



# Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

21 August 2023

## Afghanistan

### **Second anniversary of Taliban takeover of power**

On 15.08.23, the Taliban celebrated the second anniversary of their takeover with rallies and parades. The Taliban government designated 15 August as a public holiday. They stated that they had established an "Islamic system", expelled the invaders and restored security in the country. At the same time, strict security checks were in place on the anniversary day. A parade in the city of Kandahar was cancelled; according to official statements, to avoid disturbing the public. Numerous international organisations published statements and reports criticising the Taliban. For example, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennet, stated that the Taliban had committed numerous and at the same time systematic human rights violations in the last two years, refuting assumptions that they were more moderate now than during their first rule (1996 - 2001). Furthermore, restrictions originally declared to be temporary contributed to an "accelerated, systematic and all-encompassing system of segregation, marginalisation and persecution". The Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, TTP), on the other hand, congratulated in a statement on social media and called on the "oppressed people" of Pakistan to wage jihad against the government in order to establish an "Islamic system" there as well.

### **Security situation**

According to media reports on 19.08.23, a senior commander of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), Dost Mohammad, was killed in an air strike in Nangarhar province. On 14.08.23, there was an explosion at a hotel in Khost. At least three people died. Pakistani media report that this may have been a drone attack by the Pakistani army on Hafiz Gul Bahadur, one of the commanders of the TTP. The Pakistani government accuses the Taliban of doing too little against the TTP, whose attacks are planned on Afghan soil and have increased drastically since the Taliban took power. In Taloqan, capital of Takhar province, a car bomb exploded on 15.08.23 under unclear circumstances. According to different reports, two people were injured or four Taliban were killed and three others and two civilians were injured. The Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF) announced an attack on a Taliban base in Parwan province on the same day, killing five Taliban fighters and injuring three others.

### **Governance**

Abdul Hakim Sharai, the Taliban's acting Minister of Justice, banned any activities of political parties in the country at a press conference on 16.08.23. He said that the existence of political parties in the country was neither based on Sharia nor beneficial to the nation. According to the BBC, the number of religious schools in the country has increased fivefold under the two-year Taliban rule.

### **Persecution & Humanitarian Situation**

According to a report by the exile press medium Hasht-e Sobh on 20.08.23, eight women who wanted to hold a protest march were detained by the Taliban in Kabul. According to a report by the Taliban Supreme Court on

17.08.23, 19 people convicted of adultery and robbery, among other charges, were publicly flogged in a sports stadium in Sarpul province. According to a report by the NGO Afghan Witness on 15.08.23, 3,329 human rights violations by the Taliban have been reported since 15.01.22, including violations of the right to life, the right to freedom from torture, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and women's rights.

Save the Children has published a report that points to a dire humanitarian situation. 38.4 % of 1,205 children surveyed in six provinces work to support their families. 76.1% of them said they currently had less food than a year ago, the report said. IOM pointed out that 79% of people in Afghanistan do not have adequate access to clean water. Women's groups in Afghanistan protested on social media and released statements drawing attention to the human rights violations against women by the Taliban.

## **Bangladesh**

### **Pressure on opposition; arrests of BNP members**

In the northeastern town of Habiganj, police used batons and tear gas during a protest by thousands of supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on 19.08.23. Hundreds of people, including security personnel, were injured. The BNP, led by former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, is demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the formation of an independent caretaker government until the next national elections in January 2024.

In a statement on 19.08.23, ai expressed concern about the disappearance of six leaders of the Chhatra Dal, the student wing of the BNP. They were arrested by civilian police in the Azimpur district of Dhaka on 18.08.23.

Furthermore, more than 15 BNP leaders and activists were arrested by civilian forces in front of the party office in Dhaka's Nayapaltan district on 19.08.23. The BNP general secretary said that in view of the current political situation in Bangladesh, recent developments indicated that the Awami League-led government is trying to stay in power by all means and is using the state machinery to eliminate opposition members in the run-up to the elections.

### **Police violence in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar**

The human rights organisation Fortify Rights accuses the Armed Police Battalion security forces deployed in the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar of human rights violations, citing arbitrary arrests, physical violence, even torture and extortion.

## **Benin**

### **Criminal proceedings against numerous terror suspects discontinued**

According to media reports, a total of 127 people suspected of being terrorists by the Beninese judiciary were released from pre-trial detention on 10.08.23. The persons released had been apprehended between 2019 and 2022 and investigated for membership of a terrorist organisation. Thereafter, the investigation commission Cour de Répression des Infractions Économiques et du Terrorisme (CRIET) initiated proceedings against most of them. They were released from custody because the proceedings were stopped. The 127 persons are nationals of Benin, Niger, Togo, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Ghana and Chad. The non-Benin nationals are to be handed over to the diplomatic missions of their respective home countries. According to reports referring to information provided by the CRIET president in May 2023, over 700 people were detained in connection with suspected terrorism in Benin at the time. Benin and other West African coastal states fear that extremist groups active in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, in particular, might extend their radius of action to their countries (cf. BN of 19.06.23).

## **Burkina Faso**

### **Suspected jihadists killed**

According to the army, the police killed 40 suspected jihadists in a violent clash. The jihadists allegedly ambushed a police reconnaissance mission near Diougo-Yourga in Koulpelogo province in the northeast of the country on 19.08.23. In the same incident, five police officers died and four were injured.

## Chad

### **Termination of the ceasefire**

On 18.08.23, the rebel group Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad (FACT) announced its unilateral termination of the ceasefire agreement of 2021, because the military bombed a FACT base on 16.08.23. The rebel group considered the bombing to be a declaration of war and announced a fast response, the group said. The transitional government has not yet commented on this.

## Colombia

### **Fear of violence drives over 1,000 people from villages**

Recently, several days of clashes between the Farc dissident group Estado Mayor Central (EMC) and the guerrilla organisation Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) have caused more than a thousand people in the department of Nariño, in the extreme southwest, to leave their villages. According to media reports, the people sought shelter in the centre of the town of Samaniego in the same department. At a vigil held there on 07.08.23, they demanded the cessation of hostilities. The violent clashes seem even more dramatic in the light of the ceasefire between state security forces and the ELN, the largest guerrilla organisation that remains active, which came into effect on 03.08.23 (cf. BN of 07.08.23). According to media reports, the ELN central command has clearly instructed all guerrilla structures to stop offensive actions against the armed forces, the police and other security organs of the state as of 03.08.23. Other armed groups have been left out of the ceasefire, though.

A study presented by the representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia on 15.08.23 shows that while there has been progress in the area of human rights under the government of President Gustavo Petro, parts of the population continue to be affected by violence, disproportionately so, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities as well as peasant families in rural areas.

## Cuba

### **Economic crisis and inflation make it more difficult to afford the cost of living**

According to media reports, the continued loss of purchasing power of the Cuban currency considerably impacts large parts of the population. Basic foodstuffs and other necessities are in short supply. This is particularly challenging for people without direct access to foreign currency, such as remittances from relatives living abroad. Social inequality is increasing, the reports say and point out that persistently high inflation had rendered the officially fixed exchange rate of CUP 120 per USD 1 absurd long ago. On the black market, one USD currently costs far more than 200, sometimes even CUP 250. Many goods are hardly affordable for people with average peso salaries.

## Egypt

### **Activist and other detainees pardoned**

According to state media, on 19.08.23 the authorities released activist Ahmed Duma and an unknown number of other detainees following a presidential pardon.

The activist had been a leading figure in the 2011 protests against long-time president Hosni Mubarak. Duma was arrested in 2013 and initially sentenced to 25 years in prison for sedition and assaulting security forces in 2015; in 2019 his sentence was reduced to 15 years and he was fined EGP 6 million.

## Ethiopia

### **Several dead in air strike in Amhara**

Recently, the air force supported the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) in the conflict in Ethiopia's regional state of Amhara (cf. BN of 14.08.23 and 07.08.23). On 13.08.23, the town of Finote Selam (West Gojjam Zone) is

reported to have been the target of a drone attack in which at least 30 people were killed and 55 injured, some seriously. This is the most serious incident so far during the months of tensions between irregular Amharic militias, commonly referred to as "Fano" and the ENDF in Amhara. According to local sources, Finote Selam is under Fano control. The Ethiopian government has not yet provided any comment. Night-time curfews have been imposed in six towns - including the regional capital Bahir Dar. Security forces have set up checkpoints throughout the region. Representatives in the Ethiopian parliament demanded the cessation of fighting and called for a dialogue. Most recently, the situation is said to have calmed down. However, on 17.08.23, fierce fighting was reported between Fano and the ENDF near Dembecha town (West Gojjam).

### **Background**

Amhara is the second largest region in Ethiopia, home to more than a quarter of the total population. Protests have been going on for months. One of the triggers for the violence is the November 2022 agreement on the settlement of hostilities to end the armed conflict between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the regional state of Tigray (cf. BN of 07.11.22). In Amhara, this agreement met with criticism because the negotiations took place without Amharic participation, although Fano militias and Amhara Special Forces fought on the side of the federal army. In the process, Amhara forces occupied areas in Welkait, Tselemti, Humera and Tsegede in the western Tigray region, officially subordinating them to the Amhara regional government and displacing thousands of ethnic Tigray. Human rights organisations accused Amhara forces of an ethnic cleansing campaign characterised by arbitrary arrests, killings and deportations (cf. BN v. 11.04.22). The future affiliation of the zone is unclear. The Ethiopian government has not yet taken a clear position, it did, however, discuss a referendum, which is fundamentally rejected by Amhara on the grounds that the federal government, which was led by the TPLF at the time, assigned these areas to the Tigray region in the 1990s without consulting the local, majority Amharic population.

In addition, in April 2023, the central government decided to dissolve all local special units nationwide and to integrate them into the state security forces in order to promote ethnic unity and to prevent regional forces from becoming involved in conflicts, thus reads the official justification. This decision was widely rejected in Amhara as an attack on regional autonomy and a threat to security in the regional state. The first riots broke out in several towns (cf. BN of 24.04.23). Although some Amharic special forces agreed to their incorporation, about half are said to have joined the Fano, which refused to demobilise. The ENDF then launched an offensive against "extremist" elements. Since then, fighting between the Fano and the ENDF broke out time and again (cf. BN of 24.06.23).

## **Ghana**

### **Allegations of corruption in the passport procurement system**

According to media reports, on 14.08.23 the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration denounced the deep-rooted corruption in the passport procurement system. After an unannounced visit to the passport office, corrupt activities by passport officers in collaboration with employees of the police service, immigration, national security and outside middlemen, so-called "Goro Boys", had been uncovered. This is exactly what the extensive digitisation of the passport acquisition system in 2016 was meant to prevent, the report said, but the officials went on to manipulate the online application system to their advantage. As a result, the minister dismissed some officials from service and launched further investigations.

## **Guatemala**

### **Presidential election: Victory for anti-corruption campaigners**

Bernardo Arévalo of the Movimiento Semilla party has emerged as the clear winner of the run-off election for the presidency held on 20.08.23, according to preliminary results. Consistent media reports on 21.08.23 indicate that Arévalo received around 59% of the vote and his opponent Sandra Torres, the former First Lady of Guatemala, of the UNE party, around 36%. There were no reports of violence or unrest at the polls. The Organisation of American

States (OAS), which has a team of election observers on the ground, described the election process as smooth, according to media reports.

Arévalo, ex-diplomat and son of a former president, is considered a committed fighter against corruption and authoritarianism. According to observers, these two problems are currently among the Central American country's most pressing woes, along with violence and food insecurity. Arévalo's victory is considered a rejection of the established political parties. The term of office of the new president is to begin on 14.01.24.

## **Guinea-Bissau**

### **Freedom of the press: Broadcasting permission for Capital FM**

According to media reports, the responsible state secretary of the new government (cf. BN of 14.08.23) rescinded a decision of the previous government on 15.08.23 which had ordered the closure of Capital FM and 78 other radio stations on 18.10.22. Allegedly, the decision was made because broadcasting licences had not been extended or fees were outstanding. Some stations were able to resume operations later. Capital FM was also accused of having moved its premises without notifying the media supervisory authority. The station had briefly broadcast music programmes after having interrupted operations following an attack on its premises in which three journalists were injured (cf. BN of 14.02.22 and 24.10.22). Capital FM is now allowed to resume its programmes in full. The journalists' union of Guinea-Bissau welcomed the measure as a strengthening of freedom of the press and freedom of expression.

## **India**

### **Declaration of intent to create a uniform civil code**

Ten months ahead of the 2024 Union-wide general elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has resumed a long-pending campaign to create a uniform civil code. In India, each one of the different faith communities have their own civil laws, influenced by their respective religious texts and cultural customs. In recent weeks, Modi has personally advocated a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) arguing that a modern nation does not need duplicate laws and that a common civil code is a step towards eliminating gender discrimination in civil status laws. The BJP specifically cited the Muslim civil status laws in India as discriminatory against women. Critics counter that all civil codes are discriminatory against women. So far, no bill for a UCC has been presented. In the view of the opposition parties this is a political manoeuvre to portray minorities as backward in the run-up to the 2024 elections.

## **Iran**

### **New wave of arrests of Baha'i**

On 16.08.23, the Baha'i International Community group published a total of 180 cases of crackdowns on Baha'i members by the security authorities that had come to light in the previous two weeks. These include raids on Baha'i-run businesses, interrogations and arrests. Several prominent members of the community, especially such who had been active in unofficial leadership bodies and had already served long prison sentences, were re-arrested. Specifically, allegations of corruption by withholding medication were made against several owners of pharmacies. So far, at least 60 members of the faith community are reported to have been arrested during the current wave of arrests.

### **Action against activists**

Arrests of people associated with women's rights movements are on the rise throughout the country. They seem to be linked to the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death in September 2023, to suppress large protests in advance.

On 19.08.23, HRW reported twelve arrests in Gilan province.

On the same day, Hengaw, a Kurdish human rights organisation based in Norway, reported the arrest of two Kurdish activists and the redeployment of military units to Kurdish-majority regions of Iran.

## **Iraq**

### **Türkiye-PKK conflict**

The Turkish air force continues its daily operations, especially in the Dohuk region. Among other things, several wildfires were started, which also affected fields and other agricultural land.

### **Fight against the IS**

On 16.08.23, the Iraqi Air Force flew a strike against a suspected IS position in Kirkuk province. No further information on casualties was disclosed. IS is still active in the regions disputed between the Kurdish regional government and the central government in Baghdad, exploiting the power vacuum there. Even though the group as a whole only seems capable of smaller-scale operations, it still poses a significant security risk to the population of the region.

## **Lebanon**

### **Situation in Ain al-Hilwa**

On 18.08.23, UNRWA formally suspended all activities inside Ain al-Hilwa, stating that the security of its own staff cannot be guaranteed as gunmen are still present in various UNRWA facilities and refuse to leave.

On 20.08.23, UNRWA announced that eight UNRWA schools in Ain al-Hilwa had been taken over by armed groups which also vandalised and looted the premises. Under the current circumstances, the school year for several thousand children cannot begin, UNRWA said.

### **Shootout in Kahale**

The armed incident in majority Christian Kahale on 10.08.23 (cf. BN of 14.08.23) triggered a far-reaching political response.

Leaders of all relevant political parties stated that no escalation was desired, but at the same time blamed each other vehemently. The army was unanimously praised for its quick intervention. An investigation into the incident was ordered, but is already causing resentment, because as a first step, several innocent bystanders were summoned for questioning.

According to various sources, a Hezbollah truck was on its way to Ain al-Hilwa carrying machine gun and anti-aircraft ammunition. The ammunition was allegedly intended to replenish the depots of Hezbollah's allies in the camp after recent fighting had depleted the reserves significantly.

## **Libya**

### **High Council of State elects new chairperson**

According to media reports, the High State Council (HSC), which acts as a kind of senate and advisory body to the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU), elected Mohammed Takala as its new chairperson on 06.08.23. Takala replaces Khalid al-Mishri, who had headed the HSC since 2018. It is not yet clear what Takala's election means for the HSC's negotiations with the House of Representatives (HoR) regarding joint electoral legislation.

### **Violent clashes in Tripoli cause deaths and injuries**

The arrest of a leading member of the armed group known as the 444th Brigade at Mitiga airport by the Special Deterrence Forces, the armed group controlling the airport in the Libyan capital, resulted in heavy fighting between the two groups in several districts of Tripoli on 14.08. and 15.08.23, according to media reports. Reportedly, up to 55 people were killed and another 146 injured, including an unknown number of civilians. The fighting ended after mediation by the GNU, it was agreed to release the imprisoned leader and both groups committed to return to their barracks. The two rival groups had already fought in the capital at the end of May 2023 (cf. BN 05.06.23).

## Mali

### Central Mali: Civilians killed in attack

According to media reports, the village of Yarou near the town of Bandiagara in central Mali (Mopti region) was attacked on 18.08.23. Armed men killed at least 23 civilians and twelve more were injured in the attack. Also, several houses were set on fire. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the attack.

## Morocco

### King issues 653 pardons

To celebrate the revolution of the king and the people, King Mohammed VI has issued 653 pardons. The pardons are reductions in prison sentences, commutations of life sentences to fixed prison sentences, remissions of prison sentences or residual sentences and revocations of fines. Also benefiting from the pardons are 16 convicts of extremism and terrorism. These are eight prisoners whose remaining prison time was remitted, one prisoner whose sentence was annulled and seven prisoners whose prison sentences were shortened.

## Niger

### Latest developments

On 19.08.23, the self-declared ruler in Niger, Abdourahamane Tiani, announced his intention to establish a transitional government on state television. He said that this government should not remain in office for longer than three years. Furthermore, the Nigerien people are to be consulted within 30 days by means of a "national dialogue". Based on this, a new constitution is to be drawn up, he said.

On the same day, a delegation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) met with the new rulers in Niger's capital Niamey for the first time. Ahead of the meeting ECOWAS had declared that an intervention force was ready to be deployed in Niger, but that a peaceful solution was still being sought. According to an ECOWAS representative, ECOWAS would refrain from military intervention if the military leadership in Niger was open to a peaceful solution.

### Outbreak of violence

In the Tillabéri region in the country's southwest, violence erupted in several villages in four departments on 15.08.23, killing at least 28 civilians. Reportedly, the number of victims might rise even further.

## Nigeria

### Niger State: Numerous fatalities in attack on village

Violent actors described as bandits attacked a locality near Zungeru in Wushshi Local Government Area (LGA) of Niger State on 13.08.23, killing at least 26 members of the Nigerian security forces. Some of the victims were high-ranking members of the military, according to media reports. Several members of local vigilante groups were injured. In addition to the deadly attacks, the bandits are said to be responsible for attacks on sedentary people and for rustling. Troops deployed to drive the bandits out of the village killed more than 30 of the approximately 70 attackers, according to media reports.

Niger State is Nigeria's largest state, located in the west of the Middle Belt zone between northern and southern Nigeria. According to an expert on the region, a decrease in attacks on localities by violent actors in Niger State has been noted recently. In 2022, several deadly attacks on localities (cf. BN of 28.02.22, 07.03.22 and 28.03.22) had occurred in Niger State.

### Borno State: Hundreds killed in clashes between Islamist groups

Fighting between rival Islamist groups Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) left more than 100 members of both groups dead in the Lake Chad region on 12.08.23. Boko Haram members also reportedly captured 60 members of ISWAP on 13.08.23 on their way to Damasak in Borno State. The captives include senior

members, according to media reports. The situation had escalated because several ISWAP members had recently joined the so-called Buduma group of Boko Haram.

Battles between the Islamist groups Boko Haram and ISWAP with numerous casualties are not uncommon (cf. BN of 27.03.23). The rivalry has existed since the ISWAP group split from Boko Haram in 2016. Since then, the Boko Haram factions Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad (JAS) and ISWAP are sometimes referred to as Boko Haram, but in some reports Boko Haram is only used for the JAS group. The term Boko Haram is also used as a generic term for both ISWAP and JAS. Both groups have been carrying out attacks and other acts of violence against the military and the civilian population for years, especially in northeastern Nigeria (cf. BN of 30.05.22 and 27.03.23).

#### **Southeast: Police kill suspected separatists**

Police forces stormed a camp of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) independence movement, which has been banned since 2017, killing three suspected IPOB members in Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area (LGA) of Enugu State in the southeast on 10.08.23. This is according to media reports citing official police statements of the same day. Those killed are said to be IPOB members who try to enforce illegal sit-at-home orders and do not shy away from violence against civilians. IPOB tries to put pressure on the Nigerian government with sit-at-home orders in the southeast of the country (cf. BN of 17.07.23). Government agencies and other authorities regularly hold IPOB or its armed wing Eastern Security Network (ESN) responsible for many acts of violence in the southeast. On 23.07.23, the military destroyed several IPOB or ESN camps in the southeastern state of Anambra (cf. BN of 31.07.23).

#### **Success in the fight against FGM at regional level**

Following complaints by the Nigerian NGO Save Haven Development Initiative, 15 communities in the southeastern state of Cross River have abandoned the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). This follows from a media report of 15.08.23, which refers to statements made by the founder of the NGO at an event against FGM in Lagos. Another success story concerns the Local Government Area (LGA) Iju Ifako in the north of Lagos State. According to the local traditional ruler, FGM is no longer permitted there. Traditional rulers are still very influential in large parts of the country. Reports of successful anti-FGM campaigns and measures at regional level are not uncommon in Nigeria (cf. BN of 30.11.20, 22.02.21, 09.05.22 and 21.11.22). According to evaluations of scientific surveys, the prevalence of FGM among Nigerian girls and women has been declining for years (cf. BN of 23.01.23).

## **Pakistan**

#### **Escalation of violence against Christian minority in Punjab**

On 16.08.23, one of the most serious attacks on the Christian minority occurred in Jaranwala in the Faisalabad district of Punjab province. Videos on social media showed hundreds of people armed with batons storming and setting fire to the Salvation Army Church and the Saint Paul Catholic Church. As the violence escalated, three more churches were destroyed. Videos posted on social media showed police officers standing amid a crowd of onlookers while the attackers vandalised the churches. Houses, shops and cemeteries belonging to the Christian community were also attacked. The violence was triggered by allegedly torn Koran pages with blasphemous content. The local police filed criminal charges of blasphemy against two Christians. A Punjab government spokesperson was critical, calling the incidents an orchestrated conspiracy to incite Muslim attackers. Security has been beefed up for churches, more than 100 people have been arrested and thousands of additional police and paramilitary troops have been deployed to contain the violence amid the political and economic crisis currently prevailing in Pakistan. According to media reports on 20.08.23, more than 80 buildings were destroyed and the two Christians denounced for blasphemy were arrested.

#### **Attack in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa**

On 20.08.23, at least eleven workers were killed in the North Waziristan tribal district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province when an explosive device placed under their truck detonated. They were on their way to an army post under construction. No one claimed responsibility for the attack.



## **Russian Federation**

### **Judiciary dissolves Sakharov Centre**

On 18.08.23, a Moscow court announced the dissolution of the renowned Sakharov Centre. The reason given was that unauthorised exhibitions and conferences had taken place at the centre.

In January 2023, the Moscow city administration had withdrawn all the premises provided to the Sakharov Centre, which was already considered a "foreign agent", and terminated the free rental contracts; the institution had to close in spring, on the grounds that "foreign agents" were not allowed to receive state support. The cultural centre was founded almost thirty years ago and campaigned for human rights, disarmament and peace in the spirit of Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrei Sakharov. Among other things, it showed exhibitions on the topics of repression and the Gulag in the former Soviet Union and was one of the few organisations that questioned the official view of the Russian leadership. It was considered a meeting place for liberal Moscow and was internationally recognised as a place for democracy and civil society. The public relations work of the human rights activists critical of the government came under increasing pressure. At the very latest, when the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine began on 24.02.22, it became de facto impossible.

## **Senegal**

### **Opposition leader in intensive care and removed from electoral roll**

The imprisoned Senegalese opposition politician Ousmane Sonko has been removed from the lists of the Senegalese electoral roll, according to media reports of 16.08.23. The reports say that Sonko is therefore prevented from standing as a candidate in the presidential elections in February 2024. His political camp denounced the deletion.

According to his lawyers and the prison authorities, Sonko was admitted to the intensive care unit on 16.08.23. He has been on hunger strike since his detention on 31.07.23 and has been in hospital since 06.08.23. It is said that his state of health is alarming. The opposition politician, who has already been convicted twice, is charged with seven counts, mainly incitement to riot, forming a criminal organisation with terrorist intentions, endangering the security of the state, conspiracy against state authority and a public order offence including fomenting serious political unrest (cf. BN of 31.07.23). Other prisoners sympathetic to Ousmane Sonko are also on hunger strike in solidarity. The PASTEF party, which has been banned since 31.07.23, blames the authorities for Sonko's condition and calls the removal from the electoral roll inhumane. The opposition coalition Yewwi Askan Wi (YAW) around Ousmane Sonko demands his immediate release and that of all political prisoners.

## **Somalia**

### **Police and military clash in Mogadishu**

On 18.08. and 19.08.23, violent clashes took place between police forces and the guards of a Somali military general in the Dharkenley district of Mogadishu. Several people were reportedly killed and injured in the clashes.

### **Arrest of a media worker**

On 17.08.23, Mohamed Ibrahim Bulbul, editor-in-chief of Kaab Somali TV, was arrested in Mogadishu. Previously, he had allegedly published an article on corruption within the police.

## **Sudan**

### **Ongoing struggles**

In the capital of South Darfur, Nyala, the latest fighting between the Sudanese Army (SAF) and the paramilitary militia Rapid Support Forces (RSF) continued for three consecutive days from 11.08.23. According to various reports, between 15 and 43 civilians were killed. Both the SAF and RSF used uncoordinated artillery fire, hitting many civilian buildings such as residential houses, the reports say. In addition to the fighting in Nyala, the RSF

reported heavy artillery and air strikes by the SAF on Khartoum and Omdurman during the same period, which also claimed civilian lives.

In addition, according to media reports on 18.08.23, renewed fighting between the SAF and RSF broke out in the towns of El Fasher (North Darfur) and Al Foula (West Kordofan).

New fighting was also reported in South Kordofan. Units of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) were reported to be advancing against the regional capital Kadugli, which is currently controlled by the SAF. The reports did not say exactly which faction of the SPLM-N was involved.

In line with reports by local resistance committees, a senior representative of the Masalit ethnic group accused the RSF of demolishing camps for displaced people in the region around the town of El Geneina. So far, five such camps have been destroyed by the RSF, he said. El Geneina itself is now considered almost uninhabitable. It is estimated that up to 90 % of the population has left the city and sought refuge in Chad.

## **Syria**

### **Suweida: Protests because of economic hardship**

On 17.08.23, the cut in government subsidies and the resulting increase in fuel prices triggered protests against the general economic situation in the city of Suweida, according to media reports. Hundreds of participants burned tyres, blocked roads and chanted slogans demanding the fall of the Syrian government.

The governorate of Suweida has remained largely under government control since 2011. The majority Druze population of the governorate suffers from the poor economic situation, just like the rest of the country.

Syria's economy is permanently deteriorating. On 16.08.23, the Syrian pound reached a new low with an exchange rate of SYP 15,500 to one USD. This compares to SYP 7,000 at the beginning of 2023. When the conflict started, one USD was still trading for 47 pounds. The UN estimates that more than 90% of the population in areas under government control and under the control of anti-government Islamist militias in the northwest are living below the poverty line. The Syrian government denies responsibility for the situation blaming the sanctions imposed by numerous states in the international community.

In general, protests in government-controlled areas are rare. However, last month also several smaller protests were held in the coastal area of Syria, which is considered a bastion of support for Syria's President Assad.

## **Togo**

### **Health status of political prisoners**

According to media reports, about a dozen human rights organisations in Togo sent a jointly signed text to the government on 15.08.23 expressing concern about the country's political prisoners' health. The letter stresses that the situation of one man is especially critical at the moment. He had been arrested together with several others during the 2018 elections and has since been detained without trial. He is currently in hospital and cannot receive further treatment because the Togolese state does not provide medical care for prisoners and the family cannot continue to bear the costs.

## **Ukraine**

### **Civilian war victims (selection)**

According to Ukrainian sources, six people died from artillery fire in two villages in the Ukrainian-controlled part of the Kherson region on 13.08.23. In the night of 14.08.23, Russian attacks on Zaporizhzhya reportedly killed at least two people and injured three in Odesa. Repeated heavy Russian shelling continued on several localities in the Sumy region. In the night of 15.08.23, the western Ukrainian cities of Luzk (Volyn oblast) and Lviv became targets of Russian cruise missile attacks. In Lutsk three people died, in Lviv 40 residential buildings were damaged and 15 people were injured. According to Ukrainian sources, converted anti-aircraft missiles were also used to fire at towns near the front, killing at least one person in Kramatorsk (Donetsk oblast). Seven people were killed in a missile attack on Chernihiv (Chernihiv oblast) on 19.08.23. The missile hit the city centre and also destroyed a theatre where an exhibition of drone manufacturers was shown. About 150 others were injured.

### **Development of the war effort**

Since the expiry of the agreement concluded in July 2022 under UN and Turkish mediation to allow Ukrainian grain exports (the so-called Black Sea Grain Initiative) on 17.07.23 due to the Russian Federation's unwillingness to extend it, the city and region of Odesa, including its grain export infrastructure, have been repeatedly targeted by Russian air strikes of various kinds. The Danube seaports of Ismajil and Reni, that are now part of the main grain export route and are in close proximity to NATO territory, are also targeted by Russian attacks.

According to media reports, direct fighting continues on the front lines around Kupyansk and Lyman (Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts), most intensively around Bakhmut and in the southern Donetsk region as well as in the Kherson region. The Ukrainian army announced that it had moved reserves to Kupyansk to prevent further Russian advances in the area. Kupyansk is being evacuated. Russian artillery fire injured eleven people there, according to reports on 21.08.23.

According to reports on 17.08.23 Ukraine managed to recapture the village of Uroshayne in the Zaporizhzhya region, however, according to a media report citing US intelligence, US generals expect that one of the main targets of the current counter-offensive, Melitopol, will not be reached. Melitopol is considered an important transport hub between the Crimean peninsula and other Russian-occupied areas in the country's south. It is said that some other, minor advances were made in the western part of the region in the meantime. On 20.08.23, the Russian army claimed to have eliminated 150 Ukrainian soldiers who had tried to cross the Dnipro into Russian-occupied territory.

According to estimates by US government officials, which became known through a newspaper article, 120,000 Russian combatants may have been killed and over 170,000 injured since 24.02.22. The Ukrainian side, whose forces have a significantly lower potential, losses are estimated at 70,000 with an additional 100,000-120,000 injured. However, the article also pointed out that such estimates are very unreliable.

### **New recruitment campaign; corruption suspected in recruitment offices**

According to media reports on 18.08.23, the government launched a new recruitment campaign under the slogan "Overcome the fear". The state of war was extended by another 90 days until 15.11.23, which means that men of military age are still not allowed to leave the country. On 11.08.23 it was reported that President Volodymyr Zelensky had dismissed the heads of all regional recruitment offices on suspicion of corruption. He declared that during a war bribery was tantamount to treason. Officers who are no longer fit to fight for health reasons are to take over these positions. Zelensky is said to have signed a decree to this effect on 17.08.23.

## **Yemen / Saudi Arabia**

### **Ethiopian migrants regularly shot dead at the Saudi border**

On 21.08.23, HRW published a report on incidents at the Saudi-Yemeni border. It documented various incidents in which Saudi border guards opened fire on unarmed migrants with machine guns, mortars and the like. Several mass graves and massacres were documented. The documented casualties amount to several hundred over the course of the last few years, although HRW assumes that many more people have been killed in incidents that have gone unnoticed.