



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

Government leadership: inclusion

There have been repeated accusations of ethnic discrimination since local Taliban removed the Persian word "Daneshgah" (university) from the signboard of a university in the city of Balkh on 13.03.22. The Taliban leader, Hibatullah Akhunzada, therefore issued a 14-point decree on 15.03.22 calling on all Taliban forces, among others, to remove all ethnic symbols. The Taliban leader, Hibatullah Akhunzada, therefore issued a 14-point decree on 15.03.22, which, among other things, called on Taliban forces to treat all ethnicities equally. Other ethnic groups remain concerned that they are almost exclusively ruled by Pashtuns (who make up only 34% of the population). Members of the Hazaras commemorated their leader Abdul Ali Mazari, who was assassinated by the Taliban in 1995, in Kabul on 14.03.22 and called on the Taliban to form an inclusive government. However, at a meeting held in the town of Bannu in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan on 14.03.22, Pashtuns - with the participation of the Tahafuz movement - also called for general elections for a representative and inclusive government in Afghanistan. On 17.03.22, the Taliban therefore set up a commission to pave the way for the return of Afghanistan's political leaders who have fled the country.

Persecution situation

At least 25 people, including former army soldiers and civilians, have been killed in Ghor province since the Taliban seized power, according to a report published in the Etilaatroz newspaper on 16.03.22. Citing social media, it is reported that the Taliban tortured and killed a man in the Punjiro Valley who had taken part in a protest against the Taliban. Two members of the former army were shot dead by unknown gunmen in Farah province and Ghor province on 13.03.22.

Economic and humanitarian situation

According to a World Bank report on living conditions in Afghanistan that was published on 15.03.22, the number of job seekers has increased while wages have decreased. Moreover, 37% of the households surveyed are unable to pay for basic food supplies. Many of them have no access or just limited access to humanitarian aid. On the same day, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, warned that the humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan must not be forgotten. According to the World Food Programme, the number of people suffering from acute hunger continues to rise and has meanwhile reached 23 million. At the same time, the war in Ukraine is already affecting the price of flour. The Ministry of Public Health has expressed concern about the rising infant mortality rate, which is probably due to poverty and poor access to the healthcare system. About 13,700 newborns have died since the beginning of 2022, it said.

Albania

Protestors arrested

The Albanian Helsinki Committee has criticised the arrest of about 200 people in a report published on 18.03.22. They had demonstrated a week earlier, mainly in the capital Tirana, for tax cuts to curb the sharp hike in fuel, energy and food prices. In most cases, the authorities have charged the protestors with illegal gatherings, opposition to police forces or blocking roads. The Helsinki Committee considers the arrests to be a violation of the right of assembly. Furthermore, in some cases the reason for arrest was not written in the documents. In the meantime, a court has ordered the release of some of the people, describing their arrest as partly unlawful.

Burkina Faso

Interim president meets ECOWAS delegation

Interim President Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba received a delegation from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on 17.03.22 to provide information on the transitional phase. The delegation also met the deposed president Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, who remains under house arrest. He is in good physical health. The delegation has said it would continue to work with the new rulers. Sanctions have not yet been imposed.

People killed in ambush and attacks

At least 12 soldiers were killed in an attack perpetrated by unknown individuals near Natiaboani (Est Region) on 20.03.22, according to initial reports. An undisclosed number of assailants were also killed. Around 15 youths were abducted in nearby Nagaré on 18.03.22.

Unknown assailants killed four members of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie (VDP)) vigilante group and three civilians in an attack on the outskirts of Arbinda town (Sahel region) on 14.03.22. The attackers followed a recent and more frequent modus operandi of targeting wells, boreholes and reservoirs and attacking any members of the population they encountered. This is part of measures aimed at gaining control of towns by attacking infrastructure, communication and transport routes.

According to different reports issued on 14.03.22 or 15.03.2022, unknown individuals murdered the head of the VDP of Falagountou (Sahel region) and his wife.

According to military sources, several dozen extremists were killed or wounded and two of their bases were dismantled in two operations carried out in the Centre-Nord and Centre-Est Regions in February 2022.

Cambodia

Numerous members of the opposition party CNRP sentenced to prison, restrictions on freedom of expression

On 17.03.22, a court in the capital Phnom Penh sentenced 20 opposition politicians from the forcibly dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) to between five and 10 years in prison for "sedition", "inciting military personnel to disobedience" and "conspiracy". These include party founder Sam Rainsy and CNRP deputy chairperson Mu Sochua, both of whom live in exile and were tried in absentia alongside five other defendants. Since the Supreme Court dissolved the CNRP in November 2017, many activists have left the country out of fear of arrest and retaliation. Party leader Kem Sokha has been on trial since September 2017. Human Rights Watch describes the trial as unfair, as no credible evidence has been presented against the defendants, and states that the trial appears to be aimed at side-lining political opponents of Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), who have been in power for over 30 years.

In recent months, the government has increasingly used the COVID-19 pandemic to further restrict freedom of expression, according to various reports. Journalists, human rights defenders and voices critical of the government have been particularly affected.

Cuba

127 protesters of the July 2021 protests sentenced to prison

According to a press release issued by the Supreme Court on 16.03.22, one hundred and twenty-seven people have been sentenced to prison terms ranging from six years to 30 years for causing serious disturbances and vandalism in the wake of the anti-government protests in July 2021, in a trial held between 14.12.21 and 03.02.22 in the People's Court of Havana Province. There is still a possibility of appeal. According to government data from 25.01.22, a total of 790 people have been investigated in connection with the protests, including 55 against young men aged between 16 and 17, and numerous sentences have already been passed (cf. BN of 24.01.22).

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Opposition LAMUKA platform appeals to international human rights NGOs

The spokesperson of the LAMUKA opposition platform's European branch told UN radio Okapi on 15.03.22 that in the absence of intervention by the Congolese judicial authorities, the NGOs Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Federation for Human Rights (Fédération internationale pour les droits humains) had been informed of the arbitrary arrests and detentions, abductions and politically motivated prosecutions of LAMUKA activists in the DRC. LAMUKA has condemned these arbitrary practices on political grounds and has demanded that its activists be released.

Circumstances of François Beya's detention; continuation of unlawful practices by the ANR

According to reports, François Beya, who was arrested on 05.02.22 by the government intelligence agency (Agence Nationale de Renseignements (ANR)) in connection with an alleged failed coup d'état, and former Special Advisor to President Félix Tshisekedi on Security Affairs, remains in administrative detention without charge or trial after more than a month (cf. BN of 14.02.22). According to the NGO Congolese Association for Access to Justice (Association congolaise pour l'accès à la justice), the overall circumstances currently suggest that François Beya has been the victim of arbitrary and secret detention due to lack of access to legal counsel. According to the President of the African Association for the Defence of Human Rights (l'Association Africaine de défense des Droits de l'Homme), Me Katend, hopes that the ANR, which served as an instrument of repression and oppression under former President Joseph Kabila, would be reformed were dashed after the change in state leadership. He says cases of abductions and incommunicado detention without charge continue to occur and that the modus operandi of the ANR is deeply disturbing in the run-up to the elections scheduled for 2023.

Maniema province: high prevalence of gender-based violence

Citing official statistics, UN radio Okapi reported on 17.03.22 that 24,000 acts of gender-based violence were documented in Maniema Eastern Province between 2019 and 2021 alone. Only 9% of the victims of gender-based violence reportedly have access to holistic care. Sexual and gender-based violence are rampant in all parts of the country (cf. BN of 06.09.21).

Gambia

Case involving excessive police force under investigation; demonstration banned

According to Deputy Police Commissioner Lamin Bojang, an internal police investigation has been launched into the police officers who collectively kicked and punched an unarmed and peaceful supporter of the opposition United Democratic People (UDP) for possible disciplinary or criminal conduct (cf. BN of 14.03.22). Meanwhile, according to a media report, the Inspector General of the Police refused to allow the UDP to organise demonstrations it had applied for against the disqualification of Momodou Sabally's (UDP) candidacy in the parliamentary elections on 09.04.22 in week 11, citing security reasons. In The Gambia, the freedom to demonstrate is subject to official authorisation in accordance with Article 5 (2) of the Public Order Act of 1961.

Ghana

Leader of #FixTheCountry movement released on bail

Tema High Court decided to release the leader of the #FixTheCountry movement, Oliver Barker-Vormawor, from custody on bail on 16.03.22. Barker-Vormawor had been arrested at the international airport of the capital Accra on 11.02.22 after his return from the UK. He is accused of announcing his intention to stage a coup on social media (cf. BN of 14.02.22). The trial against him is set to continue on 29.03.22.

Guinea-Bissau

Holding of a PAIGC congress banned by court prevented

According to press reports, riots broke out between police forces and PAIGC supporters at the party headquarters of the former ruling African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) in the capital Bissau on 18.03.22. Police forces used force and tear gas to disperse the crowds. As a result, at least seven people were injured. The PAIGC supporters had gathered to prepare for a party congress scheduled to last several days, organised by its leader Domingos Simões Pereira, which had been banned by the regional court in February 2022 after the party's rival Bolom Conté took the case to court. Conté and others are allegedly challenging Pereira's right to organise the PAIGC party congress because they say his mandate is already over.

India

Karnataka: court upholds controversial ban on hijabs

On 15.03.22, a court in the state of Karnataka upheld the legality of the **ban on hijabs** in public educational institutions (cf. BN of 14.02.22). Female Muslim students consider this to be a violation of the constitution and now want to appeal to the Supreme Court.

Millions of people celebrate Hindu spring festival

This year's Holi Hindu spring festival was celebrated by millions of people, by and large, without any coronavirus restrictions. Images from different parts of the country on 18.03.22 showed people throwing coloured powder at each other in crowds and without wearing masks. The festival is celebrated in different variations and on different days depending on the state. While restrictions were in place in some locations last year, the official infection figures in India are currently at a very low level.

Iran

Temporary and final releases

Just before Iranian New Year Nowruz (20.03.22), Iranian foreign media reported that some political prisoners had been released from jail. For instance, the brother and father of a young man killed during the November 2019 riots were released on bail on 16.03.22, one month after they had been detained. The two men had been arrested in Behbahan (Khuzestan province) at the end of February 2022 for spreading propaganda for opposition forces and against the regime and had been taken to a local prison (cf. BN of 28.02.22). The two men are now awaiting trial.

On 13.03.22, another political prisoner was reportedly released from Greater Tehran Prison on payment of a high bail. The man had been sentenced to death along with two other men in connection with the November 2019 riots. At the end of 2021, the Supreme Court had granted an appeal by the defence, overturned the death sentence and referred the case to the 23rd branch of the Revolutionary Court of Tehran.

In addition, a former operator of a technology website, who had been imprisoned for eight years, was unexpectedly released on 16.03.22. The head of the so-called Orange website, which had enjoyed great popularity in Iran until it was shut down, was arrested by the Revolutionary Guards (Sepah/Pasdaran for short) in Kerman at the end of 2013, together with seven employees. The operation of the website was subsequently suspended. According to Sepah and the prosecution, those arrested were charged with attempting to overthrow the regime. No information was given about the reasons for their release.

One-year prison sentence for student activist

According to foreign media reports, a female student of Allameh Tabatabai University in Tehran has been sentenced to one year in prison. Her lawyer announced that the woman was being prosecuted for spreading propaganda against the regime after she had taken part in a rally for International Women's Day on 08.03.22 and had spoken out against the death penalty on social media. In addition to her prison sentence, the student will be barred from participating in student rallies but will be allowed to continue attending university classes. According to her lawyer, a two-year ban on membership in civil society groups has been imposed and her mobile phone has been confiscated.

Iraq

Missile attack on Balad air base

On 17.03.22, four rockets fell in open areas near the Balad air base in Salah ad Din Governorate. The air base had been used by U.S. forces in the past but is now being fully operated by Iraqi forces again. There were no casualties and there was no damage to property. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Consequences of the war against ISIS

On 15.03.22, UNICEF published a survey of children's deaths due to landmines in Iraq. Six children were reportedly killed and 10 others were injured by land mines and improvised explosive devices in February. Mines remain uncleared in large parts of Iraq not just in former ISIS areas. Landmines remain a major obstacle to repatriation.

On 20.03.22 it was announced that parts of 85 bodies had so far been recovered from a mass grave of ISIS fighters and their relatives in Mosul, though it is suspected that the grave contains many more bodies. Iraq continues to discover mass graves not only from the ISIS period but also from the regime of former dictator Saddam Hussein.

Lebanon

Economic situation

On 17.03.22, a new plan to reform the energy sector was approved in the cabinet. Currently, large parts of the country have virtually no energy supply, and many party only by the hour. Parts of the plan include the establishment of a regulatory authority, the import of electricity from Jordan and gas from Egypt as well as plans to build a new power plant in the north of the country. The chronic underfinancing and subsidisation of energy contributed significantly to Lebanon's national debt in recent decades. A comprehensive restructuring of the energy supply is one of the conditions of potential international donors. This is now the third plan to achieve this goal; the previous plans all failed due to political disagreement.

On 16.03.22, representatives of Saudi Arabia and France met to discuss joint aid for Lebanon in the form of funding for humanitarian projects. Part of the official statement was the unequivocal statement by the Saudi delegation that no Saudi money of any kind would pass through the hands of Lebanese state institutions.

Nicaragua

Trial against Cristiana Chamorro, 25 additional NGOs lose legal status

On 11.03.22, former presidential candidate Cristiana Chamorro was found guilty of money laundering and mismanagement in another closed-door trial, as were her brother Pedro Joaquín and three former employees of her foundation. The prosecution demanded prison sentences of between seven and 13 years, the exact sentence is to be announced on 21.03.22. In this case, too, NGOs and the media have criticised numerous flaws in the rule of law in the proceedings and the baselessness of the accusations. On 17.03.22, the Sandinista-dominated National Assembly also revoked the legal status of 25 other NGOs, including the independent economic think tank Funides, and the Ethics and Transparency Civic Group Foundation (Fundación Grupo Cívico Ética y Transparencia), which, among other things, carried out election monitoring.

Niger

Deadly attacks near the border with Burkina Faso

Twenty-one people were killed in two attacks carried out on 16.03.22 in the southwestern region of Tillabéri, not far from the border with Burkina Faso, according to media reports. Heavily armed men on motorbikes and in a vehicle attacked a bus, killing 19 people, including two police officers. Five other people were subsequently taken to Niamey with injuries. The bus was travelling back from the Burkinabe capital Ouagadougou. Two people were reportedly burnt to death in a truck loaded with vegetables and fruit in a second attack. Five Nigerien soldiers were reportedly killed by an IED in Torodi, also near the border with Burkina Faso, on 04.03.22. In south-western Niger, deadly attacks linked to the jihadist groups Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) and al-Qaeda are a frequent occurrence.

Nigeria

Successful deradicalisation of renegade Islamists

According to recent media reports, another 559 former members of the two main factions of Boko Haram, JAS and ISWAP, have successfully completed the state deradicalisation programme. The official graduation ceremony reportedly took place on 13.03.22 at a deradicalisation centre in the north-eastern state of Gombe. This brings the total number of graduates to 1,629. The exit programme Operation Safe Corridor, launched in 2016, enables defectors to reintegrate into civil society (cf. BN of 19.04.21). In order to achieve deradicalisation, members of Islamist groups who voluntarily lay down their weapons and surrender to the authorities receive, psychological support and various educational opportunities, among other things. According to media reports based on official figures, over 35,000 people who had been active for Islamist groups have allegedly surrendered.

Two dozen security personnel killed

According to media reports, non-state actors killed a total of 24 security personnel, including 16 police officers, two correctional officers, one National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) officer, one soldier and four members of local vigilante groups, in six states between 13.03 and 18.03.22.

As such, incidents in the states of Niger and Kebbi caused a particular stir: seven people were reportedly killed by the security forces on 15.03.22 when dozens of armed gang members in the north-central state of Niger attacked a police station in Magama Local Government Area (LGA). On the same day, according to media reports, motorcycle-riding bandits numbering around 500 invaded a tomato-processing factory in Gafara village in neighbouring Kebbi State to kidnap expatriate workers for ransom. At least four police officers were reportedly killed while repelling the attack. North-western and north-central states such as Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Niger and Kebbi have recently been more affected by criminal gang violence (cf. BN of 14.03.22).

Abduction crime in Kaduna State

On 17.03.22, armed assailants kidnapped 48 people in Agunu Dutse locality in the northern state of Kaduna. Eyewitnesses say one person was injured in the attack. According to media reports, the police reported success in the fight against kidnapping crime in the same state on the same day.

Recently, 30 suspected members of a group of criminals were arrested in Kaduna, who specialised in kidnapping and robbery on the highway (cf. BN of 20.09.21 and 29.11.21) between the cities of Kaduna and Abuja, which is considered to be very unsafe. The gang was also involved in arms smuggling. Their leader was reportedly arrested and has already confessed.

Pakistan

Repeated attack on police convoy in Balochistan

On 15.03.22, another roadside bomb hit a police convoy in Sibi district, Balochistan province. At least four security personnel were killed and nearly a dozen were injured. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the attack. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) has now claimed responsibility for another attack also carried out on a police convoy in the same district on 08.03.22 (cf. BN of 14.03.22).

Prime Minister Imran Khan faces vote of no confidence

On 25.03.22, a vote of no confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan is to be decided in Pakistan's National Assembly. Khan lost his majority in parliament after MPs from his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party resigned, meaning he no longer has the required minimum of 172 seats. The opposition has a combined 163 seats in the lower house and could achieve a majority through the no-confidence vote.

Reactions to Indian missile strike

After India launched a missile into Pakistan on 10.03.22 due to what it claimed was a technical malfunction, Pakistan has condemned the missile launch and demanded security guarantees. The relationship between the two South Asian nuclear powers is considered to be strained.

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

West Bank: two Palestinians killed in military operations

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, two Palestinians were killed in two separate military operations carried out in the Balata refugee camp in Nablus, and in the Qalandiya refugee camp near Jerusalem on 15.03.22. According to reports by the border police, they were attacked by a group of residents while carrying out arrest missions at the two camps, whereupon they opened fire to disperse the crowd. One of those killed was a 16-year-old Palestinian. Several Palestinian men and women also required hospital treatment. There were no reports of injuries among Israeli military personnel.

Republic of Moldova / Ukraine

Migration activity

According to the Moldovan Ministry of the Interior, by 20.03.22 more than 328,000 Ukrainian citizens and around 33,000 citizens of other states had fled to the Republic of Moldova since the outbreak of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. A large number of the people reportedly then travelled on to Romania, and around 102,000 people who had fled were said to still be on Moldovan territory. According to the border authorities of the Republic of Moldova, as of 20.03.22 all border crossing points were functioning. The Moldovan aviation authority announced that passenger air traffic to and from Romania would be resumed as of 21.03.22. A state of emergency is currently in force in the Republic of Moldova. The air space has been closed, with the exception of special humanitarian flights from Ukraine.

Russian Federation

Arrests during renewed protests against war in Ukraine

Many people in the country protested for an end to the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine again last week (week 11). The human rights organisation OWD-Info reported that anti-war rallies took place in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Nizhny Novgorod and Vladivostok, among other cities, on 20.03.22. Civil rights activists reported that almost 1,000 protestors were arrested. According to OWD-Info, 15,032 people have been arrested so far (as of 21.03.22) during protests against the war since Russian troops began attacking Ukraine on 24.02.22.

Russian Federation / Ukraine

Crimean Tatars handed lengthy prison sentences

On 18.03.22 a court in Rostov-on-Don sentenced five Crimean Tatars to several years in prison for membership of the banned Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir. Three of the defendants received prison sentences of 14 years and two defendants were sentenced to 15 years in prison. On 10.03.22, five Crimean Tatars had also been sentenced to several years in prison by the same court on the same charges and for organising activities for Hizb ut-Tahrir and planning to seize power. Two of the defendants had received prison sentences of 19 years, the others 15, 17 and 18

years respectively. After the Crimean peninsula was annexed from Ukraine by the Russian Federation in March 2014, dozens of Crimean Tatars became targets of state persecution on charges of membership in that organisation.

Senegal

Military operation in Casamance

The Senegalese army launched a large-scale military operation in the southern region of Casamance on the northern border with The Gambia on 13.03.22. According to a statement issued by the military chief of staff, the offensive aims to "destroy all armed gangs carrying out criminal activities in the region [in order] to preserve the integrity of the national territory at all costs". "As part of their regalian missions of securing people and property, the armies launched an operation on 13.03.22, whose main objective is to dismantle the bases of the MFDC faction of Salif Sadio", the statement said. The operation is considered to be a result of the clashes that erupted between Senegalese soldiers of the West African regional mission ECOMIG and MFDC rebels on 24.01.22 (cf. BN of 07.02.22). Four Senegalese soldiers were killed and seven were taken prisoner but were released on 14.02.22. As a result of fighting in the border area, thousands of people are seeking refuge in The Gambia, according to a statement issued by Gambian authorities on 19.03.22.

Somalia

Attack on KDF soldiers

At least nine Kenyan soldiers were killed in a bomb attack on Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) soldiers near Gherille (Gedo region) on 14.03.22, according to official reports. Five others were seriously injured. They are being treated at a hospital in Nairobi.

Important government official suspended on serious charges

President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo's deputy chief of staff, Abdinur Mohamed Ahmed, has been suspended, inter alia, on charges of serious abuse and sexual harassment of female employees, bribery, abuse of power, and violence and threats against journalists. The first allegations of sexual harassment by a former government employee surfaced in December 2021. This sparked an outcry on social media and further allegations became public. The suspension was welcomed by the local press. At the same time, President Farmajo, who is seeking re-election, is currently facing increasing political pressure due to a series of uncovered rights violations by key government and security officials.

Sri Lanka

Thousand demonstrate against the government

Around 30,000 people took part in a demonstration in front of the President's office in Colombo on 15.03.22 to protest against the government which they blame for the poor economic situation. The protests were led by the opposition alliance Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB). Opposition leader Sajith Premadasa, who lost to Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the November 2019 presidential election, called on the president to resign or bring forward the presidential election scheduled for 2024. Among other things, the demonstrators wore headbands with the slogan "Gota go home".

Due to the worsening economic situation and the high national debt (cf. BN of 06.09.21, 29.11.21 and 31.01.22), the import of basic goods such as certain foodstuffs and medicines is restricted, causing prices to skyrocket. This is increasingly becoming a problem for many citizens and resentment against the government is growing. Protests are being held repeatedly. In recent weeks, fuel shortages have increased and people have reportedly had to queue outside petrol stations for several days to fill up their cars. Power cuts and obstructions to the domestic transport of basic goods are on the rise. In less than a week, the domestic currency lost a third of its value. The government recently announced talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Observers speak of the worst economic crisis since independence in 1948.

Sudan

Demonstrations continue

On 14.03.22, 15.03.22 and 16.03.22, thousands of people took to the streets again in Khartoum and other cities in the country to demonstrate against the military coup. In particular, the people who took part in nationwide rallies held on 16.03.22 were also protesting about the further increase in the price of food. The demonstrations held on 14.03.22, on the other hand, focused on protestors being arrested for participating in demonstrations. Central demands were the release of the arrested persons and the demand for a judicial review of the military coup and its consequences. According to various reports, at least 133 people were injured on 14.03.22.

On 15.03.22 and 16.03.22, security forces also cracked down on protestors and used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowds. Protestors were injured on both days. On 15.03.22, a spokesperson for the military government also announced that security forces had attempted to rape a passer-by who had not been involved in the protests. She was travelling in a city bus that was stopped by security forces and attacked with tear gas. The incident is under investigation. A UN report in December 2021 stated that there were 13 allegations of rape and gang rape following a sit-in on 19.12.21. The latest incident on 15.03.22 again caused consternation and led to spontaneous calls for demonstrations in the cities of Khartoum, Bahri and Omdurman.

Syria

Media report: mass graves could hold evidence of war crimes

The New York Times published an investigative report on mass graves in Syria on 16.03.22. In interviews conducted over the past few months, four Syrians reported on their work on or near secret mass graves operated by the Syrian security authorities. The locations described were subsequently backed up by satellite images suggesting that in several areas under government control, graves had been systematically dug, torture victims buried in them and the areas subsequently sealed off with fences. The report mentions Qutayfa in the north and Najha in the south of Damascus as places where mass graves are said to be located.

According to witness reports and human rights organisations, people tortured to death in detention in particular were made to disappear in this way. They say U.S. government estimates from last year suggest that at least 14,000 Syrians were killed in custody during the Syrian conflict, but the actual number is likely to be far higher. More than 130,000 people are already considered to be missing after disappearing in Syrian government detention centres. Evidence smuggled out of Syria by the military photographer "Caesar" back in 2013 alone proved that 6,000 people died in Syrian captivity.

Two of the men interviewed for the investigation are now living in Germany, one is living in Lebanon and one remains in Syria.

President Assad visits the UAE

In the first trip he has made to an Arab country since 2011, the Syrian ruler met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, the de facto ruler of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the Vice-President and Prime Minister who is also the ruler of Dubai, on 18.03.22.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Assad has made virtually no trips abroad, except to Russia and Iran, his two protecting powers.

Like other Arab states, the UAE was involved in the boycott of the Syrian government for a long time but reopened its embassy in Syria at the end of 2018. The reception in Abu Dhabi marks another milestone towards normalisation and reintegration into the Arab community of states.

Thousands of Syrians work in the UAE and regularly transfer money to their relatives who remain in Syria.

Turkey

Disbarment of a number of judicial officials

On 10.03.22 and 16.03.22, the Turkish Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK) decided to revoke the licences of four prosecutors and six judges on grounds of alleged links to the Gülen movement, without providing further details.

Women's rights activists arrested

On 16.03.22 and 17.03.22, twenty-five women activists involved in demonstrations that took place on International Women's Day 2022 and other demonstrations on women's rights in Turkey were arrested during police operations carried out in the Kurdish-majority province of Diyarbakır. After being questioned at the public prosecutor's office, 11 women were referred to court with a request for arrest. Another seven women were released under parole conditions. Among the arrested women were representatives of several women's rights organisations, workers' unions and HDP politicians.

Former HDP MP released from prison

On 17.03.22, former People's Democratic Party (HDP) MP Musa Farisoğulları was released from prison after almost two years of detention. Farisoğulları had been stripped of parliamentary immunity in June 2020 after the Court of Cassation imposed a nine-year prison sentence on terrorism charges against him.

During the trial, Farisoğulları was accused of membership of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) for allegedly attending funerals of two PKK fighters. On the grounds of time served in prison so far, a court of execution granted Farisoğulları's request for release on parole.

Turkmenistan

Inauguration of the newly elected president

A ceremony to inaugurate the newly elected president, Serdar Berdimukhamedov, took place in the Turkmen capital, Ashgabat, on Saturday. According to the country's Central Election Commission, the former Deputy Prime Minister and son of former President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov received 72.97% of the vote in the early presidential election on 12.03.22, with a 97% turnout. According to media reports, there are doubts about the competitive nature of the election.

Uganda

Nine journalists arrested near Kampala

Nine journalists were reportedly arrested on 10.03.22 for offensive communication. Among those arrested, who are part of the online media platform Digitalk TV, is author and activist Norman Tumuhimbise, whose book critical of the government is due to be published on 30.03.22. The group's lawyer assumes a connection between the planned book release and the arrests. Seven people were released on bail on 15.03.22 and 16.03.22, but they remain under investigation for sedition and cyberstalking. Tumuhimbise and another journalist remain in custody and have been charged. At the court hearing, they claimed to have been severely physically abused while in state custody.

Ukraine / Russian Federation

Russian military invasion

The military invasion of Ukraine launched by the Russian Federation on 24.02.22 continues (see BN of 07.03.22 and 14.03.22). In the course of the war, the situation for the civilian population, especially in the cities surrounded by Russian armed forces, has worsened, and numerous media reports have focused on attacks on civilians and civilian facilities. An air strike on a shopping centre in Kyiv on 20.03.22 has so far claimed at least six lives, according to news agencies. According to UNHCR, the ongoing shortages of food, water and medicine, as well as the partial disruption of electricity and heating supplies in the embattled cities, have reached potentially life-threatening

proportions for the civilian population. According to UN information, a humanitarian convoy with relief supplies was able to reach the embattled town of Sumy on 18.03.22. According to UNHCR estimates as of 19.03.22, more than 3.3 million people have fled Ukraine so far. In addition, some 12 million people in Ukraine are currently in need of humanitarian assistance in the areas most affected by the war. According to UNHCR, vulnerable groups such as children, women, older people and people with disabilities, in particular, face increasing barriers to accessing essential goods and services. UN figures as of 20.03.22 record at least 902 registered civilian deaths and 1,459 injured so far. A ruling by the International Court of Justice on 16.03.22 calling on the Russian Federation to immediately suspend its military operations was rejected by the Russian government. On the morning of 21.03.22, the Ukrainian government rejected a Russian Federation demand for the surrender of its forces in the city of Mariupol. Several tens of thousands of civilians were evacuated from Mariupol via an escape corridor to the city of Zaporizhzhia last week, according to Ukrainian sources, while several attempts to deliver humanitarian aid to the city failed. Media reports say that an airstrike on a theatre building in Mariupol on 16.03.22 trapped hundreds of civilians seeking refuge there in an air-raid shelter under the rubble; as of 18.03.22, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced that 130 people had been rescued so far. On 20.03.22, it was reported that several humanitarian corridors had been established from the Kyiv, Kharkiv and Mariupol areas. Numerous media reports speak of a slowdown in Russian military operations in some areas; they say that further attempts to encircle the partially surrounded major cities of Kyiv and Kharkiv have so far been unsuccessful due to logistical problems and counterattacks by Ukrainian forces, among other reasons. According to media reports, there have been cases of abductions of officials in the areas occupied by Russian forces. Meanwhile, diplomatic rounds of negotiations between the parties to the conflict continue, aided by international mediation efforts, but a breakthrough is still not in sight. On 20.03.22, President Zelenskyy reiterated his willingness to meet directly with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Russian government said that a meeting between the two heads of state was not ruled out but would depend on the further work of the negotiating delegations.

Venezuela

Reports: murders of women between 2017 and 2021, January 2022

In a report published on 15.03.22, the NGO Committee of Relatives of Victims of the Caracazo (Comité de Familiares de Víctimas del Caracazo (Cofavic)) puts the number of violent killings of women it recorded between 2017 and 2021 at 1,821, including at least 969 proven femicides. In addition, 301 underage girls were among those killed. More than 40% of the acts occurred in the homes of those killed, with most acts recorded in the states of Zulia, Bolívar, Lara and Miranda. In January 2022, the NGO Cepaz registered a total of 20 femicides.

Annual report: extrajudicial killings by police and military forces in 2021

The non-governmental organisations Provea and Centro Gumilla registered at least 1,414 extrajudicial killings by members of various police and military units in 2021, of which almost 99% were of men. Although this figure is more than 50% lower than the previous year (3,034), it is still more than twice as high as in 2018. The Scientific, Penal, and Criminal Investigation Service Corps, (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas (CICPC)) was responsible for around 25% of the killings.

Vietnam

Lengthy prison sentences on charges of "attempting to overthrow" the government

On 15.03.22, a court in Khanh Hoa province sentenced a woman and a man to prison terms of twelve and nine years plus three years' probation. They are accused of "organising activities aiming to overthrow the government". Both are alleged to have joined groups on social media that the government classifies as "reactionary" or that are alleged to have links to Viet Tan. On 16.03.22, a woman was also sentenced to six years in prison by a court in An Giang province for attempting to overthrow the government. The convict allegedly used social media to contact the U.S.-based group Provisional National Government of Vietnam, which has been classified as a terrorist organisation in Vietnam since 2018. She was arrested in July 2021.

Yemen

Humanitarian situation

Only US\$ 1.3 billion in aid was pledged at a UN donor conference for Yemen on 16.03.22, less than one-third of the US\$ 4.27 billion needed. Financial aid for Yemen had already been insufficient in previous years but the situation has worsened since the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict. Meanwhile, a report published by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) on 14.03.22 predicted that the number of people likely to experience famine is set to increase to 161,000 in the second half of 2022. This represents a fivefold increase from the current figures.

Bomb attack on commander of separatist militia

On 15.03.22, a car bomb struck the convoy of Abdul Latif al-Sayed, commander of the Security Belt Forces, in the southern Yemeni city of Zinjibar. Four people were killed and 12 others were injured, including al-Sayed. The Security Belt Forces are part of the Southern Transition Council which is seeking an independent South Yemeni state and is backed by the United Arab Emirates.

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