



# Briefing Notes

## Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

3 May 2021

### Afghanistan

#### Warlords ready to support the Afghan army against the Taliban

In case the Taliban would boycott the peace process, some of the old Mojahedin and warlords from the civil war period (1992-96) and/or their successors have announced to support the Afghan army with their militias in the fight against the Taliban. Ethnic Tajik Ahmad Massoud, the son of the well-known Mojahed Ahmad Shah Massoud, has reportedly announced that he would lead a new resistance movement against the Taliban in the provinces of Takhar, Baghlan, Kunduz and Samangan. The same applies to ethnic Tajik warlord Ismail Khan in Herat, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami supporters in Badakhshan and Baghlan, and other militias in Maidan Wardak and Daikundi (including the Hazara Resistance Front). In view of these developments, some observers fear a new fragmentation of the parties; they see a second civil war looming in a situation similar to that after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops in 1989 and call for unconditional joint action against the Taliban. So far, only the international troops have been able to keep under control the numerous and ethnically diverse warlords, the observers say. Neither the Afghan government nor the military is thought capable of accomplishing this. It seems likely that the warlords will begin to strive for more power in the country.

#### ISIS and al-Qaida fighters in Afghan prisons

On 27.04.21, the National Directorate of Security (NDS) reported that 408 ISIS militants, among them and children, from at least 13 countries are being held in Afghan prisons. The majority are from Pakistan (299), followed by Uzbekistan (37) and China (16). Furthermore, 309 foreign al-Qaida fighters are imprisoned in Afghanistan, the NDS stated.

#### Attacks on civilians

On 01.05.21, a university lecturer was gunned down in Kabul; three women and a child were killed by a grenade impact in Nangarhar province. On 30.04.21, a car bomb exploding in front of a guesthouse killed 26 civilians and injured about 110 more in the town of Pul-e Alam, Logar province. The victims were mainly students preparing for their exams. The Afghan government has condemned the attack as a crime against humanity. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack. On 29.04.21, four employees of an energy company and two other civilians were injured in an attack in Nangarhar province. Also on 29.04.21, seven civilians, all of them young men and relatives of an army soldier, were reported killed by the Taliban in Baghlan province. On 28.04.21, it was reported that in the Arghandab district of Kandahar province, 28 civilians had been killed and 151 injured by Taliban landmines in the previous ten days. On 26.04.21, a religious event (a Quran recitation competition attended by 150 mainly young people) was shelled with rockets in Kunar province; 16 people were injured, most of them students between the age of ten and 18. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack. Also on 26.04.21, five civilians were killed and three others injured by gunmen in Nangarhar province.

## **Albania**

### **Ruling party wins parliamentary election**

On 27.04.21 the election commission informed that Prime Minister Edi Rama's Socialist Party (PS) won the parliamentary election of 25.04.21, securing about 49 percent of votes cast. As in the previous legislative period, the PS has an absolute majority of 74 of the 140 parliamentary seats; hence, Rama is heading for a third term in office. The opposition coalition around the Democratic Party (PD) (cf. BN of 29.03.21) improved by ten percentage points to around 39 percent and gained 59 seats. The Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) suffered a clear defeat with around 7% of the vote (a drop of 50 percent compared to the 2017 election), and secured four seats. Also, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) entered parliament with around 2% and three seats. The calculation of seats from the share of votes cast reflects regional distortions.

Election day itself was apparently peaceful. A few days before the election, on 21.04.21, an alleged PS activist was shot dead on the street in the city of Elbasan; four other people were injured. Apparently, the background was an altercation in which the victim was accused of offering money in return for votes.

### **Evaluation of the Election Observation Mission**

In a statement of 26.04.21, the joint election observation mission of the OSCE Offices for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) as well as the Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) and of the Council of Europe noted a misuse of state resources in the election campaign, despite the fact that an appropriate legal framework was in place. Campaigning by public figures in their official capacity and the launch of large government infrastructure projects shortly before the election gave the ruling party a considerable advantage, the mission said. Also, cases of vote buying were cause for concern. The observation mission also noted incentives and pressure put on civil servants in their voting decision. However, the legal framework ensured that fundamental freedoms were respected during the election campaign.

### **Reactions to election results**

The PS called for the celebration of the election victory, which was implemented by several thousand supporters in Tirana on 27.04.21 in defiance of Corona requirements, as Rama admitted afterwards. At the same time, the opposition denied the legitimacy of the electoral process. LSI Chair Monika Kryemadhi congratulated the 'oligarchs and gangs' on the victory. DP leader Lulzim Basha, who has led the party since 2013, called the procedure an election massacre. Meanwhile, there have been calls for his resignation from within his party.

Several Western countries have called for recognition of the election results, saying that the political actors should approach each other in a constructive and cooperative manner.

Most recently, the high number of 83,000 ballot papers declared invalid has attracted attention; with around five per cent of all votes cast, their number was significantly higher than the roughly two per cent in the 2017 election. On 29.04.21, State President Ilir Meta also called for a recount of votes, saying it was conceivable that some of the ballot papers declared invalid had been marked with a second cross at a later point in time. Apparently, videos and photographs of such election manipulations have been published in local media.

## **Burkina Faso**

### **Deaths in attacks**

On 26.04.21, a convoy of military and environmental protection agency personnel, which was on an anti-poaching mission, was attacked by unidentified individuals on a road between the towns of Fada N'Gourma and Pama (Est region). Two Spanish journalists accompanying the operation and an Irish citizen, co-founder of an anti-poaching NGO, were killed in the incident. Other media report that the Irishman was a journalist.

Also on 26.04.21, between 15 and 18 people were killed in attacks on several villages in the municipality of Seytenga (Sahel region), various reports say.

## Cameroon

### Boko Haram fighters pushed back

The Cameroon military has informed that about 80 Boko Haram fighters were pushed back from the town of Fotokol (Far North region) near the border with Nigeria during a military operation on 26.04.21. Several civilians who had been abducted by the terrorists were freed in the operation, a spokesperson said. Also, a number of Boko Haram fighters were reportedly killed and weapons were seized.

### Arrests of LGBTQI people

In its latest report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) accuses security forces in Cameroon of an increasing number of attacks on LGBTQI people. Since February 2021, at least 24 people have been arbitrarily arrested, beaten or threatened, among them a 17-year-old youth, the report says. There have also been several mass arrests in the last two years, HRW states.

## Chad

### Deadly protests, military council appoints interim government, ongoing fighting against FACT

On 27.04.21 and 01.05.21, at least five people were killed and more than 36 injured during protest rallies against the transitional military council in N'Djamena and several cities in the south of the country; about 700 demonstrators were briefly arrested. The protests, some peaceful and some violent, were met with tear gas, live ammunition and arrests by the security forces. The protesters demanded a civilian government without military interference. Meanwhile, Mahamat Idriss Déby, head of the military council and son of late President Idriss Déby, who had died on 19.04.21 fighting the rebel group Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad (FACT), has appointed a transitional government (cf. BN of 26.04.21).

In the northern part of the country, the military is still fighting the FACT.

## Colombia

### Several people killed in protest rallies

Between 28.04. and 01.05.21, nationwide protests were held against the government's planned tax reform. Official figures brought to at least 14 the number of people killed in the rallies; however, human rights organisations put the number of victims at up to 35. In addition, the organisation Temblores has registered more than 850 cases of police violence. Following the ongoing protests, President Iván Duque announced to withdraw the tax reform from Congress. The reform project aimed at a tax increase that would directly affect the middle and lower classes.

## Côte d'Ivoire

### Prominent opposition activist released from pre-trial detention

On 26.04.21, opposition activist Pulchérie Edith Gbalet was released after more than eight months in pre-trial detention. She is the president of the Alternative Citoyenne Ivoirienne (ACI) platform, a civil society organisation which has links to the opposition. At a press conference on 30.04.21, she thanked her lawyers and supporters from home and abroad. The prominent activist had been arrested in the night to 16.08.20 after having called for peaceful demonstrations against the new candidacy of incumbent president Alassane Ouattara. Originally, Ouattara had planned to abandon a third candidacy because it is controversial in terms of constitutional law; but eventually he decided to run for elections after all. In protest, several opposition candidates withdrew their candidacies and called for an election boycott. Ouattara won the election on 31.10.20 by a large majority, not least due to the boycott (cf. BN of 09.11.20). Media report that at least 87 people have died in connection with these events since August 2020. The excessive use of pre-trial detention has already triggered criticism in the past. For example, Pascal Affi N'Guessan, one of the most important opposition politicians, was only released on 30.12.20 after almost two months in pre-trial detention (cf. BN of 11.01.21).

## **DR Congo**

Prime Minister confirmed, new President of the Constitutional Court appointed

On 26.04.21, Prime Minister Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde, a confidant of President Félix Tshisekedi, was endorsed by 410 of the 412 MPs present at the plenary session of the National Assembly. Media reports generally assume that President Tshisekedi has prevailed over his predecessor Joseph Kabila after a power struggle lasting several months. In view of the complete change of government, the new majority in parliament and the appointment of Tshisekedi's confidant, Dieudonné Kaluba Dibwa, as President of the Constitutional Court on 20.04.21, former President Kabila appears to have lost most of his influence on the government, the judiciary and other strategically important institutions.

State of siege

On 30.04.21, President Félix Tshisekedi declared a state of emergency in the form of a state of siege for the conflict provinces of North Kivu and Ituri, which are affected by considerable militia violence. Prior to this, the President had asked France for support in fighting the Islamic rebel militia Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). The militia was originally based in Uganda and had officially been declared to be a foreign terrorist organisation with links to ISIS on 11.03.21 by the United States. In view of the deteriorating security situation in eastern Congo, also Kenya pledged on 26.04.21 to send more troops as part of the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO).

In a recent report of 22.04.21, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) noted a further deterioration in the humanitarian and security situation in Ituri province (particularly in the Djugu regions and the northern parts of Irumu region), not least in view of the increase in acts of violence against civilians and new waves of displacement. UNICEF stated in a press release on 26.04.21 that despite urgent appeals by UNICEF and other humanitarian agencies, the situation in Ituri province continues to deteriorate. There has been an increase in armed and inter-communal violence, leading to serious violations of children's rights, human rights abuses against women and new waves of internal displacement.

## **Ecuador**

Relaxation of ban on abortion

On 28.04.21, Ecuador's Constitutional Court ruled in favour of decriminalising abortions after rape. The decision was made following a petition by women's rights groups and paves the way for corresponding changes in the law. So far, Ecuadorian criminal law provides for a prison sentence of up to three years for abortions. Abortions are only allowed either if the woman's life is in danger or if the pregnancy is the result of sexual abuse of a mentally handicapped woman.

## **Ethiopia**

TPLF and OLA classified as terrorist organisations

In response to the increasing violence in the regional states of Tigray and Oromia, the Ethiopian cabinet has classified the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA-Shane) as terrorist groups in a declaration of 01.05.21. Both organisations are held responsible for the death and displacement of civilians as well as for the destruction and damage of state institutions.

The TPLF had held government power in the regional state of Tigray until November 2020 and is currently waging a guerrilla war against the Ethiopian government. The term OLA-Shane covers a military splinter group of the Oromo Liberation Front, which continues the armed struggle against the Ethiopian government in the west and south of the regional state of Oromia. The group has been repeatedly accused of attacks on civilians, most recently on 30.04.21 when 15 bus passengers were killed in the Horo Guduru Wollega zone.

After Prime Minister Abiy had removed the Ginbot 7, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and other groups from the list of terrorist organisations in mid-2018, only al-Qaida and al-Shabaab were recently listed as militant groups.

## **Gambia**

### Conviction for homosexuality

The Gambian news portal The Voice reports that the Kanifing Magistrate Court ruled on 26.04.21 that Senegalese national Mustapha Jai was guilty of an 'attempted unnatural offence' under Article 145 of the Criminal Code 1965 (as amended in 2005), and sentenced him to the maximum prison term of seven years or a fine of 100,000 Dalasi (approx. 1.995 USD, as of 03.05.21). The court also ordered the convict to pay damages in the amount of 50,000 Dalasi (approx. 977 USD, as of 03.05.21) to the victim. For the first time, the Gambian news portal The Standard had reported about an arrest on charges of homosexuality on 01.07.20. One day later, the news website The Point reported on the formal indictment of the accused on charges of attempted homosexual acts.

## **Guinea**

### Hundreds still in detention without charge

Around six months after the presidential election of 18.10.20 and the subsequent protests (cf. BN of 02.11.20 and 21.12.20), many of those arrested are still held in detention. Apparently, there are nearly 400 detainees, among them party officials of the Union des forces démocratiques de Guinée (UFDG). Some of them are in a precarious state of health; others have apparently died in custody. Court hearings have not yet been set, and many detainees have not yet been formally charged. The government rejects the opposition's accusations that the detainees are political prisoners. The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights has reportedly condemned the continued detention.

## **India**

### COVID-19 pandemic: tense situation; relief supplies have arrived

Last week, India recorded the highest number of daily deaths from COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic. The health system is near collapse, hospitals and crematories are overcrowded. In January 2021, India had launched a vaccination campaign. Since 01.05.21, all adults are eligible for vaccination; before that date, only those over 45 received the vaccine. However, several states have run out of vaccines. Relief supplies have arrived from various countries, e.g. ventilators from Germany and a vaccine shipment from Russia, which had already delivered ventilators, oxygen generation equipment and medicines. Additional medical equipment and medicines have also arrived from France and Belgium. Media report that India plans to increase its own vaccine production by June 2021. The state railway company has announced to provide 4,000 coaches with 64,000 temporary beds for Corona patients. Meanwhile, regional elections have been held in some states and there have been large rallies in West Bengal, among other places.

### BJP defeated in in West Bengal regional elections

According to the provisional vote count of 02.05.21, Mamata Banerjee was elected Chief Minister of the state of West Bengal for a third term. Her regional Trinamool Congress Party (TMC) secured a two-thirds majority in the 294-seat regional assembly before the final count ended. Banerjee is currently India's only female chief minister. Prime Minister Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made significant gains, securing at least 77 seats, compared to just three seats in the 2016 regional elections.

## Iran

### More arrests of Baha'is

Iranian foreign media report that eight members of the Baha'i community were arrested in the Baharestan region (Isfahan province) on 25.04.21 during house searches. A total of 13 homes were searched; seven women and one man were arrested and taken to an unknown location.

### Illegal land grabbing stopped by force

On 28.04.21, several villagers were injured in an operation against illegal land grabbers carried out by special forces in Selseleh district (Lorestan province). The operation was conducted as part of a plan to 'liberate national lands' in two villages. Iranian foreign media report that armed special forces attacked houses and gardens and opened fire on residents who protested against the operation. In addition to rubber bullets, live ammunition was also used. In the ensuing clashes, houses were destroyed and walnut trees were cut down by the authorities. District governor Morteza Mahdavi Kiya has stated that the affected land had been settled and cultivated under customary law in the past years. Now, the applicable law and the aforementioned plan was being implemented on the instructions of the public prosecutor and the local security council, the governor said.

### Well-known activist arrested

Reports from Iranian foreign media say that on 29.04.21, security forces confronted Manouchehr Bakhtiari, the father of a protester killed during the November 2019 protests, at his brother's house, beat him and subsequently arrested him without a warrant. Since his son had been killed by security forces, he had repeatedly spoken out publicly on social media against the government and the political system. The case has received international attention due to Bakhtiari's numerous interviews with Iranian media.

## Iraq

### Rocket attack and explosions

On 01.05.21, an explosive device detonated in the north of Baghdad. The device was located near Iraqi military vehicles. Four people died in the incident. An explosion also occurred in Kirkuk, killing three Peshmerga fighters.

On 02.05.21, new rocket attacks were launched at Baghdad's International Airport, with no-one injured. ISIS militants are held responsible for all these attacks; they have taken responsibility for the attack on 01.05.21. The President of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan, Nijirfan Barzani, has urged once more for cooperation between the Iraqi military and the Peshmerga in the fight against ISIS in the disputed border region, saying that the militants were exploiting the security vacuum there.

### Clinic fire

The death toll from a fire at the Ibn al-Khatib hospital in Baghdad has risen to over 130 during the week. The full extent of the fire is still unclear. On 02.05.21, a second incident occurred when an individual tried to set fire to the Dar-al-Salam hospital, which is also located in Baghdad. The background is unclear, the man was arrested before he carried out the plan.

### Criminal court for ISIS suspects

On 28.04.21, the cabinet of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan approved a bill authorising the establishment of a criminal court in Erbil where only cases of suspected ISIS fighters are to be dealt with.

### Protests

On 02.05.21, people rallied again in Baghdad against high unemployment and poor working conditions. The protesters tried to enter the offices of the finance ministry. Shots were fired and three protesters were injured.

## Kenya

Closure of Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps by 30.06.22

On 29.04.21, Kenya and the UN agreed on a plan to close the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps by 30.06.22. In a joint statement, the Kenyan government and the UN refugee agency UNHCR said that the refugee camps do not offer a long-term solution. Together, the two camps hold more than 430,000 refugees, mainly from Somalia and South Sudan. Since 2016, the Kenyan authorities have repeatedly threatened to dissolve the Dadaab and Kakuma camps. The last attempt to close them had failed in 2017, when the High Court intervened and ruled the government's decision unconstitutional.

## Kyrgyzstan

Border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

On 28.04. and 29.04.21, an armed conflict broke out on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, killing 34 Kyrgyz citizens, according to official Kyrgyz figures. About a dozen villages were also affected, with houses and other objects burnt down. In Kyrgyzstan, more than 33,000 people were evacuated from villages near the border. The Tajik authorities have not yet officially reported casualty figures. The Tajik service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reports no less than 15 victims. The clashes followed long-running border disputes between the two states. The most recent dispute was over the water infrastructure near the state borders. On 01.05.21, talks were held between government delegations from both sides of the conflict, with both sides declaring a complete ceasefire and the withdrawal of troops.

## Mali

French-Malian military operation

The Malian army has informed that on 26.04.21, soldiers killed at least 26 jihadist militants, destroyed two vehicles, and captured a large quantity of arms in a military operation by Malian and French forces near the border with Mauritania.

## Myanmar

Ongoing protests against the military coup continue, increasing signs of civil war

The human rights organisation Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) has reported that at least 765 people have died due to police and military violence since the military coup of 01.02.21 led by Min Aung Hlaing. Currently, 3,555 people are in detention, with 1,396 arrest warrants still outstanding.

During several days of fighting in Mindat (Chin State), local resistance fighters from the newly formed Chinland Defence Force (CDF) have killed between 15 and 30 soldiers of the Myanmar army (Tatmadaw), with figures varying in different reports. The fighting had broken out on 24.04.21 after the arrest of seven civilians. They were reportedly released on 27.04.21 in exchange for 20 detained Tatmadaw soldiers.

In Yinmabin and Kani (Sagaing region), where local people and the Tatmadaw had clashed in mid-April, civilians continue to put up armed resistance against the troops stationed there. Meanwhile Yee Mon, defence minister of the underground National Unity Government (NUG), has announced the establishment of a People's Defence Army. On 30.04.21, UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener cited reports that many urban students are being trained by ethnic militias in the use of weapons.

On 27.04.21, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) seriously clashed with the military at a Tatmadaw outpost in Hpapun district (Mutraw). Apparently, the KNLA burnt down the base. On 27.04. and 28.04.21, the junta launched a total of nine airstrikes on Hpapun, deliberately targeting civilians, the Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) reports. On 28.04. and 29.04.21, more than 2,000 people fled from Hpapun to Thailand. The UN estimates that so far, 10,000 people have fled to neighbouring countries. The number of internally displaced people (IDPs) is estimated by the UN at 20,000; the KPSN estimates 45,000 IDPs in KNLA-controlled areas alone.

On 29.04.21, an attack by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) reportedly killed 20 Tatmadaw soldiers. The clash occurred at the foot of the embattled Alaw Bum military base, which is currently in the hands of the KIA. There is no exact information on casualties on the KIA side.

On the same day, several missile attacks were reported against Tatmadaw airbases in Magway and Meiktila, as well as two explosions in front of the immigration office and near a photo studio in Meiktila. No-one was injured, and it remained unclear who was responsible for the attacks.

On 01.05. and 02.05.21, there were several explosions in Yangon during nationwide demonstrations. Security forces shot dead a total of six protesters in Shan and Kachin states and in the Sagaing region. Protest organisers have called for a worldwide Myanmar Spring Revolution.

## **Niger**

16 soldiers killed

In an attack in the Tahoua region, a heavily armed group has killed at least 16 soldiers and injured six others. Apparently, several of the attackers have also lost their lives or were injured. Both the motivation and the origin of the attackers are still unclear. In addition to Islamist groups, also criminally motivated groups are active in Niger.

## **Nigeria**

Raid against Eastern Security Network (ESN)

On 24.04.21, Nigerian security forces killed a senior ESN commander during a raid on the ESN headquarters in southeastern Imo state. The network is viewed as a paramilitary wing of the secessionist group Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Media reports have cited an official statement from the Nigerian Armed Forces, that at least eleven people, among them security personnel, were killed in the operation jointly carried out by the army, police and state security service. Also on 24.04.21, the Imo state governor's country house was attacked and set ablaze by unidentified individuals; four security personnel and a firefighter were reportedly killed in the incident. Most recently, a whole series of attacks was launched on police officers and police facilities in the South-East and South-South regions (cf. BN of 22.03.21); in addition, around 1,800 prison inmates were liberated (cf. BN of 12.04.21).

Terrorist attacks in the northeast

At the end of April 2021, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a split-off from the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram, reportedly launched two attacks within a short period of time: On 24.04.21 (other sources put the date at one or two days earlier), the terrorists attacked the village of Geidam in Yobe state near the border with Niger in trucks equipped with machine guns. Geidam is the hometown of the new Inspector General of the Nigerian police, Usman Alkali Baba (cf. BN of 26.04.21). At least eleven people were killed in the incident. Apparently, the Nigerian armed forces reacted shortly afterwards. Geidam has been the target of terrorist attacks in the past. On 25.04.21, at least 31 soldiers were killed when a military convoy was ambushed in Mainok locality, Borno State, as was reported by military officials. Apparently, this was the deadliest attack so far in 2021 against the Nigerian army. The Islamist group ISWAP, which had split off from the terrorist group Boko Haram in 2016, is viewed as a West African offshoot of the jihadist militia Islamic State (IS) and is mainly active in north-eastern Nigeria.

Report on Boko Haram renegades

In the Lake Chad region, more than 4,000 members of Boko Haram factions have deserted these extremist groups. This was reported by media citing a publication by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) of March 2021. The report said that at least 2,400 desertions were recorded in Chad, 1,000 in Nigeria, 584 in Cameroon and 243 in Niger. The motives of the deserters are manifold, including private circumstances, concerns about their own security and internal disputes. According to the report, Boko Haram has imposed severe restrictions and constant surveillance on its members. Those who deviate from the group's rules or are even suspected of doing so are subject to severe punishment. The report stresses the importance of reintegration measures for those who leave Boko Haram.

## **North Macedonia**

New legal provisions to strengthen the rights of transgender people

Media report that on 27.04.21, the government of North Macedonia passed a legislative amendment to facilitate the recognition of gender identity for transgender people. To protect the privacy of those concerned, the amendment stipulates that people who want to change their gender entry in the birth register no longer need to submit and have recorded documents of whether they have undergone surgery, hormone therapies or other psychiatric, psychological or medical treatment. The amendment, which needs to be confirmed by parliament before implementation, was deemed necessary after the ECHR had ordered the government to pay damages to a transgender person in early 2019.

## **Pakistan**

COVID-19 pandemic: tense situation; measures announced

Last week, Pakistan recorded the highest number of daily deaths from COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic. The number of new infections within one day has also increased. The cause is seen in insufficient compliance with restrictions. Many people do not wear a mask and continue to gather in large numbers during the fasting month of Ramadan (13.04.21 - 12.05.21), for example to break their fast or to go shopping. The health ministry has instructed provincial governments to implement stricter measures and closures in at least 16 major cities. Stricter rules also apply at the borders with Afghanistan and Iran. In addition, the authorities have announced a ban on tourist travel and inter-provincial travel ahead of the upcoming Eid holidays at the end of Ramadan. From 03.05.21, people between the age of 40 and 49 are also eligible for vaccination.

## **Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel**

Palestinian Autonomous Territories: Elections cancelled

On 29.04.21, President Mahmoud Abbas announced the postponement of both the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council scheduled for 22.05.21, as well as the presidential elections set for 31.07.21 (cf. BN of 18.01.21). The Israeli government has so far not yet officially agreed to the participation of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem in the election, he said. He stressed, however, that this was a non-negotiable issue. It would have been the first elections since 2006, supported by both Fatah and Hamas, Abbas said. Many people had hoped that the elections would bring the two major parties closer together. Various experts and officials see another reason for the postponement, which is the fear that President Abbas' Fatah party might lose ground to some Fatah splinter groups in the election, with the possible result of a strengthened Hamas.

The radical Islamist Hamas has condemned the decision and spoke of a 'coup'.

Israel: Black Hebrew Israelites requested to leave the country

According to press reports of 26.04.21, the Israeli government has ordered several members of the Black Hebrew community to leave the country and return to the USA within 60 days. 46 families are affected by the measure, including many children who were born in Israel. The Black Hebrews or Hebrew Israelites stem from a migration of African-Americans and regard themselves as successors to one of the ancient Israelite tribes. They have adapted Jewish traditions, combined them with Christian elements and live a culture influenced by West African elements. Their self-conception is not explicitly Jewish. Nevertheless, the community has lived in Israel since the 1960s, with residential statuses ranging from citizenship to permanent residence to illegal residence.

## **Russian Federation**

Regional offices of Navalny's network added to extremist list

The regional campaign offices of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny are no longer allowed to operate. On 30.04.21, they were officially classified as extremist and added to the list of terrorist and extremist organisations of the

financial supervisory authority Rosfinmonitoring, which had announced a corresponding update of its list shortly before.

On 27.04.21, the Russian prosecutor's office had filed an application to classify Navalny's anti-corruption foundation FBK and his regional campaign network as extremist and thus to impose a total ban on the work of the organisations. In this case, members and supporters of the network would face long prison sentences. Subsequently, the regional offices had dissolved on 27.04.21 ahead of the decision, to avoid a complete ban resulting from the feared classification as extremist. Some of the 37 offices will try to continue their activities as new independent political organisations. In recent years, these offices have been important for the opposition in elections, as they have repeatedly organised campaigns for tactical smart voting. In doing so, they appealed to the electorate to vote for the candidate most likely to oust the Kremlin's United Russia party, irrespective of their political allegiances. Prior to the classification of the regional offices as extremist, it became known on 30.04.21 that prominent lawyer Ivan Pavlov was arrested in Moscow by the Russian domestic intelligence service FSB. The lawyers' organisation Komanda 29, led by Pavlov, represents the movement around the imprisoned Navalny, among other cases.

## Somalia

President Farmajo will not extend his term of office

After several days of clashes between opposition and pro-government security forces in Mogadishu (cf. BN of 26.04.21), President Farmajo declared on 28.04.21 to bow to national and international pressure and not to seek an extension of his term of office by two years. In a TV address, he also called for a dialogue to resolve the political tensions. Tens of thousands of civilians have already left their homes during the fighting to find temporary refuge in safer areas.

Press freedom

On 27.04.21, the private news agency Mustaqbal Media in Mogadishu was raided, and technical equipment was confiscated. Both the Committee to Protect Journalists and the Somali Journalists Syndicate report that since February 2021, there has been an increase in temporary arrests, threats, and state violence against media workers in Mogadishu, Galmudug and Somaliland. The focus is particularly on media houses and professionals who report critically on the security apparatus, e.g. on arbitrary arrests of civilians or on the clashes between opposition and pro-government security forces during the current government crisis in Mogadishu.

Attack

On 28.04.21, several people were killed and others injured in a suicide attack outside a police headquarters in Mogadishu. Civilians were also among the victims. There are different reports on the number of victims, ranging from three to eleven dead and at least seven to eleven injured. Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for the attack.

## Syria

Qamishli: Mediation by Russian military police

Following the armed clashes between Kurdish-led security forces and government forces loyal to Assad, which have intensified since 21.04.21 (cf. BN of 26.04.21), the Russian military informed on 27.04.21 that units were deployed to Qamishli to stop the fighting.

Rear admiral Alexander Karpov has informed that combat helicopters were deployed to the region and that the fighting was halted. Karpov currently heads the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring in the Syrian Arab Republic.

COVID 19 pandemic

On 29.04.21, the autonomous administration of northern and eastern Syria, which is the civilian counterpart to the military forces of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), announced to extend the curfews in place for another week, after the number of positive cases had continued to rise recently in north-eastern Syria.

Meanwhile, the International Committee of the Red Cross has highlighted a lack of testing capacity and oxygen in the region, saying that virus control in north-east Syria was in 'serious jeopardy'. A part of the 200,000 COVID-19 vaccines that arrived in Damascus last week (cf. BN of 26.04.21) is earmarked for delivery to the regional administration in north-east Syria.

On 01.05.21, the first person was vaccinated in the Islamist-held rebel-held area in north-west Syria. Some 53,800 doses of vaccine have reportedly arrived in Idlib. Recently, 30 percent of all registered COVID-19 infections in the region were found among health workers. This group will now be prioritised in the vaccination campaign. In Idlib, more than 21,000 positive cases have been registered so far, out of a population of about four million.

## Togo

Opposition politician arrested

On 29.04.21, Djimon Oré, president of the opposition party Front des Patriotes pour la Démocratie (FPD) and former minister of communications, was arrested. Two days before, he had criticised the state leadership in a radio interview on Togo's Independence Day. He is accused of attempted serious disturbance of the public order and of insult, among other things.

## Turkey

Arrest for Tik-Tok contribution

On 25.04.21, two people were arrested for posting a satirical video on the Tik-Tok video portal about the limited value of a Turkish passport. They are now accused of insulting and disparaging symbols of state sovereignty. For the time being, both were conditionally released pending further criminal investigations.

COVID-19 pandemic

In view of the high number of infections, a strict lockdown announced by President Erdogan began on the evening of 29.04.21 and is to last until 17.05.21. The lockdown thus falls during the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan, and the restrictions are not to be lifted even during the three-day Eid holidays. Strict curfew restrictions are in place in the cities. Cafés and restaurants are closed again after a short period of opening. Face-to-face teaching in kindergartens and school classes is suspended, and upcoming exams were postponed. To escape the restrictions, thousands of city dwellers tried to reach rural areas and tourist resorts before the shutdown.

Attack in Istanbul prevented

On 29.04.21, an anti-terror unit discovered five kilogrammes of explosives placed under a bus at a busy bus station in Istanbul. Two people were arrested; they are now accused of being PKK adherents and of having planned the attack.

Ban on audio and video recordings of police officers on duty

On 30.04.21, the interior ministry issued a ban on audio and video recordings of police officers during protests and demonstrations. The decree says that voice and film recordings by civilians prevent the execution of duty of police officers and reveal their identity. In future, violations of the ban are punishable under criminal law. Before, the government had already ordered the removal of identification numbers from riot police helmets and increased the deployment of police officers in civilian clothes at protest rallies. The Association of Progressive Lawyers (CHP) in Istanbul has criticised the ban, arguing that it was enacted to prevent incidents of police violence from being documented.

## Uzbekistan

Further restriction of freedom of expression

On 31.03.21, a series of legislative amendments entered into force targeting mainly the freedom of expression in the digital space. Specifically, the offence of insulting and defaming the president was extended to online speech.

The amendment introduces prison sentences of up to five years. Furthermore, a fine of up to 19.6 million Sum (approx. 1,540 EUR) was introduced for comments that incite disregard of legal provisions and, in the opinion of the authorities, pose a threat to the public order. In addition, online calls to participate in unauthorised demonstrations and the dissemination of information which is 'disrespectful' of the state was made an offence without specifying a penalty. The practical implementation of the amendments remains to be seen.

## **Venezuela / Colombia**

### **Fighting on the Colombian border**

Since the Venezuelan army launched an offensive against Colombian guerrilla groups in the border zone in March 2021 (cf. BN of 29.03.21), there have been repeated clashes in the area. The military is fighting FARC dissidents and guerrilla fighters of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), who have established quasi-state structures in Apure province. Media report that on 24.04. and 25.04.21, at least eight soldiers were killed in fighting. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports arbitrary arrests, torture, and the extrajudicial execution of at least four civilians by Venezuelan security forces. Since the outbreak of fighting, at least 5,800 civilians have fled the combat zone to Colombia.

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