



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

Security situation

According to a UN Security Council report released on 29.01.24, the terrorist network al-Qaeda has set up a total of eight new training camps in Afghanistan, four of which are located in the provinces of Ghazni, Laghman, Parwan and Uruzgan, as well as a new weapons depot in the Panjshir Valley. According to the report, the Taliban have been concealing their close ties with al-Qaeda. In addition, al-Qaeda and the Taliban are supporting the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)) in the attacks they are carrying out in Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban have denied the allegation.¹

Governance and persecution

According to media reports, Chinese President Xi Jinping accepted the credentials of Taliban-appointed Afghan Ambassador Asadullah Bilal Karimi at a ceremony on 30.01.24 along with the credentials of envoys of around 40 other countries. According to some analysts and former diplomats, this step marks the first official recognition of the Taliban interim government by a major nation. Although the spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry did not confirm recognition of the Taliban government, he emphasised that, from the Chinese perspective, Afghanistan should not be excluded from the international community.

The US is exploring the possibility of consular access to Afghanistan, according to a recently published strategy paper published by the US State Department. This does not mean recognition of the Taliban government, but rather serves to build functional relationships in order to better pursue the US government's own goals.

In a controversial statement, Noorullah Noori, Taliban Minister of Borders and Tribal Affairs, denied the existence of an "official" or "international" border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs released a video in which Noori described the Durand Line separating the two countries as a "hypothetical line".

According to reports, there has been an increase in unsolved murders committed by unidentified gunmen across the country since 25.01.24. Within a week, a total of 12 people, including old people, women and children, were killed in the provinces of Helmand, Badghis, Balkh, Takhar and Herat. There is reason to fear that the number of unreported cases is high. On 01.02.24, the Taliban had two people flogged in Kabul for having an "extramarital relationship".²

Humanitarian situation

The provincial hospital of Badakhshan has reportedly recorded around 10,000 cases of measles since the beginning of 2024, and 21 children have succumbed to the illness so far. The increase is partly due to the lack of medication.³

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Thousands left without shelter after flooding

Weeks of heavy rainfall in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in January 2024 have caused the Congo River and several tributaries to overflow, resulting in severe flooding in several provinces across the country. Thousands of people lost their homes after the floods. According to official figures, 12 people died and 1,177 houses were destroyed. However, media reports say that at least 500 families have been left homeless by the floods in the city of Shabunda (South Kivu) alone, 900 families have been left homeless in the city of Lubumbashi (Haut-Katanga) and 200 houses have been destroyed in the city of Kisangani (Tshopo). Cities in the west of the country in the province of Kwilu and the capital Kinshasa have also been severely affected. The Congo River has risen by more than six metres since January 2024 and has thus almost reached its highest level since the year 1961. Doctors without Borders (MSF) report that they are providing assistance in the most badly affected communes, as many people are not receiving any support from anywhere else. MSF estimates that 600,000 people in eight provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been affected by the floods.⁴

Gambia

Recent opinion poll on the reputation and work of police

One media outlet, citing an opinion poll conducted by the pan-African research network Afrobarometer, reported that 43% of Gambian citizens who took part in the opinion poll and had encountered the police said they had to pay bribes to obtain police assistance or to avoid problems, the nature of which is not known. The majority of citizens who sought police assistance also said they found it difficult to get the help they needed while 33 percent said police use excessive force. However, they did not provide any details. It is estimated that 39 percent of the respondents said the police are actually involved in criminal activities. Twenty four percent of respondents believe the government is fighting against crime.⁵

Ghana

Several people sentenced to death

The Supreme Court in Accra sentenced six people, including three Ghanaian soldiers, to death on 24.01.24 after convicting them of plotting to carry out a coup against the country's government in 2021. The court found the defendants guilty of high treason and conspiracy to commit high treason. According to media reports, this is the first high treason trial to be held in Ghana since 1966. The defendants were arrested in the capital Accra in 2021 with locally manufactured weapons. Three other people, including members of the police and military, were acquitted. It is not known whether the death penalty will actually be carried out. The last time the death penalty was carried out in Ghana was in 1992. The defence lawyers announced that they would appeal the verdict. On 25.07.23, lawmakers voted to abolish the death penalty for ordinary crimes, replacing it with a life sentence (cf. BN of 31.07.23).⁶

Guinea

Further crackdown on the media and journalists

Since 03.01.24, the news site Mosaïque Guinée in Guinea has been inaccessible from within Guinea. No official reason for blocking the website has been given. On 17.01.24, the regulatory authority HAC suspended the news website Dépêche Guinée for nine months and its senior employee Abdoul Latif Diallo for six months. Diallo had written an article about suspected embezzlement, an allegation about which the Minister of Economy and Finance and the Governor of the Central Bank had complained.

According to media reports and a statement issued by the American NGO Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the media union Social Protection Platform -The Gambia (Syndicat des professionnels de la presse de Guinée (SPPG)) organised a protest against censorship on 18.01.2014. Nine journalists covering the protest were briefly arrested. Although the charges against them were dropped on 19.01.2014, SPPG Secretary General Sékou Jamal

Pendessa was taken into custody, where he remains. Pendessa has been charged with taking part in an unauthorised demonstration and publishing data that could disrupt public order. Other trade unions showed solidarity with SPPG, announcing that they would organise a general strike if Pendessa is not released.

The UN had already expressed concern about the increasing restrictions on freedom of the press and freedom of expression (cf. BN of 08.01.24). In addition to the CPJ, the American Deputy Assistant Secretary for West Africa, Michael Heath, has now also urged the Guinean authorities to take measures to restore freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

Heath also expressed concern about the slowdown in the transition process, which was supposed to be completed by 01.01.20. The National Front for the Defence of the Constitution (Front national de défense de la Constitution (FNDC)), a civil society and party political alliance that has been dissolved, has been trying to exert pressure on the ruling military junta and has posted a countdown to the planned end of the transition phase on its website since 29.01.24.⁷

India

Growing Hindu nationalism in the run-up to nationwide elections

On 31.01.2014, a local court ruled that Hindu worshippers could pray in the basement of the 17th century Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh and ordered the authorities to make proper arrangements for worshippers within a week. On 01.02.24, families of Hindu priests used the mosque to hold ceremonies for the very first time. The Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi is one of several Muslim places of worship that right-wing Hindu groups, backed by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have sought for decades to reclaim. On 02.02.24, the Allahabad High Court initially dismissed the appeal lodged by the organisation managing the affairs of the mosque. In addition, the website of Hindutva Watch, an independent platform based in the US that documents hate crimes against religious minorities in India, is no longer accessible just two months before the national elections are due to be held in India. The founder of the platform had previously been warned by the Indian authorities that the website would be blocked. The website of India Hate Lab, an initiative to document hate speech in India, is no longer accessible in India either.⁸

Iran

Report on death of a student in custody

A news portal that reports on the province of Sistan and Baluchestan has announced that a 19-year-old student died in Zahedan (provincial capital) three days after being arrested by security forces. The student was reportedly arrested on 30.01.24 for his online activities and support for the protests in Zahedan. It is not possible to independently verify reports by a human rights organisation that he had been tortured in prison.

Anti-government rallies take place time and again in Zahedan and other cities in the region on Fridays, triggered by the crackdown on protestors by law enforcement officers in October 2022 (cf. BN of 10.10.22 and 09.10.23).⁹

Shops strike in Kurdish cities in response to execution of prisoners

According to media reports, shops in several cities in Kordestan province, inter alia in Sanandaj and Saqqez, shut down on 31.01.24. Several shops, businesses and human rights groups had called for the strike in response to the execution of four Kurdish prisoners on 29.01.24 (cf. BN of 29.01.24).

Citing human rights organisations, it was reported on 01.02.24 that around 71 death sentences had already been carried out in Iranian prisons since the beginning of 2024, 28 of them between 21.01.24 and 31.01.24 alone. At least six people have allegedly been imprisoned for politically motivated reasons and 22 people have been executed for drug-related offences and homicide during this period.

According to estimates undertaken by several different sources, the number of executions carried out in 2023 is between 791 and 834, with at least 25 of the persons executed being women and two being minors. This represents an increase of more than 33 percent year-on-year.¹⁰

Father kills his own son for feminine behaviour

According to media reports issued on 31.01.24, a man was arrested for killing his 17-year-old son in Tabriz (East Azerbaijan). The father handed himself in to the police and admitted to killing his son because of his feminine behaviour, citing his family's disgrace as the motive. These type of crimes are often not prosecuted or are only punished as minor offences. A similar case of violence by family members was reported in 2021, when a man from Ahvaz (Khuzestan province) was killed by family members because of his sexual orientation.¹¹

Iraq

Freedom of the press in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

On 01.02.24, the US consulate in Erbil issued a press release criticising the backsliding of freedom of the press in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. A spokesperson for the Kurdish regional government has rejected the accusations. According to a Kurdish NGO, there has been a 42 percent drop in violations against journalists compared to the previous year, but obstruction of journalism has increased. As a result, freedom of the press and freedom of expression are not guaranteed in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.¹²

Airstrikes on Shia militia

On 03.02.24, the US carried out several airstrikes in the province of al-Anbar. According to the Iraqi government, at least 16 people were killed and a further 25 were injured. In addition to Shia militia fighters, the casualties are said to also include civilians.

According to the US, the airstrikes on militias in Iraq that are loyal to Iran were carried out in retaliation for the drone attack on US units in Jordan on 28.01.24.

In a separate incident that occurred on 04.02.2014, a senior official of the Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Naji al-Kaabi, was assassinated in Maysan province. According to reports, unidentified individuals riding a motorcycle ambushed al-Kaabi, who died at the scene. It is not yet clear who is responsible for the attack.

Targeted killings in drive-by shootings are frequently used by militias in Iraq to eliminate people belonging to unwanted groups.¹³

Lebanon

Situation in southern Lebanon and northern Israel

Hezbollah and the Israeli army continue to engage in regular exchanges of fire

It is becoming increasingly possible to quantify some of the damage caused by the ongoing exchanges of fire. On the Lebanese side, for example, around 2,000 hectares of forest and agricultural land have reportedly been burnt, around three times the amount contaminated with explosives. Around 55,000 olive trees that were between 25 and 250 years old have reportedly been destroyed. Estimates say this has reduced the production of Lebanese olive oil by around 20 percent. The tobacco industry has also been particularly hard hit, as more than half of the land used to grow tobacco is currently unusable. The corresponding tobacco-growing areas are concentrated in the region a few kilometres north of the border. On the Israeli side, economic life along the border has also ground to a halt, with at least 512 buildings damaged by Hezbollah fire to date.

Hezbollah has repeatedly announced that it would abide by a ceasefire in the Gaza war. Israel, on the other hand, is seeking a ceasefire that would allow the civilian population to return to the region.¹⁴

Dispute over taxation of petroleum companies

The adoption of the new budget law for 2024 has introduced a tax for petroleum companies that benefitted from the heavily subsidised exchange rate for petroleum products in 2020 and 2021. However, the wording is ambiguous and the exact interpretation is unclear. This has led to considerable protests among oil companies which announced on 31.01.24 that they would cease supplying petrol stations. However, according to a press release issued by the responsible interest group on 04.02.24, this threat has not been carried out, at least not for the time being. Nevertheless, it is feared that there could be a return to long queues and fuel shortages.¹⁵

Mali

Civilians killed

According to various media reports, members of the paramilitary Russian Wagner Group, together with Malian soldiers, executed at least 25 people in the village of Welingara (Koulikoro region) on 26.01.24. Welingara is located in south-west Mali near the border with Mauritania. The head of the UN Human Rights Division said he was horrified by the reports from Welingara. The UN is calling for a comprehensive and impartial investigation. So far, investigations launched against the Malian military have not produced any results.

At least 30 civilians are said to have been killed in another attack on two villages in the Mopti region. Unidentified gunmen are said to have attacked the villages of Ogota and Oimbe. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the attack.¹⁶

Military junta suspends peace agreement

The Malian military junta announced on 25.01.24 that it has ended the peace agreement concluded in 2015. The peace agreement had been concluded between the then government and various armed groups, including Tuareg rebels. A ceasefire had been in place since it was agreed that Mali would become autonomous in the north. However, the security situation did not improve. By the end of 2022, several armed groups from the north of the country had already suspended the peace agreement, accusing the government of not upholding its commitments (cf. BN of 02.01.23). In August 2023, the Malian junta announced that the autonomy arrangement for Mali's north agreed in 2015 would no longer apply, prompting the Tuareg rebels to rearm. The region has been embroiled in fighting ever since (cf. BN of 20.11.23).¹⁷

Nigeria

Southeast: deaths in clashes between cult groups

On 31.01.24, the Ebonyi State police confirmed that three people had been killed in a clash that erupted between members of rival cult groups in a locality in Ezza North Local Government Area (LGA). According to media reports, two persons have been arrested in connection with the incident. The cause of the clash was said to be the battle for supremacy between the cult groups in the locality. On 14.01.24, members of a cult group allegedly killed three people in Benin City, the capital of Edo State. In December 2023, more than 30 people were reportedly killed in clashes that erupted between members of the Black Axe and Supreme Eiyé cult groups in Edo State. Common features of Nigerian cult groups include profit-seeking, readiness to use violence, initiation rites and a hierarchical organisational structure. Terms denoting criminal cults are not used consistently in media reports and accounts. Because of the history of some groups as student fraternities, "cults" (cult groups) and "confraternities" (brotherhoods) are among the common terms used. In reporting, the term "cults" is sometimes understood so broadly that numerous nonpublicly active organisations with a high need for loyalty can be subsumed under it. The Nigerian "Secret Cult and Similar Activities Prohibition Act, 2012" contains a blacklist of dozens of banned cult groups. In addition, several states have laws banning cults and cult activities. Some regions have "anti-cultism" police units (cf. BN of 14.08.23).¹⁸

Calls for the declaration of a state of emergency

A coalition of 48 civil society organisations called on President Bola Tinubu to declare a state of emergency at a press conference held in Abuja on 29.01.24, in light of the current security situation in the country. According to the civil society groups, around 2,400 people were killed in attacks by violent actors between May 2023 and January 2024 and around 1,900 people were abducted. At least 230 kidnappings also took place in the first two weeks of January 2024. A spokesperson for the coalition expressed concern about the insecurity in the country and called on the government to take measures to improve the security situation and curb attacks by violent groups.¹⁹

Benue State: fatalities caused by suspected herdsmen attacks

Armed actors attacked a village in Agatu Local Government Area (LGA) in Benue State on 31.01.24, killing at least 15 people. According to media reports, several people are missing. A number of people are also said to have been displaced from their homes. The reports said that the invaders were believed to be armed herdsmen.

Local authorities suspect a connection with smouldering conflicts over land, grazing and water rights between farming communities and nomadic people who live mainly from livestock farming. Ethnic and religious rivalries, also and especially in the central region where the violence occurred, are contributing to the complexity of the situation (cf. BN of 13.03.23, 24.04.23 and 23.10.23). It was reported that localities in the Agatu LGA had already been attacked several times in January 2024. On 18.01.24 and 27.01.24, armed invaders attacked three villages in Agatu LGA, killing at least 13 people. According to media reports, those killed included a security guard and military personnel.²⁰

Southwest: schoolchildren abducted, traditional rulers murdered

The abduction of several schoolchildren, several teachers and a school bus driver near the town of Emure in the southwestern state of Ekiti has caused a huge media stir across the country. Reports vary on the number of children and teachers abducted on 29.01.24. According to media reports published on 04.02.24, a total of nine people were abducted. Of these, eight reportedly regained their freedom on 04.02.24. The ninth person, the driver of the school bus, was said to have died in captivity. It is reportedly not yet known whether a ransom was paid.

According to media reports, unknown individuals killed two prominent traditional rulers in the same state on 29.01.24. Traditional rulers are still very influential in large parts of Nigeria (cf. BN of 23.08.23).

Media reports state that on 01.02.24, unknown persons killed another traditional ruler, the Olukoro of Koro, in Kwara State, which directly borders Ekiti State to the north. The reports said that his wife and another person close to him were then abducted.²¹

North Macedonia

Ethnic Albanian prime minister leads government until parliamentary elections

According to recent media reports, on 28.01.24, the North Macedonian parliament for the first time elected an ethnic Albanian, Talat Xhaferi, the previous speaker of parliament, as caretaker prime minister. According to North Macedonian analysts and politicians, this is an "historic moment" for the country. Xhaferi, who is a member of the largest ethnic Albanian party, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), was thus confirmed as the leader of an interim government that will govern the country until the parliamentary elections are held on 08.05.24, in accordance with the arrangement negotiated as part of the coalition agreement with the Social Democratic League of Macedonia (SDSM). The election of an Albanian to head the 100-day caretaker government that is required by law was the DUI's main condition for the formation of the coalition with the SDSM in 2020. In the first parliamentary session, the newly elected Prime Minister stated that the caretaker government's main task was to prepare and hold free, fair and democratic elections in accordance with the highest European standards.²²

Pakistan

ISIS attack in Balochistan

On 30.01.24, at least four people were killed and six injured in the city of Sawai in the province of Balochistan in an explosives attack claimed by the ISIS offshoot in the region shortly after a rally organised by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party.²³

Fighting in Balochistan

At least four security personnel and six insurgents were killed in Balochistan province on the night of 30.01.24. According to an official spokesperson, Balochistan Liberation Army fighters attacked military installations in the city of Mach with guns and rockets.

A report issued by the broadcaster Geo News on 02.02.24 states that 24 militants were killed in three days of subsequent military operations, adding that four security personnel were also killed in the operations.²⁴

Attack on police station in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

On the night of 05.02.24, dozens of armed militants attacked a police station in the Dera Ismail Khan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. According to the authorities, at least 10 police officers were killed and several were injured in a firefight that lasted several hours. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack.²⁵

Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel

Current developments / humanitarian situation

According to media reports, Israeli attacks have continued in large parts of the Gaza Strip, resulting in further harm to people and damage to infrastructure.

Palestinian militias carried out two rocket attacks on southern Israel on 01.02.24. There were no reports of casualties. Further fighting was reported in the northern and central as well as in the southern Gaza Strip. Intense fighting continued in and around the southern city of Khan Younis, including near the Nasser and Al Amal hospitals. According to Israeli reports, a training centre belonging to the militant Islamist Hamas organisation was stormed and further members of the organisation were killed. A total of 17 out of 24 Hamas battalions have reportedly now been neutralised. According to information provided by the Hamas-controlled Palestinian Health Authority on 04.02.24, at least 127 people were killed and 178 others injured within 24 hours, including both civilians and Hamas fighters. The information provided by the parties to the conflict cannot be independently confirmed.

Violent clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinian militias also continued in the West Bank.

The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is described as increasingly deteriorating. According to the WFP, one in four households in the Gaza Strip (around 500,000 people) is facing extreme hunger. According to reports, more Palestinians have sought refuge in the southern border city of Rafah, which, with over one million people, is already considered to be overcrowded. The ongoing fighting and evacuation orders are reportedly resulting in internally displaced people leaving their shelters to seek refuge again.

Media reports published on 02.02.24 say that according to a high-ranking Hamas member, negotiations are being conducted that envisage longer ceasefires in Gaza and a gradual exchange of Hamas hostages for Palestinians imprisoned in Israel.²⁶

Russian Federation

Parliament votes in favour of expropriation of war opponents

The Russian lower house of parliament (State Duma) has approved a law to confiscate the property of opponents of the war and so-called enemies of the state. The bill was also passed unanimously in the third reading on 31.01.24. The pending approval by the second chamber of parliament, the Federation Council, is considered to be as much of a formality as the entry into force of the law with President Putin's signature. The Russian government says that the previously much-debated law is intended to criminalise alleged discrediting of the army, public calls for extremism and calls for sanctions against Russia or aiding and abetting their implementation. Anyone who, for example, supports either international organisations of which Russia is not a member or foreign authorities must also expect to be stripped of their property and honorary titles in future. With the new law, the Russian government intends to crack down in particular on regime critics who have emigrated. According to parliamentary speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, the law represents an "absolute majority who think it is necessary to punish traitors" who "sling mud at our country and our soldiers and officers taking part in the special military operation from abroad". This refers to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, against which no public criticism is tolerated in Russia.²⁷

Woman with rainbow-coloured earrings sentenced to several days in jail

A young woman has been jailed for five days for wearing rainbow-coloured earrings in a café. A court in the city of Nizhny Novgorod, east of Moscow, based the jail sentence handed down on 01.02.24 on the display of "extremist symbolism", the aid organisation Egida reported, citing a lawyer representing the woman. Independent Russian media also reported the conviction. It was the first known case of a prison sentence for rainbow symbolism since Russia categorised the LGBTIQ community as "extremist" in November 2023 amid international protest, further restricting the rights of lesbian, gay and queer people.²⁸

Arrests at demonstration

On 03.02.24, several people were detained at a rally by wives and partners of Russian soldiers in Moscow. Twenty seven people, who were removed from Manege Square in front of the Kremlin, were reportedly transferred to the nearest police station. According to the report, only men were among those detained. As a video journalist from the AFP news agency reported, they were journalists, including foreign representatives. Those arrested were later

released. The protest action was called for by the "Putj domoi" (Way Home) movement, which was initiated by the wives and partners of Russians mobilised for military service. To mark the 500th day since the partial mobilisation on 21.09.22 for the war against Ukraine ordered by President Putin, the relatives laid flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Kremlin wall. With this peaceful protest, they want to force the return of their men from the front and the abandonment of further mobilisation.

These protests by relatives of soldiers fighting in Ukraine have been taking place in Moscow and other Russian cities for several weeks and have so far generally involved around 30 to 100 demonstrating women. With their protest, the women want to show those Russians who are untouched by the Ukraine conflict in their everyday lives that there is another part of society that is constantly suffering and wants peace. Up to now, there none of these women have been arrested by the security forces, who otherwise immediately suppress any opposition activity.²⁹

Senegal

Protests and clashes following the postponement of the presidential election; arrests, tv station suspended

Three weeks before the presidential election and only a few hours before the official opening of the election campaign, President Macky Sall announced in a speech held on 03.02.24 that the election would be postponed indefinitely for the time being. The move was justified by disputes over the list of presidential candidates who are eligible for election. Sall reaffirmed that he would not run for a third term in office. He also promised to initiate an open dialogue to achieve the conditions for free, transparent and inclusive elections in a peaceful and reconciled Senegal. The postponement of the presidential election, the first in the country's history, has been described as an "institutional coup" in opposition circles. It further exacerbates the political crisis within the country. Political tensions in the country have only recently risen again. The background to this was the disqualification of presidential candidates, including opposition leaders Ousmane Sonko and Karim Wade (cf. BN of 22.01.24). Wade's party, the former ruling Senegalese Democratic Party (Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS)), requested a postponement of the election after Wade's disqualification.

Sections of the opposition reject the election postponement. They called for protests and at the same time announced that they would adhere to launching the election campaign on 04.02.24. Numerous people responded to the call. According to agency and media reports, protests and clashes occurred in parts of the capital Dakar and in the major city of Thiès on 04.02.24. During initial protests, tear gas was reportedly used to disperse the crowds, who reacted by throwing stones. The reports said that some demonstrators also set up roadblocks with burning tyres. Several demonstrators were said to have been arrested, including the presidential candidate Anta Babacar Ngom and the former Prime Minister Mimi Touré, who was not allowed to run for election. Supporters and employees of the candidate Daouda Ndiay were reportedly arrested too and Ndiay himself was allegedly mistreated by the police. Deutsche Welle was the only media outlet to report on Ndiay's arrest.

Reports said that the private television station Walfadjri had again had its signal suspended due to its live coverage of the protests (cf. BN of 12.06.23). Two journalists from other media companies who wanted to report on the protests had also been temporarily detained for unknown reasons.

Further protests have already been announced for 05.02.24.³⁰

Sonko's substitute candidate remains in custody

According to the "Diomaye Président" coalition, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, the officially authorised substitute candidate for opposition leader Ousmane Sonko, remains in custody even after several months. A further application by Faye for provisional release had been rejected. The secretary general of the banned Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics, and Fraternity party (Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité (PASTEF)) was charged with several criminal offences because he had criticised politically motivated prosecution and the instrumentalisation of the judiciary against PASTEF party leader Sonko in an online post (cf. BN of 17.04.23 (cf. BN of 17.04.23)).³¹

CPJ: several journalists detained for their work; attack on another journalist

According to the US organisation Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a total of five journalists were imprisoned for their work as of 01.12.23. According to CPJ, the figures also reflect the crackdown on the media in the country.

Senegal has only appeared on its annual list of imprisoned journalists worldwide twice, with one journalist imprisoned in 2008 and 2022, respectively. In addition, the Coordination of Press Associations (CAP) has condemned threats, intimidation and verbal attacks against the journalist and editor-in-chief of the online newspaper Pressafrik by activists from political parties. The organisation says that journalists should not be denigrated and ridiculed for their work and for expressing their opinions. CAP recently reported on death threats and verbal attacks against a journalist (cf. BN of 15.01.24).³²

Conviction in a torture case

According to a media report, a court has sentenced a warden from the prison in Ziguinchor who was recently charged with torture and ill-treatment of a minor inmate to two years in prison (cf. BN of 22.01.24).³³

Sierra Leone

Death of several girls after female genital mutilation

According to a media report, three girls aged between 12 and 17 died in the North Western Province as a result of female genital mutilation (FGM). The parents and those who had performed the procedure were reportedly taken into police custody. FGM is not enshrined as a criminal offence in national law and is widespread. According to a national survey conducted in 2019, 83% of girls and women between the ages of 15 and 49 have undergone FGM. FGM is seen as a rite of passage into womanhood and is carried out by so-called "soweis", high-ranking members of the influential Bondo Society – a secret society for women.³⁴

South Sudan

More deaths in intercommunal clashes

According to reports, at least 37 people were killed and dozens injured, including women and children, following renewed clashes in the border region of Abyei on 31.01.24 und 01.02.24. The clashes occurred in Rum-Ameer, Alal and Mijak, among other places, and involved an armed youth group operating in Warrap State and followers of spiritual leader Gai Machiek operating in Unity State. Officials also hold Machiek responsible for the violent clashes that erupted on 27.01.24 (cf. BN of 29.01.24). The point of contention is access to grazing land and water points for cattle herders in already populated areas in the border region between Sudan and South Sudan.³⁵

Sudan

General situation

According to the WFP, almost five million people are experiencing emergency levels of hunger, and a total of 18 million people are facing acute hunger. The WFP says there are already reports of famine-related deaths and explains that, although food aid is available to the WFP, it is not reaching its destinations due to the lack of access for humanitarian aid that is being affected by a lack of security, blockades and other obstacles. It adds that the conflict centres with the highest need for food aid are currently in the regions of Khartoum, Darfur, Kordofan and Gezira.

Meanwhile, the fighting continues. According to reports, four people were killed and others injured in El Fasher (North Darfur) on 01.02.24.³⁶

Syria

Damascus: Israeli airstrike

Several people were wounded and killed in a suspected Israeli airstrike carried out on targets near the Syrian capital Damascus on 29.01.24.

According to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a farm on which members of Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed groups were allegedly staying was attacked. At least seven people were

reportedly killed, including four Syrian nationals. According to other media, the attack took place in the Damascus suburb of Sayyida Zaynab.³⁷

US airstrikes

One week after the attack on a US base in Jordan, in which three members of the US military were killed (cf. BN of 29.01.24), the US military attacked dozens of targets in Syria and Iraq from the air in retaliatory strikes.

A total of more than 85 targets at seven locations belonging to al-Quds forces or other Iranian-backed groups were reportedly hit. According to the US military, four of these locations were in Syria. According to the SOHR, 23 militia members were killed in the attacks. US President Joe Biden has announced further military measures.³⁸

Togo

Health insurance for the entire population

In January 2024, the Togolese government introduced universal health insurance (L'Assurance Maladie Universelle, AMU) for the entire Togolese population, which was previously reserved for civil servants and other individual professional groups. This social reform was promised by President Faure Gnassingbé during the last presidential elections in February 2020. The implementation of the AMU is managed jointly by the National Health Insurance Institute (Institut National d'Assurance Maladie (INAM)) and the National Social Security Fund (Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale (CNSS)). As of 2012, only 8 percent of the population had health insurance. On 15.01.24, a delegation of ministers launched a national campaign to raise public awareness of universal health coverage in the Centrale, Kara and Savanes regions.³⁹

Türkiye

Arrests following attack on church

According to the Ministry of Interior, security forces arrested a total of 34 foreign nationals over their suspected links with ISIS and other terrorist organisations on 03.02.24.

The detainees include people who were wanted with an Interpol red notice. The suspects were detained in anti-terror operations that were carried out simultaneously in the provinces of Istanbul, Kocaeli, Yalova, Kayseri, Bursa, Duzce and Yozgat. Firearms, money in foreign currency and digital material were also seized during the operations. The operation took place after two armed men carried out an attack at the Santa Maria Church in the Sariyer district of Istanbul on 28.01.24 (cf. BN of 29.01.24). ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attack.⁴⁰

Ukraine

Civilian war casualties; prisoner exchange; financial aid

According to Russian and local reports, 28 people died on 03.02.24 when a bakery in the city of Lysychansk in the largely occupied Luhansk Oblast was shelled by the Ukrainians. According to Ukrainian media reports, the bakery was used to supply Russian occupiers and local supporters. No statement has been issued by the Ukrainian government. The death of three people as a result of Ukrainian missile fire had already been reported from the occupied capital of the Donetsk region on 29.01.24. According to a report issued by the de facto authorities on 31.01.24, two people were killed in a Ukrainian drone attack on another occupied part of the Donetsk region.

According to Ukrainian sources, two people died in the capital Kiev on the night of 30.01.24 as a result of Russian attacks. The deaths of two foreign humanitarian aid workers were confirmed on 02.02.24. They were killed in a Russian attack on Beryslav (Kherson Oblast).

Following the crash of a transport plane which, according to Russian reports, was carrying 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war intended for an exchange (cf. BN of 29.01.24), the Russian side has so far provided no evidence to back up this claim. Ukraine did not rule out the possibility that there may have been prisoners of war on board. On 31.01.24, a successful exchange of around 200 prisoners of war on each side was then reported, citing information from both sides. This is said to be the 50th prisoner exchange in total.

The EU heads of state and government have agreed on a financial aid package for Ukraine over the next four years in the form of grants totalling EUR 17 billion and loans of EUR 33 billion. Without the financial aid, Ukraine would run out of money by March 2024, according to reports citing diplomatic sources.⁴¹

Development of the war

Ukraine lacks artillery ammunition. According to media reports, Defence Minister Rustem Umerov informed his counterparts in partner countries that the Russian armed forces are currently able to fire three times more shells per day along the 1,500 km front than his troops. He said the shortage of ammunition was increasing daily. It is also reported that the EU estimates that Ukraine needs 200,000 155 mm calibre shells per month. At the same time, Estonian estimates have reportedly shown that the Russian Federation will have almost twice as many shells available in the future, also with the help of North Korea.

In the embattled city of Avdiivka (Donetsk Oblast; cf. BN of 16.10.23, 30.10.23 and 11.12.23), some Russian troops are said to have succeeded in gaining access to a residential neighbourhood via a 1.2 km long sewer tunnel and entrenching themselves there, it was reported on 30.01.24.⁴²

Disagreements between political and military leadership

For some time there have been reports of disagreements between President Volodymyr Zelensky and the armed forces commander-in-chief, Valery Zaluzhny. It has now been reported that Zelensky attempted to persuade Zaluzhny to resign, but then refrained from doing so. Zaluzhny refused to step down. In addition, Zelensky's favoured successor, Oleksandr Syrsky, commander of the Ukrainian ground forces, had reportedly declined an offer to replace Valery Zaluzhny. The chief of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, Kyrylo Budanov, is said to be under discussion for the position of commander-in-chief. High-ranking military officers as well as the US and the United Kingdom have reportedly spoken out against Zaluzhny's dismissal. According to reports, Zaluzhny himself enjoys great popularity among the population. He is said to have denied any speculation that he has political ambitions.⁴³

Yemen

Situation in the Red Sea

The situation in the Red Sea remains, by and large, unchanged. Most recently, the US-led coalition carried out dozens of attacks against targets in the areas controlled by the Houthis on 04.04.24. Fighter jets and warships were deployed. According to the US, 36 targets were hit, while a Houthi spokesperson said 48 targets had been hit in seven governorates. The governorates of Amanat al-Asimah (the capital district, which includes the capital Sanaa), Sanaa (the area surrounding the capital not including Sanaa city) and Taizz were the worst affected. Hodeida, Hajja, al-Bayda and Saada are also said to have been affected. Neither the US-led coalition nor the Houthis have reported any casualties or fatalities to date.⁴⁴

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