



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

Security situation

According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) published on 14.03.23, Afghanistan remains the country most impacted by terrorism for the fourth consecutive year. On 14.03.23, fighters of the National Resistance Front (NRF) claimed to have killed eight Taliban insurgents in Baghlan province. On 16.03.23, the NRF reported killing two Taliban members in Jawzjan province. On 19.03.23, according to media reports, a local Taliban manager of religious affairs and Hajj (pilgrimage) was killed by unknown individuals in Aqcha district (Jawzjan province).

Persecution events

On 15.03.23, five people convicted of various offences were flogged by the Taliban in Paktia province. Afghanistan International reported that the Taliban had paraded people wearing women's clothing who were accused of theft through the streets of Kabul on 15.03.23. The same day, it was reported that a teacher who had posted critical comments about the Taliban on social media was arrested by the Taliban in Takhar province almost three weeks ago. Hasht-e Subh reports that on 14.03.23, two hospital workers of Hazara ethnicity were arrested by the Taliban in Parwan province.

On 13.03.23 and 14.03.23, three former soldiers were arrested by the Taliban in Baghlan and Khost provinces. A video that has been widely circulated on social media claims to show the Taliban suffocating a former soldier by putting a plastic bag over his head and face.

On 13.03.23, it was reported that four Taliban members raped a woman and her 11 and 13-year-old daughters in Sar-e Pul province. When the victims reported the case to local authorities, they were threatened and told not to speak to the media. On the same day, the only women's library in Kabul, which had about 5,000 books, was closed by the Taliban who had already sealed the library three times before, although it is reported that this did not stop women from visiting it.

Government business

On 20.03.23, local employees of the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in Daikundi province (which is mainly inhabited by Shia Hazara) declared the Persian New Year festival Nowruz to be un-Islamic and unlawful in the province. They met with worshippers from 35 mosques in the province and warned residents that they would face punishment if they were caught celebrating the festival. In March 2022, the festival had already been removed from the official calendar nationwide by the Taliban. On 18.03.23, the Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada banned the cultivation of cannabis in Afghanistan by decree. It was reported on the same day that the Taliban had detained around 20 barbers in Farah province the previous week for trimming beards. After the Afghan embassies in Tehran (Iran) and Istanbul (Türkiye), the embassy in Dubai has now been officially handed over to the Taliban with the complicity of the government there (cf. BN of 27.02.23 and 06.03.23). On 15.03.23, the Taliban launched a polio vaccination drive in the country.

Angola

Luanda: houses demolished with no compensation

In the presence of a massive deployment of various security forces, 300 houses were demolished in the Zango 3 neighbourhood of Viana municipality (Luanda province) on 27.02.13, according to media reports and Human Rights Watch (HRW). Residents did not receive any compensation and no other shelter was provided to house the hundreds of families that were left homeless, they said. The authorities said they had warned the residents in advance not to build houses illegally in an area reserved for the construction of an electric power station for the Zango area. Those affected said they were not informed about the imminent demolition. Moreover, they said security forces had neither identified themselves nor presented a court order for the demolition. They used force to evacuate the houses and arrested many people who were peacefully protesting.

According to HRW, in carrying out forced evictions the authorities are violating numerous human rights provisions, even when the eviction itself is legal. Since the end of the civil war in 2002, the authorities in Angola have repeatedly carried out forced evictions. In 2016, for instance, 6,000 people in Viana were made homeless as a result of forced evictions. When HRW reviewed their situation again two years later, they had neither been allocated new accommodation nor received compensation.

Activist released from prison calls for dialogue with the government

The leader of the autonomy movement Movimento do Protectorado (Português) da Lunda Tchokwe (Movement of the Portuguese Protectorate of Lunda Tchokwe (MPPLT or MPLT), José Mateus Zeca Mutchima, announced on 09.03.23 at a press conference covered by the media that he would continue to campaign for the autonomy of the population in the "Lundas" (Lunda Norte and Lunda Sul regions). He said the people want a dialogue with the government.

Zeca Mutchima had been released from prison about a week earlier after his release had been delayed even though he was entitled to amnesty (cf. BN of 27.02.23). He described himself as a political prisoner. He said he had nothing to do with the events in Cafunfo in Lunda Norte (cf. BN of 08.02.21 and 22.02.21), which were the basis of his arrest and conviction. The clashes that erupted between demonstrators and security forces there on 30.01.21 have not yet been fully resolved. While officials said at the time that six people had been killed, civil society organisations say the death toll was more than 100. The area is considered to be rich in mineral resources, especially diamonds, but according to opposition representatives there is widespread poverty. On 18.03.23, the leader of the largest opposition party UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), Adalberto Costa Júnior, accused foreign countries with an interest in Angola's mineral resources of turning a blind eye to the human rights violations being committed in the country.

Colombia

Progress of peace negotiations

ELN: on 11.03.23, the Colombian government and the guerrilla group Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) (National Liberation Army) agreed on a six-point plan for peace talks at the second round of peace negotiations held in Mexico City, with the aim of reaching a ceasefire agreement based on international law. This plan includes guarantees for the political participation of the ELN and a stronger involvement of the population in the peace process, among other things. In November 2022, the government led by Gustavo Petro and the ELN resumed peace talks in a first round in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas following a four-year break. The next round of negotiations will take place in Cuba. In addition to Mexico, Venezuela and Cuba, Brazil, Chile and Norway are also participating in the peace process as guarantors.

FARC dissidents: on 13.03.23, President Gustavo Petro announced the start of peace negotiations with the Central General Staff of the Estado Mayor Central (EMC), a dissident group of the demobilised guerrilla group FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), on his Twitter account. Petro also wrote that with the start of the talks, practically half of the people currently armed would enter into negotiations with the government. The announcement came after the Attorney General's Office suspended 19 arrest warrants against members of the guerrilla group who rejected the peace agreement signed in November 2016 between the government of then President Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC. In February, President Petro asked the Attorney General's Office to

suspend the arrest warrants against them to facilitate the start of peace negotiations. A protocol for a temporary ceasefire on both sides until June 2023 was also agreed upon. Back in September 2022, the guerrilla group declared a unilateral ceasefire and the first exploratory talks for a peace dialogue began.

Clan del Golfo: on 19.03.2013, President Petro announced on Twitter that the ceasefire with Colombia's most powerful crime syndicate, the Clan del Golfo, also known as Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC) (Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), had been lifted with immediate effect and that the security forces had been ordered to resume all military operations against the syndicate. The government believes that this armed group is still involved in the illegal gold business and cocaine trafficking and is behind a violent mining strike in Bajo Cauca, Antioquia, a region in north-eastern Colombia. The president's announcement marks the first break with one of the criminal organisations that were dedicated to total peace (Paz total). Petro had announced in December that his government had reached a ceasefire agreement until the end of June with several armed groups, including the Clan del Golfo (cf. BN of 02.01.23).

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Massive displacement in North Kivu

Referring to data provided by UNHCR and the UN blue helmet mission MONUSCO, the UN repeatedly reports on the displacement faced by the civilian population, especially in North Kivu. In February 2023 alone, 300,000 people were forced to leave their homes in North Kivu due to clashes that erupted between government forces and armed groups. Some of the IDPs have been forced to sleep in the open air and are exhausted and traumatised. They reported serious human rights violations such as arbitrary killings, abductions and rapes, especially in the Rutshuru and Masisi areas. A ceasefire agreement with the M23 group announced at the beginning of March, which was due to come into effect on 07.03.23, has not yet been realised. As a result of further fighting, more than 100,000 people have fled the two areas. Four civilians were killed and at least five persons were injured. In addition, at least 97 civilians have been killed by the Islamist group Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the Beni area since the beginning of March 2023.

Since the resurgence of violence in March 2022, no fewer than 800,000 people have been displaced, bringing the total number of internally displaced persons in the country to around six million. Thousands have also fled to neighbouring countries. As of 10.03.23, UNHCR had reportedly received only 8% of the funding it needs for its activities in 2023.

Egypt

Issuance of identity documents for dissidents living abroad made more difficult

According to reports issued by an international human rights organisation, the authorities have refused to issue or renew identity documents, such as birth certificates, passports and ID cards, for numerous dissidents, media professionals and human rights activists abroad in recent years. This has reportedly had a negative impact on the people affected and their family members, for instance, undermining their ability to travel and work as well as to gain access to healthcare and education.

The Gambia

Human rights situation for women and girls, FGM prevalence and practice

UN News reported on 11.03.23 that women and girls in The Gambia are highly affected by female genital mutilation (FGM), domestic violence and period poverty. According to Ndeye Rose Sarr, a representative of the UN Population Fund in The Gambia (UNFPA), problems usually start for Gambian girls when they begin menstruating. From the age of 10, girls are seen as potential brides for older men. Girls who have not undergone FGM risk facing social pressure to undergo FGM in their local community. According to Sarr, about 76 % of all girls and women between 14 and 49 years of age and every second girl up to the age of 14 in The Gambia have undergone female genital mutilation. Women are the ones practising FGM, usually the grandmother, the keeper of the tradition in the family. Gambians living abroad will even bring back their children to undergo FGM. And men say that this is a "women's

thing". Sarr has called, among other things, for the enforcement of the ban on FGM in criminal law, which has been in place since 2015, adding that so far only two FGM cases have been brought to court, each of which ended without a conviction (cf. BN of 06.03.23).

Guinea

Resumption of the dialogue between the opposition and government

In the presence of mediating religious leaders, representatives of the "Forces Vives", a coalition of major parties, trade unions and NGOs, met with the Prime Minister of the transitional government, Bernard Goumou, on 13.03.23. According to a press agency correspondent, the meeting failed to dispel the opposition's mistrust of the ruling junta. There was no official statement from the Forces Vives, which had cancelled a demonstration in view of the mediation by the religious leaders.

According to further media reports, the meeting was overshadowed by the brief arrests of Abdoul Sacko, a prominent representative of the Forces Vives, and Ismaël Diallo, another representative, on 11.03.23. Both arrests are alleged to have been made by members of the gendarmerie outside legal procedures. The Ministry of Justice demanded clarification on this on 12.03.23 - an incident classified as "rare" by media coverage. Nevertheless, Sacko was obliged to present himself to the gendarmerie on 13.03.23, where by his own account he was questioned about the role he played in organising banned protests, and again on 17.03.23.

India

Punjab: large-scale police operation against radical Sikh preacher

In the state of Punjab, more than 110 people were arrested on 20.03.23 in a large police crackdown lasting several days against supporters of radical Sikh preacher Amritpal Singh, including Singh's uncle and driver. On 20.03.23, there was still an increased police presence across Punjab, especially in rural areas and around Singh's home village of Jallapur Khera. Mobile internet and mobile short messaging services were shut down across the state. Police were also on heightened alert in the neighbouring state of Haryana.

Amritpal Singh has come to attention in recent months, demanding the establishment of an independent state called Khalistan. In February 2023, his supporters armed with swords, knives and pistols stormed a police station in Amritsar. Several police officers were injured. Amritsar is home to the holiest Sikh shrine, the Golden Temple. Sikhs are a religious minority in India, living mainly in Punjab and parts of the neighbouring states. In recent years, the demand for an independent Sikh state has re-emerged for the first time in connection with the farmers' protests that took place in 2021. The Khalistan movement, which gathered force in the 1980s, had been relatively low-key in the years before.

Iran

Human rights organisation: violence against underage prisoners

A report by Amnesty International (ai) dated 16.03.23 describes cases involving children and young people arrested during the recent wave of protests suffering physical and psychological violence at the hands of security authorities. Ai refers to eyewitness accounts given by temporarily detained persons and their relatives. According to the reports, the children concerned were beaten in prison vans and subjected to various humiliating punitive measures, including physical and sexual abuse, while in detention. The human rights organisation sees this as a strategy to deter children and young people from participating in further protests. However, there are no figures available as to how many minors have been arrested. Recently, the Iranian judiciary acknowledged that around 22,000 people had been arrested during the protests. The majority of them are reportedly now free, having been pardoned or having had their sentences commuted or reduced.

Activist detained again

According to media reports, the well-known activist Sepideh Qolian was rearrested on 15.03.23 just hours after being released from Tehran's Evin prison. She was allegedly travelling home to the city of Arak (Markazi province)

with family members when she was rearrested. The 28-year-old activist had been in prison since 2020, serving a five-year sentence. She was arrested for the first time at the end of 2018 after reporting on a labour protest in Khuzestan province. She also campaigns against the death sentence and for better prison conditions (cf. BN of 18.10.21 and 07.03.22). She had been released early from prison as part of recent pardons granted by the Supreme Leader of the Revolution. A video of her not wearing a headscarf, shouting slogans against the Revolutionary Leader Ali Khamenei outside Evin prison shortly after her release, went viral on social media. According to reports, when she was later arrested, two passers-by who had filmed the event were arrested too.

Protests in the run-up to Persian New Year

According to media reports, further protest rallies against the Iranian leadership took place in several cities on the evening of 15.03.23 as part of the celebrations for the Festival of Fire (Chaharshanbeh suri). There had previously been calls on social media for protests lasting several days. Some of the protests led to people being arrested by security forces who used tear gas. In the run-up to the festival, it was announced that police and security forces would take action against anyone disturbing public order. To mark the pre-Islamic ritual of the Festival of Fire, which has been celebrated since Zoroastrianism was the main religion and which takes place on the eve of the last Wednesday before the Persian calendar year (Nowruz, 20/21 March), numerous participants gather in the streets, light fires and jump over bonfires. According to a Kurdish human rights network, anti-regime protests had already taken place on 14.03.23 in the cities of Bukan (West Azerbaijan) and Saqqez (Kordestan). There, according to unverifiable information on social media, security forces opened fire on demonstrators.

Reports on execution of Kurdish prisoners

According to a Kurdish human rights network, several death sentences were carried out at Urmia Central Prison (West Azerbaijan province) on 17.03.23. One of the prisoners had reportedly been accused of treason, among other things, and had been sentenced to death for membership of the Kurdish opposition party DPKI (Democratic Party of Kurdistan Iran) in 2018. The sentence was initially overturned following an appeal to the Supreme Court. However, a revolutionary court subsequently upheld the death sentence. At least five other death sentences were carried out against persons convicted of drug-related offences (drug trafficking).

Lebanon

Economic situation

The Lebanese pound is now trading at less than 1:100,000 to the US dollar on the black market. Considering the ongoing dollarisation of the economy, this means the purchasing power of most Lebanese people has been halved within the space of a month. In 2019, the exchange rate was still at 1:1500.

The various wage increases paid to public-sector employees in recent years cannot compensate for this. Furthermore, as a result, public services are not available or are only available to a limited extent. Large parts of the school and judicial system are effectively on permanent strike, and some schools have been closed since December. According to UNICEF, half a million children have been unable to attend school over the past six months.

Since the banks went on an open-ended strike on 14.03.23, it was announced that they would reopen the branches on 20.03.23. Among other things, the banks have protested against an unclear legal situation and various rulings that ended very unfavourably for them, in some cases obliging them to pay out large sums to depositors.

Libya

Missing uranium recovered

The 2.5 tonnes of uranium reported missing by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on 15.03.23 have allegedly been found not far from its original storage location in southern Libya, according to a Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF - formerly Libyan National Army, LNA) general. A video released by the LAAF member on 16.03.23 is said to show the discovery of the missing uranium. The IAEA is currently seeking verification of the report.

Under Muammar Gaddafi, Libya had abandoned its programme to develop nuclear and chemical weapons in 2003, but in the course of the 2011 coup, storage sites were discovered in the southern Libyan desert that have since been controlled by the IAEA.

Violent clashes east of the capital

It has been reported in the media that armed clashes lasting several hours erupted between two rival local militias in Tajoura, east of Tripoli, on 12.03.23. Prior to the clashes, a militia member was allegedly killed by the rival militia. At least two members of the armed groups were reportedly killed and another seven were wounded in the ensuing fighting. As a result of the clashes, the administration of a nearby dermatology hospital had to ask its patients to leave the facility.

Madagascar / Malawi / Mozambique

Hundreds killed by cyclone

So far, Cyclone Freddy has claimed the lives of more than 400 people in Malawi, Mozambique and Madagascar and at least 88,000 people are said to have been heavily affected. Malawi has reportedly been hit the hardest by the cyclone; the death toll there has risen to 326 and 165 reception camps have already been set up for survivors. In southern Malawi, in particular, the power and drinking water supply as well as the infrastructure have reportedly been disrupted.

Myanmar

Dozens killed in army massacres

On 11.03.23, Junta forces reportedly shot dead at least 22 and possibly up to 29 civilians, including three monks and two children, in Pinlaung, Shan State. The victims had barricaded themselves inside a monastery after fighting broke out between the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) and the Myanmar military and the pro-military Pa-O Nationalities Organisation (PNO) on 24.02.23 and spread to several villages in the area. A post-mortem report suggests that automatic weapons were probably used at close range. Junta forces had already committed two massacres of civilians in a series of raids carried out in Myinmu and Sagaing townships (Sagaing region) in early March 2023, claiming a total of 27 lives. Some of the bodies found there were severely mutilated. On 12.03.23, Junta troops raided an IDP camp in Pekhoh (Shan), burned an elderly couple to death in their house and shot dead two other people, including a child. Four more people from the camp and 12 people from the neighbouring community of Demoso (Kayah State) were abducted as human shields.

Nigeria

Katsina State: gangs kill dozens of civilians

Armed gangs killed at least 30 people in the north-western state of Katsina on 11.03.23. According to media reports, fighting also broke out between criminal gang members and self-defence groups as a result of the attacks. The latter were joined by volunteers to protect the communities. Attacks by unidentified armed groups are relatively frequent in north-western Nigeria (cf. BN of 02.01.23 and 13.02.23). The increased deployment of security forces has not succeeded in putting an end to the threat.

North-east: hundreds of family members of Islamists arrested

In the border area between Nigeria and Niger, security forces have arrested over 900 suspected family members and collaborators of Islamist groups. According to a statement issued by the spokesperson of a task force of several African countries on 15.03.23, most of those arrested were women, children and the elderly. They are to be handed over to the competent state authorities. Troops from Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon cooperate in the border region of their countries in the fight against Islamists.

The Nigerian Defence Headquarters (DHQ) has recently shared similar success stories. In January 2023, for instance, 267 persons designated as terrorists or family members of terrorists by Nigerian government agencies were said to have surrendered in various locations in the north-east (cf. BN of 30.01.23).

Pakistan

Statements by the Islamic Council

Last week, Pakistan's Council of Islamic Ideology, which has the rank of a constitutional body and provides legal advice to the government and parliament, expressed its opinion on two issues. Firstly, the anti-discrimination laws for transgender persons, which are considered to be progressive by international standards and which, according to the chairman, are not compatible with the rules of Islamic Sharia law. The council expressed concerns over the social and legal problems facing intersex and transgender persons and stressed that the protection and provision of basic human rights of intersex and transgender persons should be ensured. Secondly, the Council responded to a government question on how to deal with Quranic verses in media and advertising. According to the Council of Islamic Ideology, it is, in principle, not harmful to print Quranic verses and holy names in media and advertising. Previously, the government had warned newspapers and magazines that any desecration of excerpts from the Quran would be punishable by life imprisonment in view of the blasphemy prohibitions provided for in the Penal Code

Political tensions and controversies surrounding former Prime Minister Imran Khan

On 14.03.23, clashes broke out between security forces and supporters of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party outside the residence of former Prime Minister Imran Khan in Lahore, where they have been camping out for months. Several criminal cases, some of them politically motivated, are pending against the former prime minister. The policemen, armed with tear gas and batons, were to bring Khan to a judicial hearing. PTI supporters resisted the security forces, hurling stones and projectiles at police. According to media reports, more security forces were injured in the clashes than PTI supporters. On 17.03.23, Khan and supporters appeared before the Lahore High Court. The court granted bail for ten days for the cases pending there and set a deadline of 24.03.23 for the cases pending in the Islamabad High Court. On 18.03.23, police stormed Khan's residence looking for weapons. PTI supporters fired at the security forces from the roof. More than 60 people were arrested. Khan was not at home but was already on his way to a court hearing at the Islamabad High Court. Hundreds of PTI supporters had already gathered there and pelted security forces with stones and petrol bombs at the entrance to the building. Ultimately, the Islamabad High Court suspended the arrest warrant against Khan and adjourned the hearing until 30.03.23. Against the backdrop of the two dissolved provincial assemblies, the latest political developments could lead to concessions being made or heighten the risk of escalation.

Deadly gunfire in North Waziristan

On 15.03.23, security forces stormed a Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) retreat in North Waziristan and engaged in a gun battle, killing at least 10 people, including two children who were caught in the line of fire. The authorities say the eight others killed are believed to have been TTP fighters.

Senegal

Ai: shrinking space for civil society

According to Samira Daoud, regional director for West and Central Africa at Amnesty International (ai), the shrinking civic space phenomenon has been gradually intensifying. Senegal used to be a model of democracy and freedom, and the observed "drift into authoritarianism" is a cause for serious concern, he added. Only recently, a senior researcher at ai reported that more than 100 individuals who are thought to have oppositional attitudes or engage in activities critical of the government had been arrested (cf. BN of 13.03.23).

AJS publishes 2022 annual statistics on violence against women

The Senegalese Women Lawyers Association (AJS) documented a total of 1,530 cases of violence against women in the reporting year 2022, including 422 cases of sexualised violence and 332 cases of rape.

Opposition protests, unrest and riots, hundreds of arrests; Ousmane Sonko

According to media reports, several opposition protests took place between 14.03.23 and 16.03.23, some of which were authorised by the authorities. The opposition alliance Yewwi askan wi (Yaw) and especially Ousmane Sonko's

party Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité (PASTEF) (African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity) called for these protests. The call was for the release of political prisoners, an end to the instrumentalisation of the judiciary and an end to arbitrary arrests and detentions.

Demonstrations in various parts of the country, including the mass rally organised by Yaw in Dakar on 15.03.23, which an estimated 10,000 people took part in, had passed off largely without incident. On the occasion of the mass rally, Sonko had called on his supporters to accompany him to his defamation trial on 16.03.23 which could determine whether he will be allowed to run in the presidential elections in 2024 (cf. BN of 06.02.23). A large police contingent had sealed off Sonko's residence on 15.03.23 and prevented him from leaving his home. The police used tear gas against people who wanted to visit Sonko, including members of parliament and journalists. A member of parliament and a journalist were injured in the fracas. On the way to a court appearance on 16.03.23, police forces threw tear gas at Sonko's vehicle and his supporters, and arrested several people close to him, following disagreements over the route to the court. Sonko, who then tried to return, was forcibly removed from his vehicle by police forces, taken to the court and given medical treatment together with one of his lawyers. The defamation trial, which has been marked by tension, has reportedly been adjourned for the last time – until 30.03.23.

The police crackdown on Sonko triggered renewed street unrest and riots with harsh countermeasures (cf. BN of 20.02.23). There are reports of violent clashes erupting between opposition supporters and security forces, road blockades and, in some cases, considerable acts of vandalism in various parts of the country, especially in Dakar and its suburbs. Two people were killed, several injured and, depending on the source, 150 to well over 300 people were arrested.

Police forces had also prevented a Yaw press conference after the defamation trial was adjourned. PASTEF demanded on 18.03.23 that Sonko, who is under judicial supervision, be given a passport to enable him to receive medical treatment abroad. His health is described as worrying.

Somalia

Three persons executed

A firing squad from the military court in Mogadishu executed three men convicted of collaborating with al-Shabaab on 15.03.2013. They were allegedly responsible for explosions that killed many people and for targeted killings of civilians and government employees. Two of them were former officials of the security agencies.

Suicide bombing in Bardhere (Gedo Region)

On 14.03.23, at least five people were killed and 11 others were injured in a suicide bombing in Bardhere, Jubaland. Regional Governor Ahmed Bulle Gared survived but was injured in the attack. A vehicle loaded with explosives drove unchecked into a guest house where government employees were staying. Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Sri Lanka

Strikes over tax increase

On 15.03.23, more than 400,000 workers in the railways, hospitals and schools, among others, took part in union-organised strikes over tax increases. Large parts of public life ground to a halt again (cf. BN of 06.03.23). The tax increases are part of the conditions qualifying the country for a four-year bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

South Sudan

Extension of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)

On 15.03.23, the UN Security Council decided by resolution to extend the UN mission in South Sudan by one year until 15.03.24. The military troop strength of the mission was set at a maximum of 17,000 persons, and a maximum of 2,101 persons for police forces. In addition, 88 posts have been earmarked for advisors to the judiciary and the prison system. The mission is further based on the strategic plan of preventing a return to civil war, building

sustainable and lasting peace nationwide, as well as facilitating fair and peaceful elections and supporting inclusive, accountable governance. The core elements of the mission remain the protection of the population, the creation of favourable conditions for humanitarian assistance, support for the peace process, and the monitoring and investigation of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

Jonglei State: deadly attack on WFP convoy

According to media reports, on 17.03.23, a WFP convoy was ambushed by armed youths near Uror town. One or two drivers were reportedly killed - information varies. According to an official of the Jonglei State Government, youths from the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) were responsible for the attack. The accusation was denied by the GPAA. The WFP has not yet issued any statement.

Due to its own policy, the WFP generally rejects police escorts for its own convoys, claiming this could potentially jeopardise impartiality. However, in order to improve the security of such convoys, the government of Jonglei State plans to deploy youths from GPAA and Jonglei State to work along important roads in order to prevent such attacks.

Sudan

Renewed protests

On 14.03.23, renewed protests took place in Khartoum against the interim military government. In addition to the police, military forces were also deployed against the protestors. With the massive use of tear gas, the security forces prevented the demonstrators from marching to the presidential residence, the Palace of the Republic.

On 16.03.23, the resistance committees in Khartoum called for further spontaneous and unannounced demonstrations. According to media reports, 11 people were injured by the security forces' actions, some of whom were hit by police vehicles or fired at directly with tear gas canisters.

Although a framework agreement was signed on 05.12.22 between the interim military government and individual opposition groups under the umbrella of the Forces for Freedom and Change - Central Council (FFC-CC), the protests continue. The resistance committees responsible for organising the protests reiterated their position on 14.03.23 not to allow any negotiations, deals or legitimisation regarding the interim military government. The agreement provides, among other things, for peaceful, non-violent action by the security forces against protestors, but this has repeatedly not been respected.

Police violence against journalist

According to media reports, a Sudanese journalist is considering pressing charges against the police in the capital Khartoum. On 19.03.23, while reporting on the clearance and demolition of a slum in the capital, she was allegedly prevented from doing her journalistic work by up to ten police officers using violence. One policeman threatened her with a drawn weapon.

She was reportedly also forced to delete the pictures she had taken and to sit in a police vehicle. She was only let out of the vehicle after several hours. The police did not press charges.

The incident was confirmed and strongly condemned by the Association of Sudanese Journalists. They also accused the police of generally following more closely the behaviour and thinking of the old regime under Omar al-Bashir.

Syria

Commander of the al-Quds Brigades killed

On 19.03.23, according to the al-Quds Brigades, one of their commanders was deliberately shot dead with a firearm in the Damascus suburb of Qudsaya. The group accused Israel of the killing. Israeli authorities, in line with their usual practice regarding military and security operations, did not comment on the allegations. The al-Quds Brigades is the armed wing of the Islamic Jihad militant group, a Palestinian militia operating mainly in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

WFP: food insecurity increasing dramatically

In a press release issued on 15.03.23, the WFP highlighted the worsening food supply crisis in Syria. After twelve years of armed conflict, economic deterioration and last month's earthquakes, more than half of the population

(55%) is food insecure. According to the report, malnutrition is on the rise. Due to the poor economic situation, some basic foodstuffs now cost 13 times more than they did in 2020.

Togo

Two journalists sentenced to three years in prison

On 15.03.23, a court in the capital Lomé sentenced the journalists Ferdinand Ayité and Isidore Kouwonou in absentia to three years' imprisonment and a fine of CFA francs three million (approximately EUR 4,600) each. According to media reports, they are accused of public contempt of authority and propagating falsehoods on social networks. Ayité is the publisher and Kouwonou the editor-in-chief of the magazine L'Alternative. The charges followed complaints by two ministers over statements made in a programme broadcast on YouTube in late 2021. The verdict was handed down in absentia as the current whereabouts of the two journalists are unknown. Organisations for the protection of journalistic work criticise the verdict.

Türkiye

Discrimination against refugees in the earthquake zone

According to a report published by the Association for Migration Research (Göç Araştırmaları Derneği) (GAR) on 13.03.23, refugees, mainly of Syrian nationality, were subjected to multi-layered discrimination, including hate speech, ill-treatment and physical violence, in the earthquake zone following the severe earthquakes that struck southern Türkiye last month. According to the report, official figures show that 1,738,035 Syrian nationals (49.64%) who were granted temporary protection status in Türkiye were directly affected by the February 2023 earthquakes. The report said the Syrian population has been subjected to serious discrimination in the delivery of post-quake emergency aid, during which the principles of "non-discrimination" and "impartiality" have not been respected. The reports says that the discriminatory attitude against Syrians in the country was not limited to such institutions as the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) and Türkiye's top charity organisation, the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay) but was also displayed by local administrations. According to the report, official figures show that more than 40,000 Syrian nationals had returned to their homeland by 28.02.23. In addition, the problems of accommodation, hygiene and access to clean water and psychosocial support of the people who continue to stay in the quake-hit cities remain. Syrian refugees have been repeatedly removed from tent cities, temporary shelters and even places allocated to them by the government after the earthquake.

Meanwhile, the death toll from the earthquake has risen to over 48,000. According to government figures, the number of buildings destroyed or severely damaged has risen to over 227,000. According to local media reports, heavy rains also triggered flash floods on 15.03.23, resulting in the deaths of at least 16 people living in tents and container shelters in earthquake affected south-eastern Türkiye.

Restrictions on freedom of the press after earthquakes

On 17.03.23, it was reported that the government had further restricted the freedom of the press following the February 2023 earthquakes. After the quakes, several media professionals in the earthquake region were temporarily detained, while courts reportedly blocked access to some online news services and articles about the disaster. In addition, two days after the quakes, authorities restricted Twitter's bandwidth for about a day, blocking access to the platform. However, public criticism caused the restriction to be lifted as Twitter had played an important role in the rescue efforts. Many people under the rubble had posted their location in order to be found. According to a statement issued by the police on 13.03.23, one hundred and seventy-three people were arrested for their social media posts about the quakes, 43 of whom were remanded in custody. In addition, some of the social media users and at least one journalist were charged under the controversial law against the "spread of disinformation" passed in October 2022. In a public statement issued on 16.03.23, the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) organisation condemned the recent censorship of online reports criticising government measures following last month's severe earthquakes.

HDP proceedings

On 16.03.23, the Constitutional Court rejected a request by the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) to postpone a final decision on the case, which could lead to the party being banned for alleged links to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), until after the May 2023 elections. The proceedings against the HDP, the third largest party in parliament, will therefore take place before the elections. An exact date has not yet been announced. The court also rejected the HDP's request to be granted two additional months to prepare for the trial.

Tunisia

Parliament opens without independent journalists

On 13.03.23, the newly elected parliament held its first session. Foreign and independent journalists were not allowed to enter the parliament building on the orders of President Kais Saied, so only state media and news agencies were allowed in. The official reason given was to prevent possible unrest. However, protests broke out in front of the parliament building. In addition, the opposition voiced renewed criticism of the legitimacy of the election and the arrests of dissidents in recent weeks. The Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (Haute Autorité Indépendante de la Communication Audiovisuelle, HAICA) and the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (Syndicat National de Journalistes Tunisiens) (SNJT) protested against media censorship.

Ukraine

UN Commission of Inquiry: no evidence of genocide, but numerous war crimes

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry mandated by the UN Human Rights Council published its report (identifier A/HRC/52/62) on the armed conflict in Ukraine on 15.03.23. The report concludes that primarily Russian authorities have committed a wide range of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. Many of these amount to war crimes and include wilful killings, attacks on civilians, unlawful confinement, torture, rape, and unlawful forced transfers of children. The Commission concluded that Russian armed forces have carried out attacks with explosive weapons in populated areas with an apparent disregard for civilian harm and suffering. The report also mentions a "small number" of violations committed by Ukrainian armed forces, namely indiscriminate attacks and two incidents in which captured members of the Russian armed forces were shot, wounded and tortured and which should be classified as war crimes. According to the Chair of the Commission of Inquiry, Erik Møse, no evidence of genocide was found during the investigations. The Ukrainian party to the conflict has repeatedly accused the Russian side of committing genocide against the population during the armed conflict.

Ukrainian Orthodox Church must leave Kyiv Cave Monastery

At the behest of the Ministry of Culture, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) (Ukrainian: Ukraïns'ka pravoslavna cerkva; UPC) must leave its spiritual centre, the Kyiv Cave Monastery, which is also the seat of Metropolitan Onufry of the UOC and one of Kyiv's landmarks, by 29.03.23. The Ukrainian authorities justified this in a letter made public on 10.03.23 with the "violation of the provisions of the agreement on the use of state property by the monastery". The background is that the UOC is not autocephalous under church law but part of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Since the outbreak of the conflict, this fact has led to spiralling tensions between the Ukrainian state and the UOC. Even though, in May last year, the UOC declared its complete "independence and autonomy" from the Moscow Patriarchate (without, of course, becoming autocephalous under church law) and condemned the Russian military action in Ukraine, the church, which has the most congregations, priests and monasteries in the country, is still regularly accused by security authorities and politicians of having pro-Russian sympathies and of cooperating with Russia's state structures and armed forces. In the recent past, numerous searches of UOC clergy and church properties have been carried out (cf. BN of 12.12.22). The UOC views itself as a victim of religious persecution and compares the state's actions with the repressive measures of the Soviet era.

Development of hostilities

A significant part of the fighting continues to unfold in the direction of Bakhmut in Donetsk Oblast. Attacks have taken place near Orekhovo-Vasilyevka, Ivanivka, Grigorivka and Bakhmut itself. According to media reports, Russian forces continue to make military advances, especially in and around Bakhmut. In the direction of Kupiansk and Lyman, fighting has taken place at Hrianykivka, Kreminna, Kuzmin, Verkhnekamenskoye and Spirne.

Uzbekistan

Lengthy prison sentences following unrest in Karakalpakstan in 2022

On 17.03.23, a court in the city of Bukhara handed down prison terms of between five and 11 years to 28 people and parole-like sentences to a further 11 people in connection with the anti-government protests held in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan. During the protests, violent clashes had broken out between demonstrators and security forces in July 2022, resulting in the death of 21 people, including four members of the security forces, according to official sources (cf. BN of 11.07.22). The accused were found guilty of, among other things, vandalism, inflicting serious bodily harm and/or organising violent mass disturbances. In a first trial held on 31.01.23, a group of 22 protesters had already been given prison sentences, most of them also lengthy terms. Among them was Dauletmurat Tajimuratov, who was allegedly behind a plot to seize power by disrupting constitutional order in Karakalpakstan, according to government sources. The journalist and lawyer, who according to independent reports had called for a purely peaceful demonstration against the planned restriction of the region's autonomous status, received a prison sentence of 16 years.

Human rights organisations described the trials as incompatible with rule of law standards and sometimes politically motivated. In this context, the prosecution authorities had reportedly also failed to investigate allegations of ill-treatment of the defendants in police custody and had threatened the defendants with an aggravated sentence in the event that they or their relatives passed on information to the media or NGOs.

Venezuela

Economic situation: inflation, loss of purchasing power, public administration wages

According to the independent Venezuelan Financial Observatory (OVF), the monthly inflation rate was 39.4% in January 2023 and 20.2% in February 2023. The minimum income of 130 bolivars has not been increased since March 2022, but its equivalent in USD has since fallen from almost USD 30 to USD 5.40 due to devaluation, significantly reducing people's purchasing power in a largely de facto dollarised economy. According to official figures quoted in media reports, around 5.5 million public sector employees and five million pensioners earn the minimum wage or a multiple thereof. However, according to the salary scales of the Ministry of Education (MPPE), as of January 2023, even the equivalent of a teacher's salary based on a 40-hour contract at the highest salary level VI, for instance, was only about USD 24. In comparison, the equivalent of the basic food basket for a family of five was about USD 400, according to various organisations. In February 2023, almost 90% of the 762 registered protests in the country took place for economic, social, cultural and environmental rights (DESCA). The majority of these protests were held by teachers, healthcare workers, pensioners and other state employees demanding fairer wages and working conditions. Many of these people say they have other, informal jobs in addition to official employment or have to rely on other sources of income, such as remittances from relatives, to support themselves.

Yemen

Outbreaks of measles and polio

The number of cases of measles and polio in Yemen is currently on the rise; at present, Yemen has the second highest number of confirmed measles cases worldwide. The WHO reported on 19.03.23 that around 80 % of sick children have no vaccination protection. The vaccination rates in Yemen have been falling for some time, on the one hand due to poor medical care, on the other hand due to growing scepticism about vaccinations.

Rising cost of living

The cost of living in Yemen has risen sharply due to inflation and the war in Ukraine. For this reason, UNICEF announced a 38% increase in base benefits on 19.03.23, as part of the so-called cash aid programme. Food is becoming increasingly unaffordable for many Yemenis, with 1 kg of rice costs, for instance, currently costing around USD 1.60.

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