



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

1 March 2021

Afghanistan

COVID-19 pandemic

On 07.02.21, Afghanistan received 500,000 doses of vaccine from India. The vaccination campaign was launched on 23.02.21 and has reached people in 27 provinces since 25.02.21. Another shipment of 468,000 doses through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) initiative is expected to arrive in the first week of March 2021. According to the Afghan Minister of Health, the first persons to be vaccinated will be 250,000 people working in security, healthcare, education and the media.

Attacks, hostilities, civilian casualties

The recently published United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's (UNAMA) 2020 Annual Report on Civilian Casualties in the Conflict, states that 8,820 civilian casualties were reported last year (3,035 of whom were killed and 5,785 of whom were injured), a decrease of 15% from the previous year and the lowest number of civilian casualties recorded since 2013. However, a closer look at the period under review reveals that the number actually increased in each quarter. Finally, after the Taliban's peace talks with the Afghan government began to falter again on 12.09.20, the number of casualties in the fourth quarter of 2020 was 45% higher than in the fourth quarter of 2019. One of the causes was an increasing number of attacks involving improvised explosive devices and targeted killings. In addition, the number of child soldiers and minors recruited, especially by the Taliban, increased in 2020. Unemployment and growing poverty resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are seen as contributing factors.

Renewed attacks on journalists

On 26.02.21, Afghan media covered a story about a local reporter who was investigating illegal land grabbing in Kapisa province, north of Kabul, and was abused and threatened by armed men. These men were allegedly in cahoots with a local government agency.

On 25.02.21, gunmen allegedly attacked the house of a journalist murdered in January 2021 in Ghor province, killing or injuring several family members. The family blamed the Taliban, but the Taliban have denied the allegation.

Allegations of torture against police in Kandahar

According to press reports, several young men are accusing the police in Kandahar of extorting confessions from them. The men say they were tortured and in some cases sexually abused.

Afghanistan / Pakistan

Construction of border fence along Afghan-Pakistan border nears completion

The construction of a fortified fence along the Afghan-Pakistan border which began in March 2017 is almost complete, according to Pakistani government sources, and is on track to be completed in April 2021.

Albania

Appeals court rejects deportation of suspected Gülen supporter

According to a media report, the second administrative court in Tirana ruled on 25.02.21 that the imminent deportation of a Turkish citizen and suspected Gülen supporter to his home country was not legal. The asylum application of the person concerned had been rejected in the administrative proceedings, also in the second instance (cf. BN of 21.09.20). The first administrative court had rejected the suspension of deportation (cf. BN of 23.11.20) and on 22.12.20 also rejected the appeal in its entirety. The current decision does not oblige the competent authority to recognise the asylum application.

Algeria

Protest rallies continue – the military intervenes

Several thousand persons took to the streets on 22.02.21 on the second anniversary of the launch of the peaceful protest movement, renewing their demands for a comprehensive change in policy and system. Demonstrations were also held on 26.02.21, although the government had banned gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The military responded to the mostly non-violent protests with the use of tear gas and batons after a cordon was breached. Some protestors were also reportedly arrested.

Armenia

Power struggle between government and opposition intensifies

In Armenia, the power struggle between the government and the opposition has shifted further onto the streets. Thousands of supporters from both sides gathered in central squares in the capital of Yerevan on 25.02.21. The rally focused on Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan but indirectly it is about the heavy defeat Armenia suffered in the intense fighting against Azerbaijan almost four months ago. On 09.11.20, Pashinyan had agreed to a ceasefire agreement after the lost battles over Nagorno-Karabakh. The opposition therefore accuses him of treason and is calling for his resignation. Criticism has come from many sections of society, especially since the ruling party cancelled the pledged new elections a few weeks ago. Now the general staff of the armed forces has intervened. Numerous high-ranking officers signed a demand for the resignation of Pashinyan and his government. They criticised him for dismissing the vice-chief of staff on 24.02.21. Pashinyan responded by accusing the military of attempting to overthrow the government. He accused the generals of not wanting to face questions about the lost war. He then called on his supporters to protest and on the opposition to return to dialogue instead of confrontation. Thousands of people followed him on the march he led to Yerevan's Republic Square on 25.02.21. The march is reminiscent of 2018 when he and his supporters brought about a peaceful change of power in a nationwide wave of protests. By contrast, at the same time, the former ruling Republican party, united with other opposition parties, called for a rally in Opera Square, 500 metres away. Here, too, several thousand protesters gathered and demanded the immediate resignation of Pashinyan.

Benin

Constitutional Court upholds Electoral Commission's decision

On 22.02.21, the Constitutional Court upheld the decision of the Autonomous National Electoral Commission CENA to admit only three out of 20 candidates to run in the presidential election scheduled for 11.04.21. Apart from incumbent Patrice Talon, these are the less-known candidates Alassane Soumanou and Corentin Kohoué (cf. BN of 15.02.21). The court rejected appeals by eight candidates barred from running in the election.

Central African Republic

Amnesty International report on victims of recent violence

On 24.02.21, Amnesty International (ai) published a report on civilian casualties in the wake of violence unleashed by the rebel alliance Coalition of Patriots for Change (Coalition des patriotes pour le changement (CPC)), which sought to prevent the elections held on 27.12.20 (cf. BN of 11.01.21). The report stated that numerous civilians had been killed or injured as a result of the violence. In Bangui, at least one young man had been shot dead by security forces on 11.01.21 because he had disobeyed a curfew imposed on 07.01.21. In particular, it had been confirmed that on 15.02.21 and 16.02.21, 14 persons, including at least one woman and one child, were killed near a religious site during an attempt made by security forces and allied forces from abroad to drive the CPC out of the town of Bambari (centre of the country). A Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) medical centre in Bambari was also damaged in the fighting on 16.02.21. MSF reportedly had to treat 30 persons who had sustained injuries. ai called on the government to launch independent investigations into human rights violations by both armed groups and security forces.

The government announced on 24.02.21 that the army had captured the town of Bossangoa (northwest of the country), considered to be a stronghold of former president François Bozizé. Bozizé is accused of supporting the CPC.

UN Under-Secretary-General on the humanitarian situation

On 25.02.21, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations, including the MINUSCA mission deployed in the Central African Republic (cf. BN of 22.02.21), briefed the UN Security Council on the situation in the country. Regarding the humanitarian situation, he referred to continuing attempts by the CPC to cut off the MSR-1 route between the capital Bangui and Cameroon, which is indispensable for supplies. More than a thousand trucks carrying essential supplies continued to be blocked at the border with Cameroon. Most recently, however, the first convoys carrying humanitarian aid managed to reach Bangui. As of January 2021, the Central African Republic was the most dangerous country in the world for international NGO workers, he said. The country accounted for 46% of all incidents reported worldwide.

China

Arrests following criticism of border guards

According to media reports of 23.02.21, seven persons were arrested between 19.02.21 and 21.02.21 for making critical comments about members of the People's Liberation Army on the micro-blogging service Weibo and the social media app WeChat. On 19.02.21, the Chinese military had published for the first time detailed information on the casualties suffered by the People's Liberation Army in clashes that erupted with Indian forces in Ladakh in June 2020 (cf. BN of 22.06.20). According to the report, four soldiers were killed and a commander was seriously injured. The 38-year-old Weibo blogger Qiu Ziming, whose case attracted the most attention due to its reach of over 2.5 million followers, had criticised the commander's actions and questioned the death toll. The arrest of Qiu and other critics came after internet users reported blog posts and WeChat messages to the authorities. The police had publicly called for this after news of the first case leaked. Those arrested are accused of instigating arguments and provoking trouble. According to the police, they are also accused of violating the law on the protection of heroes and martyrs, which was passed in 2018 and criminalises the disparagement of war heroes and their deeds. However, according to state media, the law cannot be applied to the current cases. The reason for this is that an amendment to the Chinese penal code, which is necessary for this purpose, will not enter into force until 01.03.21.

Hong Kong: 47 activists charged

On 28.02.21 arrest warrants were issued for eight activists and 39 activists of the democracy movement. They will have to stand trial from 01.03.21 on charges of conspiracy to commit subversion. The group is accused of violating the security law in July 2020 by taking part in an unofficial primary election ahead of local polls. According to official sources, the general election originally scheduled for September 2020 has been postponed by one year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The list of defendants includes former MPs, numerous district councillors and some of the movement's best-known members, including Leung Kwok-hung, Jimmy Sham, Benny Tai and Joshua Wong. All

the defendants, along with eight other opposition members, had already been provisionally arrested in January 2021 but were subsequently released on bail (cf. BN of 11.01.21). If convicted, they could be sentenced to life imprisonment.

Colombia / Venezuela

Protection status for Venezuelan migrants

President Iván Duque announced on 08.02.21 that Colombia will grant temporary protection status to about one million migrants from Venezuela. The protection status will be valid for ten years. Within this period, they will be able to apply for permanent residence. In addition, the migrants will have access to the labour market and the national health system. The measure will legalise the status of numerous Venezuelans who have fled to Colombia without an official residence permit. The registration process will document the place of residence and socioeconomic conditions of undocumented migrants along with an inclusion in the “biometric register”. Migrants who refuse to comply with this requirement face deportation, according to Duque.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Increase in militia violence in the eastern parts of the country

According to the February 2021 report by the American monitoring group Kivu Security Tracker (KST), there has been a significant increase in homicides and violent crimes in the eastern parts of the country since the end of 2019 compared to previous years. According to KST data, the number of armed groups operating in the eastern parts of the country in 2020 was down from the previous year at around 120 instead of 130. As of October 2020, most armed groups are active in South Kivu province, followed by North Kivu, Ituri and Tanganyika provinces. According to the report, in addition to the dominant armed actors such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (Forces démocratiques pour la libération du Rwanda (FDLR)), the Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain (APCLS)) and Nduma Defense of Congo- Renovated (Nduma défense du Congo-Rénové (NDC-R)), Congolese government forces were responsible for both a third of the incidents and half of the civilian deaths. According to the KST report, by far the most killings of civilians among the non-state actors were carried out by the ADF rebel militia. The high plateau of Minembwe (South Kivu province), the areas around Walikale, Masisi, Lubero and Rutshuri (North Kivu) and the strife-ridden area of Beni (North Kivu) where the highest number of fatalities were recorded, as well as the province of Ituri, which has experienced an increase in violence since 2017, represent the regional hotspots of violent conflict in eastern Congo.

Reporters Without Borders: journalism a dangerous profession

In a press release dated 23.02.21, the NGO Reporters Without Borders (RSF) condemned the arrest and detention of journalist Christophe Yoka Nkumu who works for the radio station Liberté Bikoro on charges of defamation based on suspected reporting. The journalist who was arrested on 22.02.21 and detained in a prison in Mbandaka in the capital of the northwestern province of Equateur, allegedly reported that an unnamed parliamentary representative was making personal use of a car allocated to the public health authorities for combatting Ebola. In addition to calling for his immediate release, RSF criticised the fact that journalism continues to be a dangerous profession in the DRC. The systematic jailing of journalists who criticise politicians needs to stop. Only significant concrete measures such as a moratorium on arrests of journalists and an overhaul of repressive media legislation will end these repeated abuses, RSF says.

In its press release, RSF referred to other incidents against members of the press in recent times. The journalist and director of Radio Liberté, Lisala Erick Ngunde, who was arrested in the neighbouring province of Mongala on 13.02.21 for reporting on political tension in the region, has been released from custody in the meantime, but has been banned from working. Nanou Kazaku, a journalist working for UB-FM radio, was wounded by gunshot during a demonstration in Gorma, the capital of North Kivu, on 17.02.21.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo currently ranks 150th out of 180 countries in RSF's World Press Freedom Index 2020.

In a press release issued on 08.02.21, the NGO “Journaliste en Danger” also expressed concern over the press freedom situation in the northwestern province of Mongala. It says three media companies have been closed down and that there has been a sharp rise in the number of cases of violence and threats against journalists.

Ethiopia

Conflict in Tigray

Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto informed EU Foreign Ministers on 22.02.21 of the trip he made to Ethiopia in February 2021 on behalf of the European Union. He stated that the situation in the regional state of Tigray “is uncontrollable militarily, humanely and on a humanitarian level”, adding that there was no end in sight to the fighting that had been raging on for more than three months. The Ethiopian government had not been able to give a clear picture of the situation during the talks, he said. The question of the extent to which Eritrean soldiers are involved in the conflict also remains unclear (cf. BN of 15.02.21).

A statement issued by the Ethiopian embassy in Brussels rejected Haavisto’s assessment of the situation.

Amnesty International confirms reports of massacre in Axum

In a dossier report published on 24.02.21, Amnesty International (ai) confirmed that a massacre had been carried out in the town of Axum in Tigray. After analysing satellite images, ai accused Eritrean forces of systematically killing hundreds of unarmed civilians after retaking the town from regional militias of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in an offensive carried out together with the Ethiopian army Axum in late November 2020. Amnesty International spoke to 41 survivors and witnesses for the report “The Massacre in Axum”. They consistently described extrajudicial executions, indiscriminate shelling and widespread looting (cf. BN of 18.01.21). According to ai’s assessment, the actions could amount to genocide. The Eritrean government has dismissed the accusations as grotesque.

Ghana

New facility in the LGBTI scene shut down after criticism

On 24.02.21, security forces raided the office of the Ghanaian NGO LGBT+ Rights Ghana in Accra and shut down the facility. It had been opened on 31.01.21 in the presence of, among others, representatives of the EU in Ghana as a contact point for LGBTI persons. LGBT+ Rights Ghana, founded in 2018, advocates for the rights of LGBTI persons. Since the opening was announced, various social actors have been pushing for its closure, including the organisations National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values and Advocates for Christ Ghana (A4CG), the Ghana Catholic Bishops’ Conference and several designated ministers. Threats to destroy the facility had also been made.

Adults engaging in consensual homosexual acts can be sentenced to up to three years’ imprisonment. However, no such charges or convictions have been reported in recent years.

COVID-19 pandemic: vaccination campaign launched

Ghana was the first country to receive 600,000 vaccine doses from the international COVAX initiative on 24.02.21. Free vaccinations are scheduled to start on 02.03.21. Initial target groups will include healthcare workers and persons aged 60 and over.

India / Pakistan

Kashmir: agreement to adhere more strictly to the ceasefire agreement

According to military sources, India and Pakistan have agreed in principle to more strictly observe the ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) running through Kashmir.

According to Indian government sources, at least 22 civilians and 24 soldiers were killed and 197 people were injured in 2020 due to Pakistani violations of the ceasefire along the Line of Control on the side of the Indian-administered part of Kashmir.

According to Pakistani government sources, at least 28 civilians were killed and 257 people injured in 2020 due to Indian ceasefire violations along the Line of Control on the side of Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Iran

COVID-19 pandemic

The British variant of coronavirus has continued to spread in Iran and has now been detected in 14 provinces. According to media reports, the focus is on the southwestern province of Khuzestan, where the national coronavirus traffic light is on red in eleven cities (Iran has a four-level coronavirus warning system from blue to yellow, orange to red). The cities on red alert include the industrial centres of Abadan and Ahvaz and the port city of Mahshahr. Hospital capacities have been exhausted in Abadan. The number of cases has increased tenfold within the past few days, and the number of deaths has doubled. Due to the crisis situation, travel to and from the province is prohibited. The three northern provinces (Gilan, Mazandaran, Golestan) are also experiencing a sharp rise in the number of cases.

Unrest in Sistan and Baluchistan

Unrest has broken out in the south-eastern province of Sistan and Baluchistan. The clashes between security forces and members of the Baluch ethnic minority began in the town of Saravan on the border with Pakistan on 22.02.21. According to reports in Iranian foreign media, the unrest was triggered by the authorities' closure of the Shamsar border crossing (Askan/Bam Posht border region) with Pakistan. The latter want to curb fuel smuggling in the region by setting up legal petrol sales points along the Iran-Pakistan border, meaning many people will lose their income. The measures are seen as an attempt by the Sepah-e Pasdaran to control the lucrative fuel trade itself. The protests that broke out in the wake of the border closure escalated when units of the Revolutionary Guards opened fire on a group of smugglers, killing two people, according to official reports. According to Amnesty International (ai) and Kampein-e Fa'alan -e Baluch, ten persons were killed. The protests and unrest spread to other cities in the province in the following days, with police and Revolutionary Guard bases also coming under attack. The cities affected are Iranshahr, Zahedan, Souran, Qaleh-ye Bid, Sar Jangal, Mir Javeh, Khash and Jakigur. However, the focus of the clashes remained the border town of Saravan. The security forces fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the protesters. In response, many professional groups and workers in the region's bazaars stopped work and went on strike for several days. The protesters are demanding the withdrawal of the Pasdaran from the region. The Iranian government shut down the internet for mobile phones and deployed security forces and military vehicles from neighbouring provinces.

Sistan and Baluchistan is the poorest province in Iran and suffers from high unemployment rate and water shortages. The situation has been considered tense for some time. According to reports by Iranian human rights organisations, 20 members of the Baluch people have been executed since November 2020. Riots broke out in the city of Iranshahr on 24.01.21 following the demolition of the foundations for a Sunni mosque that had not been approved by the authorities.

Early release from prison

According to reports by human rights organisations and foreign media, the writer, filmmaker and satirist Kiyumars Marzban, as well as the journalist and political activist Hengameh Shahidi, were granted early release from prison on 24.02.21. Marzban was serving a two-and-a-half-year sentence in Tehran's Evin Prison. He had been arrested in August 2018 on five charges. In August 2019, the court found him innocent of the charge of assembly and collective action against national security, however, sentenced him to a total of 23 years and three months in prison in connection with four other charges, in particular for his cooperation with foreign media. The well-known journalist Shahidi had already been imprisoned for three years and eight months on charges of propaganda against the government as well as acts against national security, she had been sentenced to three years and eight months.

Student sentenced to five years in prison

A Tehran University student was sentenced to five years in prison by a Revolutionary Court, according to reports by Iranian media abroad. The defendant was charged with “gathering and colluding with the intention to act against national security”. The student had been arrested in the course of the protests in January 2018. She had taken part in a small gathering of students to mark the birthday of a Gonabadi dervish.

Iraq

Protests

On 22.02.21, protests took place again in Nasiriya, the capital of Dhi Qar province. Protesters demanded the resignation of Governor Nazim al-Waeli and that those responsible for the attacks on activists be held accountable. When the protesters tried to set fire to a government building, police opened fire on the crowd, killing two people. On 25.02.21, one person died during demonstrations in the city when police cleared al-Nasr Bridge, which had been blocked by protesters.

On 26.02.21, six more persons died and more than 175 were injured in clashes that erupted between the police and protesters.

As a result of these clashes, Governor Nazim al-Waeli tendered his resignation the same day. Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi appointed Abdul Ghani al-Asadi, a general and commander of the Iraqi special forces, as interim governor. The protesters held symbolic funeral ceremonies for those killed on 28.02.21 and spoke out against the new governor. They said they want an independent governor who would not be influenced by the ruling parties. The Iraqi Prime Minister stated at a meeting on 28.02.21 that those who acted against the protesters would be held accountable.

Attack on member of the Iraqi Parliament

On 26.02.21, Iraqi parliamentarian Dr Ghalib Mohammed Ali was hospitalised following a knife attack outside his home in Sulaymaniyah. Dr. Ghalib Mohammed Ali is considered to be a critic of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). He was discharged the same day. The KRG condemned the attack and launched an investigation.

COVID-19 pandemic

Due to an increase in cases of COVID-19, a travel ban within all provinces in Iraq was announced on 25.02.21. Exceptions are only made for travel on humanitarian grounds or for government employees on official business.

On 27.02.21, the Ministry of Health announced that the first COVID-19 vaccines will arrive in Iraq on 01.03.21. This is a vaccine from China.

Kazakhstan

Arrests at opposition rallies

People took to the streets in several cities across the country on 28.02.21 to demonstrate for democratic reforms, the release of political prisoners, land reform and against the political influence of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Several hundred persons gathered at the only authorised demonstration in the town of Oral. The rallies had been organised by the Democratic Party and the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party. Police arrested dozens of protesters.

Kosovo

Parliamentary election to bring about change in the political landscape

Although experience with previous parliamentary elections suggests that it may take several weeks before the official results are published, the previous opposition party Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) seems to have won a clear victory in the early parliamentary elections held on 14.02.21 (cf. BN of 11.01.21). According to the count so far, Vetëvendosje received just under 48% of the vote. The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), currently led by

caretaker Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti, received around 13% of the vote. In the last parliamentary election held on 06.10.19, the LDK was still almost level with Vetëvendosje (with each party garnering around 25% of the vote). LDK party leader Isa Mustafa resigned from his post the day after the election. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) led by former President Hashim Thaçi was the second strongest party, with around 17% of the vote.

Commentators interpret the election results as an expression of a widespread desire for change. The leader of Vetëvendosje, Albin Kurti, said his party was elected to initially address justice and job opportunities. Kosovo's dialogue with Serbia, on the other hand, will not be a priority for his government. Kurti himself was excluded from the election (cf. BN of 25.01.21). It is widely believed, however, that his lack of a parliamentary mandate will not prevent him from being elected prime minister. In order to achieve the necessary absolute majority of 61 parliamentary seats, Vetëvendosje will have to rely on the support of representatives of the minorities, for whom 20 of the 120 seats in parliament are reserved.

Vetëvendosje has ruled out a coalition with the Srpska Lista (Serb List, SL) party, which is expected to have won all ten mandates due to the Serb minority. Regardless of a coalition, according to the constitution, at least one ministerial post must be filled by a representative of the Serb minority. Two of the four parliamentary mandates for the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities are likely to go to the Romani Inicijativa (RI) party, which has not been represented so far. After the election, accusations were made that the RI was a product of the SL or the government of Serbia. The result had been achieved in particular through votes donated by municipalities where the Serbian ethnic group is in the majority. Similar accusations were also raised with regard to votes for a new movement representing the Bosnian minority. Voters can vote for any candidate regardless of ethnicity.

Malaysia

Deportations to Myanmar

On 23.02.21, 1,086 migrants from Myanmar were deported from Malaysia despite a court order to halt the deportation. Originally, 1,200 migrants were to be deported. The statement did not explain why only 1,086 were deported instead of 1,200. The migrants reportedly did not include asylum seekers or refugees from the Rohingya ethnic minority. Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International (ai) and Asylum Access had warned that the migrants' lives would be at risk if they returned to Myanmar.

Myanmar

Protests continue, military crackdown claims more lives

Although the military threatened to use lethal force against demonstrators, hundreds of thousands of people, according to local media reports even several million people, followed a call for a general strike against the junta on 22.02.21. This was the biggest rally since the military coup on 01.02.21.

On 24.02.21 around 1,000 supporters of the military government gathered in Yangon (Rangoon) for a march and attacked opponents of the coup with stones. In Mandalay, another protestor succumbed to injuries sustained during a rally on 20.02.21 (cf. BN of 22.02.21).

On 27.02.21, state media announced the dismissal of Myanmar's UN Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun for treason after he had called on the international community to exert pressure on the military government. Also on 27.02.21, the military and police began to crack down on the protest movement with increasing severity. In several towns, tear gas and stun grenades were used in addition to rubber bullets. Security forces also fired live ammunition into the air and targeted demonstrators. According to UN sources, at least 18 persons had been killed in peaceful protests in Yangon, Dawei, Mandalay, Myeik, Bago and Pokokku by 28.02.21. More than 30 people were injured, some seriously. The number of persons killed in connection with the protests has now risen to at least 22. The Auxiliary Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) puts the number of people arrested at 1,132, including seven journalists.

Trial against Aung San Suu Kyi continues

Overthrown government leader Aung San Suu Kyi is said to remain under house arrest. Her lawyer Khin Maung Zaw said he would not be allowed to see her or represent her at her court hearing on 01.03.21. Aung San Suu Kyi

faces charges of violating the Foreign Trade Act and the Disaster Relief Act. According to media reports, she faces six years in prison.

Niger

Unrest following presidential run-off

Riots broke out in several towns after the results of the presidential run-off election were announced on 21.02.21. According to the Nigerien Ministry of the Interior, two persons were killed and around 470 were arrested. Two days after the election, the Independent National Electoral Commission CENI published the preliminary election results. According to the results, Mohamed Bazoum, former Minister of the Interior and candidate of the ruling Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (Parti nigérien pour la démocratie et le socialisme (PNDS)), won with 55.75% of the vote against the opposition candidate Mahamane Ousmane, who received 44.25% of the vote. Ousmane, who became Niger's first democratically elected president in 1993, told the media that the election was tainted by irregularities and fraud and that he was the winner. The opposition was unable to provide evidence of this.

Nigeria

More than 300 schoolgirls abducted

According to media reports and information provided by representatives of Nigerian authorities, a group of armed men raided a boarding school in the town of Jangebe in the northern state of Zamfara on 26.02.21 and abducted 317 schoolgirls. A police spokesperson said on the day of the abduction that heavily armed security forces would reinforce rescue operations that are already underway. At first, it was not clear who was responsible for the kidnapping. Northern Nigeria has experienced a wave of attacks by gangs who kill, rob and abduct residents. The last incident involved the abduction of almost 30 pupils, twelve relatives and three teachers in the central state of Niger on 17.02.21 (cf. BN of 22.02.21). According to media reports on 27.02.21, these kidnap victims have since been released. The exact circumstances of the release have not been made public. President Muhammadu Buhari had announced shortly before that no ransom would be paid.

Persons killed and injured in attack in the northeast

At least ten persons were killed and around 40 injured in an attack on Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in the northeast, on 23.02.21, according to Nigerian authorities. Suspected Islamist attackers had opened fire on the city. This was reported in a statement issued by the governor of the state the following day. It initially remained unclear who was behind the attack. The Islamist group Boko Haram and its splinter organisation Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have terrorised the region for years by carrying out suicide attacks, raids and other attacks against the Nigerian military and civilian population. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the violence has displaced almost 2.4 million people in Nigeria and neighbouring countries.

COVID-19 pandemic: number of cases probably higher than official figures

There is reason to believe that the number of cases of COVID-19 in Nigeria may be far higher than official figures suggest. This is based on media reports citing research results published on 22.02.21 by the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and the Nigeria Institute for Medical Research (NIMR). The study results suggest that about one in five residents of Lagos, Enugu and Nasarawa states may already have contracted COVID-19. The result of the study does not match the official figures on the incidence of infection. The NCDC website, which is updated regularly, states that about 156,000 cases have been confirmed nationwide so far and that around 1,900 persons have died of COVID-19.

North Macedonia

Violent protests erupt following life sentences for ethnic Albanians

According to recent media reports, at least seven police officers were injured during a protest march in the capital Skopje on 26.02.21. The violence occurred after several thousand ethnic Albanians called for a "protest for justice"

and demanded freedom for five ethnic Albanians. The five Albanians had been sentenced by a Macedonian criminal court on 23.02.21 in a politically controversial retrial (that had been underway since 2018) to life imprisonment in some cases for the murder of five ethnic Macedonians in 2012. The demonstrators had chanted “Justice for Albanians”, carrying banners criticising the courts and judiciary and demanding the resignation of allegedly corrupt prosecutors. The 2012 crime and the subsequent 2014 first-instance verdict had caused strong inter-ethnic tensions and fuelled speculation about political interference during Nikola Gruevski’s term in office. However, the retrial had not led to any significant new findings.

Pakistan

Attack against aid workers in North Waziristan

On 22.02.21, unknown gunmen shot and killed four female aid workers in the former tribal area of North Waziristan, which belongs to the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. Back in January 2021, unknown perpetrators carried out a similar attack in which one person was killed (cf. BN of 18.01.21).

Ahmadiyya community: website on persecution situation shut down

According to a press release issued by the Ahmadiyya community Germany on 22.02.21, the international website that covers the persecution of the Ahmadis was taken offline as a result of the measures implemented by the Pakistani Internet Regulatory Authority (cf. BN of 15.02.21). An alternative is available on the website of the Ahmadiyya Community in Germany.

Republic of the Congo

Secret arms supplies exposed

According to research conducted by the investigative journalist network Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), the government has been purchasing hundreds of tonnes of undeclared weapons from Azerbaijan since at least 2015 until January 2020. Opposition figures claim that previous shipments of weapons from Azerbaijan were used to fuel a brutal post-election offensive in 2016 that led to a humanitarian crisis. According to the UN, about 140,000 people in the southern Pool region were affected by the humanitarian crisis, for which the government blamed the Ninja militia, primarily recruited from the Lari ethnic group.

With regard to the presidential elections scheduled for 21.03.21, the opposition, in view of the disclosure of the supply of weaponry in January 2020, feared that President Denis Sassou-Nguesso, who is running for a third term in office, would again resort to violence to ensure he remains in power.

Russian Federation

Navalny begins prison sentence in penal colony

The imprisoned Putin critic Alexei Navalny has been taken to a penal colony near Moscow. He will serve his sentence in the camp located about 100 km east of the capital in the small town of Pokrov (Vladimir region), according to a report issued by the RIA news agency on 28.02.21, citing a commission that represents the rights of Russian prisoners. Taking into account earlier periods of imprisonment and several months of house arrest, Navalny could be released in the summer of 2023 after serving two years, six months and two weeks. Around 800 persons are currently serving their sentences at the penal colony in Pokrov. According to human rights activists, the detention centres are notorious for violence, torture and also deaths. According to media reports, however, the prison conditions in the Pokrov prison camp are supposed to be less harsh than in other prison camps, e.g. in Siberia.

Somalia

COVID-19 pandemic

In February 2021, a significant increase in COVID 19 cases (infections and deaths) was recorded in Somalia. Oxygen supplies were running low in hospitals in Mogadishu. Nevertheless, healthcare workers fear that the official figures are too low, partly because deaths from coronavirus that occur in private hospitals or at home are not registered. Laboratory tests were sent abroad to check whether more infectious mutations of the virus were spreading. Schools and universities were reportedly closed for a fortnight on 22.02.21 and public gatherings were banned. The first shipments of vaccines are expected to arrive in March 2021.

Syria

US Air Force bombs militia position on the border with Iraq

As a presumed response to the missile attack in Erbil, Iraq, on 15.02.21 (cf. BN of 22.02.21), the US military bombed pro-Iranian militias on 25.02.21 who have established another, albeit unofficial, border post on the Syrian side of the border with Iraq between al-Qaem and Abu Kamal, through which weapons and fighters are said to be regularly smuggled.

The militias that used the crossing are said to include Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada. According to US government officials, "a handful" of militiamen were killed. Meanwhile, media close to the militias reported that one person had been killed and several injured.

Hama: five civilians killed in mine blast

On 27.02.21, a total of 18 persons were involved in a mine blast in the central province of Hama, the state news agency SANA reported. The mine is believed to have been left behind by rebels who once controlled the nearby town of Salamiyeh.

Fire at camp for persons who have family ties with ISIS

According to UNICEF, three minors were killed and 15 others were injured in a fire at the notorious Al-Hol camp on 28.02.21, where about 80% of the 62,000 residents are women and children. The cause of the fire was not initially known. Crime in Al-Hol is reported to have risen sharply in recent weeks.

Suspected attack on oil pipeline in eastern Syria

According to the state-owned news agency SANA, an oil pipeline was sabotaged near Abu Khashab in Deir ez-Zor on 27.02.21. ISIS sleeper cells continue to operate in the sparsely populated areas of eastern Syria and repeatedly carry out attacks against government troops and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Turkey

FETÖ raids on the military

According to media reports, arrest warrants were issued for 148 suspects, 103 of them soldiers on active duty, on 24.02.21 as part of an investigation conducted by the Izmir Chief Public Prosecutor's Office into previously undiscovered FETÖ structures in the armed forces, and 18 more suspects are being sought. In addition, raids were carried out in 47 provinces. The suspects are accused of communicating with undercover FETÖ imams - high-ranking FETÖ members - via payphones. Of the suspects, 12 are said to be from the land forces, 47 from the air force, 18 from the navy, 38 from the gendarmerie and 19 from the coast guard. According to the Chief Public Prosecutor's Office, there were far more Gülenists in the armed forces than those who took part in the failed coup attempt. They say the existence of undetected or inactive FETÖ cells in the armed forces still poses a great danger.

Motions to revoke the mandate of a Member of Parliament

On 25.02.21, according to media reports, the Turkish Parliamentary Presidency received applications from various public prosecutors to suspend the mandates of 33 members of parliament, at least nine of them allegedly MPs who

are members of the People's Democratic Party (HDP). Among them is the co-chair of the HDP, Pervin Buldan, who is accused of being involved in the pro-Kurdish Kobane protests in 2014, in which 37 people died.

Tunisia

Mass protests in Tunis – government crisis deepens

The biggest protests for years took place in Tunis on 27.02.21. Thousands of supporters of the ruling Islamic conservative party Ennahda demonstrated in the streets of the capital after the party called for a “march to defend democratic institutions”. Ennahda is Tunisia's strongest party.

The background is the ongoing dispute between President Kais Saied and Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi regarding the cabinet reshuffle that has been approved by parliament.

Vietnam

General appointed head of the Commission for Propaganda and Education

Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Trong Nghia was appointed head of the Commission for Propaganda and Education on 19.02.21. The commission is responsible for overseeing the country's media. Nguyen's previous work in the army included overseeing the creation in 2017 of the Force 47 cyber unit, which combats anti-state propaganda and misinformation on the internet.

COVID-19 pandemic: first vaccine delivery made

On 24.02.21, Vietnam received its first shipment of 117,600 doses of vaccine from South Korea. The vaccination is scheduled to start in March 2021. According to Johns Hopkins University (JHU), 2,448 persons have contracted coronavirus in Vietnam so far. 35 persons have died (as of: 01.03.21).

Yemen

Fighting continues in Marib

Heavy fighting rages on between Houthi rebels and pro-government forces in the Marib governorate in northern Yemen. Although the heaviest fighting has taken place in the district of Sirwah, armed clashes have also occurred just a few kilometres from the city of Marib, the capital of the governorate. It is unclear how many civilian casualties and displaced people there are, but at least 8,000 persons have been forced to flee recently. According to the UN, the unrest is rendering the delivery of aid increasingly difficult.

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