



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

Withdrawal of international troops

According to the peace agreement concluded by the US and the Taliban, international troops would have to withdraw by the end of April 2021. Whether this deadline can be met depends, among other things, on the Taliban's future actions. The new US administration has declared its intention to check whether the Taliban are honouring their commitments. A complete withdrawal of international troops seems unlikely at present, given the Taliban's ongoing attacks against Afghan government units in recent weeks and months and the faltering peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Observers assume, however, that the Taliban will not accept international troops remaining and could resume attacks and assaults against foreign troops, from which they had largely refrained so far. On the other hand, it is feared that a withdrawal of international troops could lead to civil war.

Attacks, hostilities, civilian casualties

An attack on the Deputy Minister of Agriculture was carried out in Kabul on 08.02.21, injuring two persons.

On 09.02.21, a UN convoy was attacked by unknown gunmen on the road between Kabul and Jalalabad, killing five Afghan security force members. In addition, two officers of the Afghan intelligence service were killed when an improvised explosive device exploded in Nangarhar.

In addition, two attacks were carried out on government employees in Kabul, killing four officers and injuring two. On 10.02.21, four bombings were carried out in Kabul, killing three persons and injuring six. The attacks were aimed at police officers (including the police chief of Kabul's 5th Police District) and employees of the Ministry of Labour. No group has claimed responsibility for any of the attacks.

On 13.02.21, at least a 100 oil and gas tankers were destroyed by fire in Herat province (near Islam Qala, the border crossing with Iran). It is not known what caused the fire, but at least 50 persons were injured. The damage is estimated to be in the region of US\$ 50 million to US\$ 100 million.

On 14.02.21, (suspected) Taliban militants abducted eleven workers from the Pashdan Dam construction site in Herat.

According to research conducted by the New York Times, 141 government troops and 41 civilians were killed in February 2021 (as at: 12.02.21).

Deportations from Turkey

According to the Afghan Minister for Refugees and Returnees, up to 200 Afghan nationals are being deported from Turkey and being sent back to Afghanistan every day.

Albania

Adoption of a new asylum law

On 01.02.21, the parliament in Albania adopted a new asylum law. This was preceded by close cooperation with the EU delegation in Albania and the UNHCR in drafting the text of the law. Both have welcomed the new law, which they say will bring Albania closer to international standards and EU legislation and will strengthen guarantees for vulnerable asylum seekers such as unaccompanied minors. It also reinforces the framework for the integration of refugees.

ECtHR confirms dismissal of constitutional judge

On 09.02.21, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) published its judgment (15227/19) in the case of a former constitutional judge who had been dismissed in the course of the review of judges and prosecutors in Albania. The review commission had found that the constitutional judge had not been able to clarify the origin of her assets and had subsequently banned her from returning to the judicial system for life on the grounds of serious ethical violations. The ECtHR found that the competent Albanian authorities had been independent and impartial and that the lifetime exclusion had also been proportionate. The judge was one of five dismissed constitutional judges, three others had resigned in order to avoid vetting. With one remaining judge, the Constitutional Court had been unable to function for two years. According to a media report, around 20 out of a total of 109 dismissed judges and prosecutors have filed an appeal with the ECtHR.

Algeria

Allegations of torture during detention to be investigated

Algeria will launch an investigation into allegations that security forces tortured a student while he was in detention. The student had been arrested during the protests two years ago that led to Bouteflika's fall. The student was held in custody for a total of 14 months.

Benin

Candidates in the upcoming presidential election

According to information received from the Commission Electorale Nationale Autonome (Autonomous National Electoral Commission (CENA)), two candidates will run against the incumbent Patrice Talon in the presidential election scheduled for 11.04.21. As the CENA announced on 12.02.21, apart from Talon, only Alassane Soumanou of the opposition Forces Cauris pour un Bénin Émergent (Cowry Forces for an Emerging Benin (FCBE)) and Corentin Kohoué (former member of the Les Démocrates (The Democrats)) party among a total of 20 candidates have so far fulfilled the requirements for admission to the election. Among others, the electoral commission rejected the candidacy of the important opposition member Joel Aïvo (party alliance Front pour la Restauration de la Démocratie) (Front for the Restoration of Democracy).

Candidacy requires the formal support of at least 10% of the country's 83 MPs and 77 mayors (thus at least 16 persons). The opposition is not represented in the current parliament. Following an electoral reform, opposition parties were de facto excluded from the 2019 parliamentary election and only two parties close to President Talon were admitted. A final decision on admission to the presidential election will be made by the Constitutional Court and published on 22.02.21.

Ganiou Soglo, son of former President Nicephore Soglo and one of the candidates rejected by the CENA, was shot by unknown gunmen on 05.02.21 while driving to his farm in Zinvié near Cotonou. The reasons for the shooting were initially unclear. He travelled to France for medical treatment.

UN Special Representative calls for talks

The Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, visited Benin from 07.02.21 to 10.02.21. He spoke with President Patrice Talon and with representatives of the government, the opposition and civil society. He called for talks to facilitate a peaceful and credible presidential election (see above). A domestic political crisis and violent clashes between opposition supporters and

security forces had ensued following the 2019 general election, due to the de facto exclusion of the opposition (cf. BN of 06.05.19).

Central African Republic

Election date set for second round of parliamentary elections

In a decree issued on 12.02.21, the incumbent Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who officially won the presidential election held on 27.12.20 with 53.16% of the vote, set the date for the second round of the parliamentary elections for 14.03.21. The first round of parliamentary elections had taken place in parallel in parts of the country on 27.12.20 (cf. BN of 25.01.21). In places where the parliamentary elections could not take place because of the outbreak of violence at the time, they too are to be held on 14.03.21. A total of 118 of the 140 parliamentary mandates remain to be allocated in the two election rounds. Originally, the opposition alliance COD2020 had intended to boycott the parliamentary elections. But the defeated presidential candidate Annicet-Georges Dologuélé decided that his candidates, also part of COD2020, would remain in the race. The election date has now been set against a backdrop of ongoing violence and displacement (cf. BN of 11.01.21, 18.01.21, 25.01.21 and 01.02.21).

China

Publisher sentenced to several years in prison

On 09.02.21, a Beijing court sentenced Geng Xiaonan, a publisher who had been arrested on 09.09.20, to three years in prison. Officially, Geng was charged with engaging in illegal business activities. Her lifestyle publishing house Ruiya Books is said to have published 200,000 titles for which she did not have the full publishing rights. According to estimates from Geng's associates, the sentence is a typical case in which entrepreneurs are falsely accused of committing a business offence so that they can be punished for a political offence. In the months leading up to her arrest, Geng had been campaigning on behalf of, among others, Xu Zhangrun, a law professor suspended from his post at Tsinghua University. Xu, who had openly criticised the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and President Xi Jinping in several essays published since 2018, was detained for several days on 06.07.20. In recent years, Geng had also been regularly involved in hosting cultural events that provided a platform for people to voice critical opinions.

Hong Kong: Jimmy Lai to remain in pre-trial detention

On 09.02.21, the Court of Final Appeal allowed the Hong Kong prosecution's appeal against the High Court's decision to release media entrepreneur Jimmy Lai to house arrest on bail of 10 million Hong Kong dollars (HKD) (cf. BN of 11.01.21). The 35-page document refers to Article 42 (2) of the National Security Law. The article creates an exception to the Hong Kong rule in favour of releasing non-violent offenders on bail. According to the article, release on bail may only be granted if there are sufficient grounds to assume that the accused will not commit further acts that endanger national security. This provision had been misinterpreted by High Court Judge Alex Lee. However, Lai, whose trial is scheduled to begin on 16.04.21, can apply for a review of the ruling.

Colombia

Increase in murders in Cauca Department

Colombian media reported on 06.02.21 the killing of a 40-year-old smallholder farmer and his two adolescent sons in the southwest of the country. According to the investigating authorities, the victims show signs of torture. Members of the paramilitary group "Dagoberto Ramos" (renegades of the FARC guerrillas) are suspected of being the perpetrators. Two days earlier, the bodies of three farmers were found in the municipality of Argelia, also in the department of Cauca. In a letter found at the scene, the armed group "Carlos Patiño" (also an offshoot of the FARC) claimed responsibility for the crime and accused those killed of being members of the rival ELN guerrillas. The murders are examples of the rapidly increasing number of targeted killings in Colombia. According to the Peace and Reconciliation Foundation (Fundación Paz y Reconciliación), 50 persons were killed in twelve departments between the beginning of the year and 04.02.21.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

UNHCR criticises increase of violence against civilians in Ituri und North-Kivu provinces

The spokesperson of the High Commission, Marta Hurtado, has expressed strong criticism about the significant increase of violence against civilians in the Irumu and Mambasa areas of Ituri province and the Beni area of North Kivu province. Both the rebel militia Allied Democratic Forces-National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (ADF-NALU) operating in Ituri and North Kivu provinces and the Congolese security forces and military are being held responsible for the human rights violations committed as well as for the serious violations of international humanitarian law.

Rebel attacks on military camps in Lubumbashi

According to media reports, the rebel militia Bakata Kantanga attacked two military camps in Lubumbashi on 14.02.21. Lubumbashi, a city with a population of over one million, is the second largest city in the Democratic Republic of Congo and is located in the southern region of Haut-Katanga which is a mining hub. According to the ruling mayor of Lubumbashi, one civilian, six insurgents and four Congolese security force members were killed.

Ecuador

Presidential elections

The left-wing candidate Andrés Arauz received the most votes in the presidential election held on 07.02.21. With around 32%, he is the favourite for the run-off election to be held on 11.04.21. However, it is still open who will challenge him. Due to inaccuracies, missing signatures of the electoral committees and complaints, almost ten percent of the ballot boxes need to be checked and recounted. The result of indigenous lawyer Yaku Pérez, who represents a left-green agenda, and conservative ex-banker Guillermo Lasso were in a virtual tie. The previous president Lenín Moreno declined to seek re-election.

Ecuador, which has a population of around 17 million, is facing considerable economic problems. A high national debt caused by the decline in the oil price and the COVID-19 pandemic involving almost 260,000 cases so far and around 15,000 deaths - have led the country to the crisis.

Egypt / Palestinian Autonomous Territories

Border crossing between Gaza Strip and Egypt opened

On 09.02.21, the Egyptian authorities opened the Rafah border crossing with the Gaza Strip indefinitely, after it had only been opened for a few days at a time in recent months.

Ethiopia

Ethiopian Red Cross warns of famine in Tigray

The Ethiopian Red Cross has warned of potential famine that could cause tens of thousands of deaths in the conflict-ridden region of Tigray. According to a statement published by the organisation on 10.02.21, the first deaths have already been reported. Access to aid is limited to the regional capital of Mekele and its surrounding areas. People from rural areas, on the other hand, have hardly any possibility of receiving aid. Around 80% of the region is affected. Around 3.8 million of the six million people in Tigray need immediate humanitarian assistance.

Gambia

Vice-President's call for an end to female genital mutilation

On the occasion of this year's International Day of "Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation", Vice President Dr Isatou Touray called on all relevant stakeholders to work closely together to eliminate female genital mutilation (FGM), which is widespread and explicitly punishable in The Gambia. She said the government will work with non-

governmental organisations, other civil society organisations and other institutions to raise awareness among people in the regions who continue to adhere to the tradition of FGM. The government will be the driving force behind the abolition of the tradition of FGM in the communities there, the Vice President said.

Leaders of the “3 Years Jotna” detained again

On 10.02.21, the High Court in Banjul suspended criminal proceedings against nine leaders of the civil society protest movement “3 Years Jotna” at the request of the public prosecutor. On the same day, the police again arrested the leaders of the opposition movement. The reason given was that the arrests were justified in view of new submissions by the prosecution to the court, claiming that criminal investigations had again been initiated against the defendants for unlawful assembly (Article 69 of the Criminal Code), vandalism of buildings (Article 76 of the Criminal Code) and incitement to vandalism (Article 74 of the Criminal Code). The arrested leaders of the protest movement have since been released on bail, according to media reports.

After violent clashes erupted with the police during a demonstration against Adama Barrow’s government in January 2020, the “3 Years Jotna” protest movement was officially banned by the government. In the course of the violent dispersal of the protest, a total of 137 protesters and several journalists as well as the leaders of the protest movement were detained temporarily.

Ghana

COVID-19 pandemic: work of parliament restricted

In response to an increase in the number of COVID-19 infections among MPs (17) and parliamentary staff (151), it was decided on 09.02.21 to close the parliamentary chamber for three weeks. Plenary sessions have been cancelled although committees continue to meet. The number of weekly sessions had been limited to two the previous week in view of rising number of cases in the parliament

COVID-19 pandemic: rising number of infections

Ghana has been moderately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the number of cases has been rising sharply since the beginning of 2021, with Kumasi and the Accra Metropolitan Area forming regional hotspots. According to data provided by Ghana Health Service, 718 new cases were reported for 10.02.21. In total, there have been 75,836 cases to date, with 533 people dying from or with COVID-19. The SARS-CoV-2 B.1.1.7 variant in particular, which is considered to be more contagious, is currently spreading.

COVID-19 pandemic: vaccinations

Vaccinations have not yet begun. According to plans, Ghana will receive 2.4 million doses of vaccine between March and June 2021. The vaccinations will be free of charge for the population.

Guinea

Prison sentence for member of the opposition

A court of first instance in Dixinn (Kindia region) sentenced opposition member Mamadi Condé on 08.02.21 to five years’ imprisonment and a fine of 100 million Guinean francs (GNF, around EUR 9,000) for disseminating racist, threatening and abusive content via the internet. Mamadi Condé, who according to media reports is both a Guinean and Canadian citizen with primary residence in Canada, had been arrested shortly after the presidential election on 18.10.20. Also known as “Madic 100 frontière”, under which a Facebook profile with around 279,000 followers exists, he is said to have vociferously opposed the third term of President Alpha Condé. The Facebook page shows that Mamadi Condé is a member of the Union des Forces Démocratiques de Guinée (Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea (UFDG)), the party of the defeated presidential candidate Cellou Dalein Diall (cf. BN of 02.11.20).

Resurgence of Ebola

The Ebola virus has recurred in the southeastern region of Nzérékoré. Three persons have died from the virus and another five are in isolation for treatment. All eight persons had attended the same funeral on 01.02.21. Guinea had been the worst hit, along with Liberia and Sierra Leone, in the world’s worst ever outbreak of the disease between

2013 and 2016 in West Africa, which claimed at least 11,300 deaths. According to a media report, the World Health Organization (WHO) has said that sporadic individual cases are not unusual following a large outbreak, but nevertheless expressed concern about the deaths.

India

Ladakh: withdrawal of troops apparently agreed with China

On 11.02.21, according to Indian government sources, an agreement was reached with China in the months-long conflict at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the northern Union Territory of Ladakh in the Himalayas. After several rounds of talks, both countries have reportedly agreed to withdraw their troops.

Talks between government and farmers' unions

On 08.02.21, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi called on farmers who have been demonstrating and have camped outside the capital New Delhi for several months to end the protests and invited farmers' unions to engage in talks about the controversial agricultural liberalisation laws.

Iran

COVID-19 pandemic

Vaccinations against the coronavirus began in Iran on 09.02.21. Shortly before, the first shipments of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V had arrived in Tehran. The vaccination campaign began with the Health Minister's son. Healthcare workers are to be vaccinated first. Meanwhile, officials warn of a fourth wave of coronavirus in view of the ever-increasing spread of the British mutant variant. The situation is particularly worrying in the southwestern province of Khuzestan, where the capacity of intensive care beds in hospitals has been exhausted. In view of the critical situation, new restrictions are to be imposed at provincial level. Khuzestan was placed in full lockdown on 13.02.21. On 14.02.21, the Ministry of Health reported 7,390 new cases nationwide within 24 hours.

Arrests and sentences

Iranian foreign media report that several civil society activists have been arrested or detained in the period between 08.02.21 and 14.02.21. A science author working in the field of philosophy was arrested and taken to an unknown location on 08.02.21. No information is available on the specific charges and the reasons for his arrest. On 11.02.21, a well-known writer was reportedly arrested and detained by the security authorities in Hamadan. The man had already been sentenced to two years in prison in 2017 for publishing texts containing "insults to sacred principles" but has not had to serve it so far due to an appeals process and the subsequent outbreak of coronavirus. A female student at Tehran University was handed a sentence of five years' imprisonment and probation by a Tehran Revolutionary Court for participating in the protests held in November 2018. An appeal court confirmed the prison sentence for one year and suspended the remaining four years. In the city of Sanandaj (Kordistan province), an appeal court reduced the prison sentence of a young woman from ten to five years. The head of the Nuzhin cultural association teaches Kurdish language and literature. The conviction was for "establishing a group with the aim of destroying national security". Kurdistan Human Rights Network has reported that several recently arrested Kurdish activists have been transferred from pre-trial detention to central prisons (to Urumiyeh and Mahabad). Approximately 100 members of Kurdish civil society have reportedly been arrested in the period between January and February 2021 (cf. BN of 08.02.21).

Iraq

Turkish military operation in northern Iraq

The Turkish Ministry of Defence announced on 10.02.21 that a new military operation against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) had begun in northern Iraq. The aim of the operation in the province of Dohuk near the Turkish border is in particular to destroy PKK positions in order to prevent terrorist attacks being carried out from northern Iraq and to guarantee border security. The mission was based on the right to self-defence, as there

was evidence the PKK had launched a major attack from northern Iraq. During this operation in northern Iraq, on 14.02.21 the Turkish military found the dead bodies of 13 Turks in a cave who had been abducted and shot dead, according to official sources. The PKK denies having killed these persons, saying that they died in combat in the region.

On Friday 12.02.21, the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF, Hashd al-Shaabi) sent several troops to the Shingal region in response to the Turkish military offensive. Two hundred members of the Shingal Resistance Units (YBS), who are said to be close to the PKK, have joined the PMF.

COVID-19 pandemic

On 13.02.21, the National Security and Health Committee decided to impose restrictions on movement and contacts in Iraq due to the steady increase in the number of infections in recent weeks. A curfew has also been imposed between 08:00 pm and 05:00 am. Schools, universities, parks, venues for weddings and funerals, and places of religious communities are to close on 15.02.21.

Moldova

Government formation failed

The Moldovan parliament rejected President Maia Sandu's nominee for Prime Minister, Natalia Gavrilita, on 11.02.21. The Republic of Moldova is currently led by an interim government. Following President Sandu's re-nomination of Natalia Gavrilita after the vote, new elections are now the most likely scenario.

Mongolia

COVID-19 pandemic: mass testing and strict lockdown

Since 11.02.21, the day before this year's Mongolian New Year Tsagaan Sar, Mongolia has been under a nationwide lockdown which is scheduled to last until 23.02.21. As part of the lockdown, travel between provinces has been restricted and roads to and from the capital Ulan Bator (Ulaanbaatar) have been closed to private motor traffic. A large-scale PCR testing campaign began in Ulan Bator also on 11.02.21 with the aim of testing one person per household for the virus. The background to the measures is an increase in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, which can be traced back to the first local outbreak in the previously little-affected country in mid-November 2020. Mongolia has recorded 2,383 cases and two deaths. Of these, most infections have been reported in Ulan Bator and Selenge province. The increase in the number of coronavirus cases in recent weeks has fuelled criticism of the government's handling of the pandemic. Another reason for growing discontent is the economy, which shrank by 7.3% in the first nine months of 2020.

Montenegro

COVID-19 pandemic: sharp rise in the number of COVID cases

On 09.02.21, Health Minister Jelena Borovinic Bojovic announced that new restrictive measures would be imposed due to a sharp surge in the number of cases, especially in some holiday resorts. Due to delays in the EU-controlled COVAX vaccine programme, the ministry intends to enter into direct negotiations with vaccine manufacturers. According to recent media reports, the Institute of Public Health said Montenegro has the highest rate in the Balkan region, with an incidence of currently 1,257 active cases per 100,000 inhabitants.

Morocco

Diplomatic relations established with Israel

Morocco and Israel have re-established diplomatic relations after 20 years. After Israeli diplomat David Govrin took up his post at the liaison office in Rabat, Moroccan diplomat Abderrahim Beyyoud also took up his post at the liaison office in Tel Aviv on 09.02.21. Morocco and Israel announced steps to normalise relations in December 2020.

Myanmar

Violence against protestors

On 09.02.21, the police cracked down heavily on peaceful protestors, resulting in numerous people being injured. A 19-year-old student in Naypyidaw died after being shot in the head. Some uniformed police officers were reported to have defected to the protestors. According to the National League for Democracy (NLD), the army (Tadmaw) searched and destroyed their party headquarters in Yangon (formerly Rangoon). On 10.02.21, six high-ranking politicians, including a close advisor to Aung San Suu Kyi, were arrested.

On 11.02.21, demonstrations continued, including in front of the Chinese embassy in Yangon, with around 3,000 participants accusing China of supporting the junta. In Mandalay, artists demonstrated for the restoration of the civilian government. Bank employees, railway workers as well as numerous members of ethnic minorities are also reported to have taken part in the demonstrations. On 14.02.21, tens of thousands of persons once again demonstrated against the coup, and the military regime now allows persons to be arrested without a warrant and raids to be carried out without a search warrant. According to the non-governmental organisation Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), more than 260 persons have been arrested, according to other reports 350. Armoured vehicles have been positioned in the major cities, the army further restricted citizens' freedoms.

On 15.02.21, Khin Maung Zaw, state counsellor Suu Kyi's lawyer, announced that she would have to remain in pre-trial detention until 17.02.21. Despite a high military presence and a nightly internet blockade, many people took to the streets again.

On 12.02.21, on the occasion of the annual national holiday (Union Day), about 23,000 prisoners were released, including 55 foreigners. The well-known monk and "hate preacher" Wirathu is also said to be among those pardoned. For years, he had been stirring up anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar and criticising the ousted government.

Nigeria

Democracy deficits remain

In the Democracy Index 2020 published by The Economist magazine on 02.02.21, Nigeria has dropped one place from 109th to 110th (out of 167 countries) compared to the previous year.

Kidnappers surrender

According to media reports issued on 09.02.21, seven of those involved in the mass abduction of schoolchildren on 11.12.20 have surrendered to the authorities, including one of the leaders of the armed groups involved in the operation. Government representatives from the northern Nigerian state of Zamfara said that in exchange for an amnesty agreement, the men had handed over their weapons and vowed not to return to their criminal practices. The 43-year-old leader is said to have originally been a cattle rustler before he turned to arms trafficking with criminal and jihadist groups. Over 300 students were kidnapped from a boarding school in Katsina State in northern Nigeria on 11.12.20 (cf. BN of 21.12.20).

Protestors arrested

Nigerian security forces arrested at least twelve persons in Lagos on 13.02.21 who were planning to hold a peaceful rally against the reopening of the city's Lekki toll plaza. Among those arrested were celebrities from the entertainment industry. The Lekki toll plaza had become a symbol of the October 2020 protests against police violence, called EndSARS (cf. BN of 26.10.20) as according to media reports on 20.10.20, an as yet unknown number of unarmed protestors had been shot dead in unexplained circumstances. There had been calls on social media for protests on 13.02.21. In turn, authorities had issued a strong warning against participation and increased the presence of security forces at the toll plaza.

Pakistan

COVID-19 pandemic: vaccination programme launched

On 02.02.21, Pakistan launched its national vaccination programme against coronavirus. On 01.02.21, the 500,000 vaccine doses from China reached the country. Healthcare workers are to be vaccinated first, followed by the elderly. Further vaccine doses have also been ordered from other manufacturers.

Ahmadiyya Community: member shot dead in Peshawar; blasphemy allegations

On 11.02.21, a doctor and member of the Ahmadiyya Community was shot dead at his practice in the northwestern city of Peshawar in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province.

Five Ahmadis were killed between late July and late November 2020. A sixth victim, shot multiple times in September 2020, survived with serious injuries.

The very belief of Ahmadis that the founder of their community holds the rank of a prophet fulfils the offence of insulting the prophet (blasphemy), which is punishable by death in Pakistan.

According to Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) attempted to have the website of the US-based Ahmadiyya Community removed in December 2020. The website's operators also received legal notice that they could be charged with blasphemy in Pakistan due to their self-designation as Muslims.

Republic of the Congo

Journalist to go from sickbed directly into detention

According to media reports, the well-known Congolese cartoonist and director of the satirical magazine *Sel Pigment*, Raymond Malonga, has been arrested; in the meantime, the satirical magazine *Sel Pigment* has also been temporarily banned by the state media authority. The background is not known. According to the international non-governmental organisation Reporters Without Borders, Raymond Malonga, who was being treated in hospital for a bout of malaria, was arrested at his bedside by members of the intelligence service dressed in plain clothes after he reportedly failed to comply with several summonses. Raymond Malonga was immediately taken to the central prison of the capital Brazzaville, where he was placed in an isolation and quarantine unit specially set up for inmates suffering from COVID-19. The International Federation of Journalists and Reporters Without Borders condemn the arrest and demand the immediate release of Raymond Malonga.

Somalia

Elections

The Somali government and the states have not yet agreed on how to proceed with the elections that were supposed to take place on 08.02.21. The opposition parties have declared that they no longer recognise President Mohamed Farmajo and want to establish a transitional government. The President has announced that a new meeting between the parties concerned will take place on 15.02.21. The government and the states, especially Jubaland and Puntland, cannot agree on how to organise the elections. The UN has called on the government to hold the elections as soon as possible, as the postponement will lead to an unpredictable political situation in the country. Many fear that al-Shabaab, who have already threatened to disrupt the elections, will take advantage of the situation.

COVID-19 pandemic

Somalia is to receive 1.2 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine through COVAX by March 2021, which is enough for about three percent of the population. Healthcare workers will be vaccinated first. Additional vaccines are expected to arrive in March and April 2021. The vaccines received through COVAX will then protect 20% of the population. So far, 5,183 cases and 152 deaths have been recorded in Somalia (as of 14.02.21). At the beginning of February 2021, 10 persons died from the virus within five days, the highest increase in deaths since August 2020. Of almost 600 people tested in the Banaadir region (Mogadishu) on 09.02.21, about nine percent were infected with

the virus. In total, more than 200,000 persons have been tested in Somalia. Initial measures to contain the pandemic, such as a curfew and the closure of the borders, have since been lifted again. The government does not provide regular information on the coronavirus situation in the country.

The EU recently allocated EUR 5 million for a three-year project to support the work of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Somali government in strengthening the healthcare system and preventing further spread of the virus.

Attacks on humanitarian operations

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) recorded an increase in attacks on humanitarian operations in Somalia in 2020. During the year, 255 incidents targeting humanitarian organisations were recorded, an increase of almost 60% compared to the previous year. Fifteen aid workers were killed, at least 12 were injured, 24 were abducted and 14 were temporarily detained or arrested.

Bombing in Mogadishu

On 13.02.21, a car bomb exploded near parliament in Mogadishu, killing and injuring several people.

Syria

UN warns of ISIS resurgence

United Nations (UN) First Under-Secretary-General Vladimir Voronkov called on the UN Security Council on 11.02.21 to repatriate foreign relatives of suspected ISIS fighters remaining in Syria to their home countries. Around two years after ISIS were defeated in Syria, some 27,500 foreign children are still living in camps in northeastern Syria, most of them reportedly from Iraq. However, about 8,000 of them are said to come from a total of 60 other countries.

He said with severely limited access to education, the women and children in the camps are at risk of falling victim to radical Islamic ideology. ISIS fighters had already declared the liberation of these prisoners a new priority, while the Kurdish-led security forces had reduced their number of guards in prisons, in some cases sharply.

According to Voronkov, around 10,000 ISIS fighters remain active in the region, most of them in Iraq.

Turkey

Counter-terrorism operations

The Turkish Interior Ministry announced on 12.02.21 that it was launching another phase of domestic counter-terrorism operations in the southeast of the country, saying that Operation Eren-10 Gabar would start in the southeastern provinces of Sirnak and Siirt, involving 68 teams. Most recently, Operation Eren-9 Kazan-Han Yaylasi was launched on 10.02.21 in Hakkari province involving 129 teams. Since the beginning of this year, the first eight phases of the operation have already been launched and Eren-1 Tendürek, Eren-2 Lice, Eren-3 Mount Ararat, Eren-4 Karlova-Varto, Eren-5 Bagok, Eren-6 Mergelo, Eren-7 Mercan-Munsuz Valley and Eren-8 Amanoslar are still underway, according to the Ministry (cf. BN of 01.02.21).

Ukraine

COVID-19 pandemic: ban on approval of Russian Sputnik vaccine

The Ukrainian government banned the approval of vaccines from the Russian Federation on 08.02.21. President Zelenskiy announced that the government had ordered 20 million vaccine doses from the Indian manufacturer Serum Institute of India and that around half the population would be vaccinated by the beginning of 2022. According to the president, the first phase of the vaccination campaign should start in the course of February 2021, but so far Ukraine has not received a single delivery of doses of the vaccine.

Yemen

COVID-19 pandemic

COVAX (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access) will deliver 2.3 million doses of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine to Yemen by early March 2021, according to reports. The Yemeni government has asked COVAX to provide a total of 14 million vaccines, which is enough for about 23% of the population. The government's target is to vaccinate 70% of the population. In addition, the government has approached Saudi Arabia for assistance in funding the vaccines. The vaccines are also to be distributed in the Houthi-controlled north. The Houthis have not published figures on the number of cases of coronavirus since May 2020. At that time, they stated that four persons had contracted coronavirus and one person had died from it. The government, which controls the southern parts of Yemen, has reported 2,145 cases, including 617 deaths (as of 14.02.21). However, the number of unreported cases is probably much higher.

Famine

The UN warned on 21.02.21 that nearly 2.3 million children under the age of five (half of all children in this age group) will suffer from acute malnutrition in 2021. This is a new high and represents a 16% increase from the same time last year. 400,000 of them (a 22% increase from last year) are at risk of dying from malnutrition if they do not receive treatment. In addition, 1.2 million pregnant women and nursing mothers are estimated to be seriously malnourished, which could mean that even more children will suffer from malnutrition.

Clashes in Marib

Clashes between Houthi rebels and government forces in the southern and eastern parts of Marib governorate have increased since the Houthis began renewed attacks on the province in early February 2021. Dozens of fighters from both sides have reportedly been killed or injured. Marib is the last government stronghold in northern Yemen, but the Houthis have increasingly tried to take control of Marib over the past year. Thousands of internally displaced persons are already living in the province and hundreds of families have been forced to flee by the recent hostilities.

Parliamentarians sentenced to death by Houthi court

The Houthi-led Specialised Criminal Court in Sanaa has sentenced eleven parliamentarians to death in absentia over their support for the Yemeni government, according to press reports. The parliamentarians were charged with attending a session of parliament in the city of Seiyun in 2019. The court ordered that all their property be confiscated. In March 2020, the same court sentenced 35 parliamentarians to death for their support of the Saudi Arabia-led coalition. The Yemeni government does not recognise the court and said that its sentences have no legal validity.

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Briefing Notes
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