release of Putin critic Navalny**

Tens of thousands of persons responded to a call for protests by opposition politician Alexey Navalny in Russia on 23.01.21, despite pressure from the authorities and a large police presence. According to civil rights activists, more than 3,500 persons were arrested at rallies held in more than 100 cities. Security forces used heavy force in some cases. The Russian authorities accused demonstrators of attacking police officers. In Moscow alone, at least 1,360 demonstrators were arrested and 523 more were detained in St. Petersburg. According to Russia's Children's Rights Commissioner, around 300 minors were also taken into custody. The demonstrators protested against President Vladimir Putin and demanded Navalny's release. The best-known critic of Putin was arrested in Moscow on 17.01.21 after returning from Germany. On 18.01.21, a Russian court sentenced him to 30 days' imprisonment in summary proceedings for violating parole conditions. The US and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, criticised the crackdown by the security forces and called for the immediate release of those arrested and of Alexey Navalny.

## Somalia

### **Ugandan AMISOM troops wage heavy attack on al-Shabaab fighters**

Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) claimed they killed 189 al-Shabab fighters in air strikes and ground assaults waged against the militant group on 22.01.21. The Ugandan troops are part of the AMISOM peace-keeping mission in Somalia. Ugandan soldiers reportedly attacked al-Shabaab militants in the villages of Sigaale, Adimole and Kayitoy in the Lower Shabelle region. Two al-Shabaab commanders were arrested and handed over to the Somali army. No civilians were reportedly involved.

### **All US troops withdrawn**

As announced by the US government on 04.12.20 (cf. BN of 07.12.20), all American troops have now been withdrawn from Somalia. An estimated 700 troops were deployed in Somalia and had been involved in anti-terrorist operations and in the training of an elite special unit (the Danab Special Forces). The US has pledged further support to the Somali government, even though the troops will be deployed in neighbouring countries in the future. It is not known whether the newly-elected US President Joe Biden will reverse this decision.

### **Attacks against public officials**

Several attacks have been carried out against government officials in the past week. At least six persons were killed and eight wounded in a landmine explosion on 17.01.21 targeting the convoy of a regional official near Teshile, Lower Shabelle region. The official himself survived the attack. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack, stating that it was aimed at the Somali military's so-called Danab Special Forces.

On 19.01.21, several persons, including a deputy commissioner, were killed or injured in another landmine explosion in Garasbale, near Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab also claimed responsibility for this attack.

On 21.01.21, the District Commissioner for Hodan District in Mogadishu was killed in a shootout between his bodyguards and the police. The reason for the shooting is not known.

## Syria

### **Civilians killed in Israeli strike on military targets**

Israeli airstrikes targeted a site near the city of Hama in north-western Syria on 22.01.21 according to Syrian media in which four family members were reportedly killed. Four other civilians were reportedly injured and three houses were destroyed. Syrian air defences managed to intercept some of the missiles. The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that the Israeli attack was aimed at five positions of Iranian-backed militias. The targets were all hit and destroyed. However, debris from intercepted rockets had fallen on civilian residential areas, killing innocent civilians.

The Israeli side did not comment on the incident.

### **Currency freefall and economic crisis: SYP 5,000 banknote introduced**

The Central Bank of Syria launched a new banknote on 24.01.21 and started its circulation in the market. The Syrian lira (also: Syrian pound, SYP) is currently traded at a rate of 1,250:1 to the US dollar. The exchange rate is said to be about twice as high on the black market.

Meanwhile, the Central Statistics Office has reported that the inflation rate doubled from 2019 to 2020. Prices of basic food products such as lentils and oil are said to have increased by about 15%.

Referring to the economic development in Syria, the head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said perhaps the most worrying consequence was a growing resort to child labour. One in ten families in Syria reported using their children to earn money.

## Togo

### **Members of trade union detained**

On 20.01.21, police arrested three members of the newly-formed teachers' union Syndicat des enseignants du Togo (SET) during a meeting held at the headquarters of the Synergie des travailleurs du Togo (STT) union in Lomé. They are accused of violating regulations when SET was founded.

## Tunisia

### **Nationwide protests and violent unrest**

Since 15.01.21 and 16.01.21, mainly young people have been protesting against the government and the current economic conditions in the country, despite existing curfews (08:00 pm to 05:00 am) and a ban on assemblies to contain the coronavirus.

Violent clashes between the protesters and the security forces have occurred repeatedly over the past few nights. In addition to looting shops and banks, protesters threw stones and Molotov cocktails at the police, who in turn used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the protesters. According to media reports, more than 600 people have been detained so far.

On 19.01.21 and 23.01.21, several hundred protesters demonstrated in the centre of Tunis for the release of prisoners, an end to police violence and an improvement in living conditions.

Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and President Kais Saied signalled understanding for the demonstrators' demands, but at the same time called for calm and condemned the protesters for the violent unrests.

The ousting and exile of former dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from Tunisia on 14.01.11 initiated a democratic process that has led to just some of the structural reforms and changes hoped for ten years on. The country has been in the throes of a deep economic crisis for years, with young people particularly affected by unemployment. The COVID-19 pandemic has further compounded this situation.

## Turkey

### **Suspects with links to the Gülen Terror Group (FETÖ) arrested**

According to media reports, security forces arrested numerous suspects on 19.01.21 in nationwide operations against the Gülen movement (FETÖ). The raids targeted a clandestine network of FETÖ members within the Turkish armed forces. In the largest operation of this kind, the Izmir Chief Prosecutor's Office issued arrest warrants for 238 suspected soldiers for having links with FETÖ, including some colonels and lieutenant colonels, 173 of whom were arrested. Elsewhere, prosecutors in the western province of Balıkesir ordered the arrests of 20 FETÖ suspects in an investigation into the terrorist group's infiltration into a police school.

### **Turkey bans advertising under social media law**

Twitter was slapped with an advertising ban last week for violating the new controversial social media law which also affects Twitter's live video-sharing application Periscope and the social network Pinterest. The reason given was that the companies had failed to name a local representative and were thus in breach of the law. Turkish authorities have planned to halve the bandwidth of companies that contradict the law by April and then further reduce it by 90% in May.

### **Kavala acquittal overturned**

According to media reports, a court of appeal in Istanbul on 22.01.21 overturned the February 2020 acquittal of jailed businessman and supporter of cultural and social projects Osman Kavala and eight others persons. The judges in Istanbul ruled that the cases are to be reviewed by the competent court after new evidence has been presented. Kavala has been in prison since November 2017. He is accused of involvement in the coup attempt in 2016 as well as political and military espionage. He had been acquitted in February 2020 in a first trial in connection with the protests surrounding Gezi Park in Istanbul. Kavala was kept in prison despite the European Court of Human Rights' (ECHR) earlier decision in December 2019 stating that he should be released immediately.

## Vietnam

### Activist jailed

A court in Hau Giang province sentenced the activist Dinh Thi Thu Thuy to seven years in prison on 20.01.21 for engaging in anti-state activities. She had posted critical comments on social media about an environmental disaster in which toxic waste from a factory polluted more than 200 kilometres of the coastline in 2016 and the state leadership's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, among other things.

## Yemen

### Aid organisations make call to revoke terrorist designation

Despite the classification of the Houthi rebels as a terrorist organisation (cf. BN of 11.01.21), the US government continues to allow relief organisations, the UN and the Red Cross, to cooperate with them. Deliveries of agricultural goods, medication and medical equipment are also permitted. However, aid organisations fear that the humanitarian situation in the country will nonetheless continue to deteriorate. Twenty two aid organisations therefore called for an "immediate withdrawal" of the US designation in a statement published on 24.01.21. Critics fear that even with licences and exemptions in place for humanitarian work, the designation will have serious consequences.

### Tension runs high between STC and Yemen's government

Tensions between the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Yemeni government, which agreed to form a coalition government at the end of 2020 (see BN of 22.12.20), have risen again in recent weeks. On the one hand, the STC rejected President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's appointments to the new government, claiming not to have been consulted in advance. On the other hand, the Security Belt Forces (SBF), the military arm of the STC, have reportedly established a new military unit in Aden, the Aden Ring Belt Forces, which may also violate previous agreements between the two parties.

## Zimbabwe

### Three cabinet members die of COVID-19; physicians blamed

Since early January 2021, three members of the Cabinet (according to Associated Press (AP) four, although it did not provide their names) have died of COVID-19-related complications: Foreign Minister Sibusiso Moyo, Transport Minister Joel Biggie Matiza, Minister of State for Manicaland Province Ellen Gwaradzimba. Several other high-profile politicians and prominent Zimbabweans have also died recently.

Government spokesperson Nick Mangwana, took to Twitter on 24.01.21 to blame doctors for the deaths of the government members. He said they had threatened to withdraw oxygen treatment from the patients depending on their party affiliation. He wrote of "medical assassins". Mangwana claimed that these accusations merely involved a public debate, but also announced that the doctors concerned would be hearing from the police. His tweets provoked strong reactions. The Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights (ZADHR), for instance, dismissed the allegations and warned of a possible destabilisation of the health system, which was under great strain in its bid to contain the pandemic.

Zimbabwe has been experiencing a surge of the COVID-19 pandemic since late December 2020. According to figures provided by Johns Hopkins University, 31,320 COVID-19 infections have been recorded in the country so far, 17,453 in January 2021 alone. One thousand and five deaths have been counted in connection with the pandemic. Zimbabwe has not yet received any vaccine doses, according to President Emmerson Mnangagwa who said that responsible health officials were still deciding which vaccine the country would purchase.