



# Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

12 February 2024

## Afghanistan

### Security situation

According to its own sources, the Afghanistan Freedom Front and the National Resistance Front killed a total of five Taliban insurgents in the provinces of Parwan and Baghlan on 11.02.24 and 12.02.24.<sup>1</sup>

### Persecution

The Taliban detained 10 civilians who were playing the drums and dancing in Takhar province on 05.02.24.

According to reports, the Taliban shot and killed a woman in Balkh province on 06.02.24. The background to the shooting is unclear.

On 08.02.24, it was reported that the Taliban shot dead a former soldier in Paktya province after arresting him three days earlier. According to reports, the Taliban arrested a former policeman in Maidan Wardak province on the same day. In Faryab province, a former soldier was shot dead by unidentified gunmen on 10.02.2014.

According to reports, the Taliban arrested four people in Panjshir province on 09.02.24 on charges of collaborating with the armed opposition.

On 08.02.24, the Taliban reportedly conducted house searches in the Khair Khana neighbourhood of Kabul.

On 10.02.24, the Taliban arrested a journalist from the Pajhwok news agency in Samangan province.<sup>2</sup>

### Humanitarian situation

Deportations of Afghan nationals from Iran and Pakistan continue. According to a report issued on 08.02.24, almost 2,000 people arrived in Afghanistan in a single day, the majority of them from Iran. According to information provided by Iranian sources on 10.02.24, twenty thousand Afghan nationals had been expelled within the space of 15 days.

International organisations are warning of the increasingly severe effects of the ongoing drought. After the province of Ghazni was hit by a cold snap, a man froze to death on 06.02.24.<sup>3</sup>

## Burkina Faso

### East: dozens killed in attack on village

On 07.02.24, armed gunmen attacked a village in the commune of Tigba in eastern Burkina Faso, killing around 50 people. According to media reports, they also destroyed food supplies and kidnapped several people. Other people were displaced to neighbouring villages. Several residents of the village joined the paramilitary group Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie (VDP)) to defend themselves from further attacks. Despite ongoing military operations, the region in the east of the country remains under the control of jihadist groups.<sup>4</sup>

## **Cameroon**

### **Southwest Region: civilians killed in attack**

According to media reports, separatists carried out an armed attack in the evening hours of 29.01.24 in Buea, the capital of the anglophone Southwest Region, in which at least one person was killed and several others were wounded. The target of the attack was the area around the large market near the Molyko Stadium, where some shops were still open. The attack was apparently directed against people who failed to observe the order issued by the separatists to stay at home every Monday. The aim of the so-called ghost towns is to bring economic activities to a halt. Anyone who refuses to do so runs the risk of being attacked, kidnapped or shot.<sup>5</sup>

## **Colombia**

### **Peace talks with armed groups: Segunda Marquetalia, ELN**

According to a joint declaration issued on 09.02.24, the government and the FARC dissident group Segunda Marquetalia have begun peace talks. So-called peace zones are to be discussed, among other things. The Segunda Marquetalia is particularly active in the border region with Venezuela and, according to government figures, currently has almost 1,700 members, including over 1,000 fighters.

Almost simultaneously on 06.02.24, the extension of the ceasefire between the ELN (National Liberation Army) guerrilla group and the government, which is due to last until August 2024, came into force. The High Commissioner for Peace had already announced a scheduled extension of this ceasefire at the end of January 2024 (cf. BN of 29.01.24). However, the negotiations and the corresponding joint declaration were recently delayed. For the extension period, the two parties recently negotiated in Cuba that the ELN would stop abductions to extort ransom money for the time being. As a next step, both parties have also proposed the creation of a fund to continue financing the peace process.<sup>6</sup>

## **Egypt**

### **New law to extend military powers**

The Law on Securing and Protecting the State's Public and Vital Facilities passed by parliament on 28.01.24 provides for the extension of the military's powers to areas of internal security and has been criticised by a local human rights organisation as it could be used to suppress public protests.

The new law is an amendment to Law No. 136 dating back to 2014, which grants the military powers to perform police duties to protect public and important state facilities, such as roads, power plants, gas pipelines and railroads. In addition to the powers of the armed forces to arrest civilians and refer them to military courts provided for in the previous version, a further article was added in the newly adopted law. The new provision authorises the military to face acts and transgressions that undermine the work of the state's public facilities, or the services it provides, especially crimes that harm society's basic needs of goods and commodities. According to the human rights organisation, the new law uses vague wording that ultimately gives discretion to the President, or whomever he delegates, to identify what constitutes basic societal needs, therefore giving him unrestrained powers to determine the military's jurisdiction to arrest civilians and refer them to military courts.<sup>7</sup>

## **El Salvador**

### **Parliamentary and presidential elections: Bukele confirmed in office**

On 09.01.24, the Supreme Electoral Council confirmed that President Nayib Bukele had won the presidential election held on 04.01.24, winning over 80 percent of the vote. A partial manual recount was recently carried out due to technical problems. The official announcement of the distribution of seats in parliament, in which Bukele can also hope for a clear majority for his New Ideas (Nuevas Ideas) party, is still pending. Bukele himself had already declared himself the winner after just a small percentage of the votes had been counted. His re-election was only made possible by the constitutional court, which is loyal to the government, allowing a president to stand again even though the constitution actually prohibits re-election. In this context, a man with dual Salvadoran-Canadian

citizenship was also arrested on election day for disorderly behaviour because he had read the constitution aloud at a polling station in protest against Bukele's renewed candidacy. According to the man's lawyer, he was released on 07.01.24. Bukele is extremely popular with large sections of the population due to his hard-handed security policy against gang violence, although human rights organisations have repeatedly criticised the crackdown measures used. On 09.01.24, the state of emergency was once again extended until 11.03.24, and another mass trial to prosecute nearly 500 gang members began on 08.01.24. Also on 09.01.24, Reporters Without Borders and other organisations published a statement on the considerable decline in press freedom under Bukele and in this context also pointed out the obstacles journalists face with regard to independent election reporting.<sup>8</sup>

## **Georgia**

### **Parliament elects new Prime Minister**

Irakli Kobakhidze has taken office as Prime Minister of Georgia. The parliament in Tbilisi voted 84 to 10 to approve the leader of the ruling Georgian Dream party on 08.02.24. Critics accuse Kobakhidze of wanting to deepen the country's ties with Russia. Kobakhidze, on the other hand, believes that European countries and the US are trying to drag Georgia into Russia's war against Ukraine. This is why Georgia does not support the West's sanctions against Russia.

Former prime minister Irakli Garibashvili resigned on 29.01.24 to become the new leader of the ruling Georgian Dream party in the run-up to the parliamentary elections due to be held in October 2024.

The two politicians will therefore swap offices. Kobakhidze is politically close to his predecessor Garibashvili. Both share a comparatively reluctant stance vis-a-vis the country's possible accession to the EU and NATO and are pursuing a more partnership-based approach with Russia. This is also happening against the backdrop of the two regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are de facto separated from Georgia and have declared their independence with Russian support.<sup>9</sup>

## **India**

### **Uttarakhand: people killed in escalating protests following demolition of Muslim buildings**

On 08.02.24, at least five people were killed and dozens were injured during protests against the demolition of a mosque and a Muslim school in Haldwani in the northern state of Uttarakhand. The local city administration had ordered the buildings to be demolished on the grounds that they had been erected without authorisation. This is the latest incident in a series of government-ordered demolitions of Muslim buildings. After the protests escalated with protestors throwing stones, burning cars and encircling a police station, shoot-to-kill orders were issued, additional security forces were deployed, a curfew was imposed on the district, internet services were suspended, schools were closed and large gatherings were banned.<sup>10</sup>

## **Iran**

### **Press freedom: raid on the editorial office of media company**

According to media reports, security forces carried out a raid on the editorial office of a media outlet for economic news in Tehran on 05.02.24. Journalists working there were detained on the premises for several hours and their mobile phones were confiscated. According to family members of the journalists affected, the authorities have given no official explanation for the measures so far.<sup>11</sup>

### **Filmmaker in custody handed additional prison sentence**

According to media reports, a dissident filmmaker has been handed an additional prison sentence of around five years. The man who is incarcerated in Tehran's Evin prison announced via a phone call that he had been sentenced for his protest actions and allegations of vandalism within the detention centre. The prisoner was formerly a journalist with a daily newspaper considered to be conservative. He has been serving a multi-year prison sentence since 2019 because he and other people had publicly called for the resignation of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in 2018.<sup>12</sup>

### **Official measures against teaching staff and students**

According to media reports, Iranian authorities are continuing to exert pressure on teaching staff and students to punish them for their support of the nationwide protests in 2022 and to prevent further protest movements. According to the report, teachers have been suspended or called in for questioning in particular due to accusations they supported students and pupils in anti-government protests held in 2022. According to a report published by the Iranian Teachers' Union in June 2023, more than 250 teachers and union activists were affected by reprisals, such as temporary arrests and charges, in 2022. It was also reported that at least five students from Tehran had been barred from attending courses without due process. In addition to admission controls and the denial of access to university residential facilities, measures such as summonses by security authorities, temporary suspensions and even the expulsion of students and faculty members from the university have reportedly also taken place. Students began reporting a growing atmosphere of repression at universities in the aftermath of the protest events in 2022 (cf. BN of 27.02.23 and 11.09.23).<sup>13</sup>

## **Iraq**

### **Basra marathon: women barred**

On 07.02.24, the organisers of the marathon in Basra announced that participation in the Basra marathon would be open to men only. This decision was preceded by a directive issued by the provincial governor of Basra, demanding the exclusion of women. Shia clerics had previously strongly criticised the participation of women, citing religious traditions as the reason. Criticism had also been voiced on various social media platforms in the run-up to the event that the marathon would lead to men and women running together, claiming that this contradicts cultural values. The decision to exclude female participants has been condemned by women's rights activists, who criticise the dwindling opportunities women in Iraq have of participating in public life.<sup>14</sup>

### **US attack on Shia militia**

According to a spokesperson of the US military, US armed forces killed a high-ranking commander of Kata'ib Hizbollah (KH) on 07.02.24. The attack was reportedly carried out in response to the numerous attacks by pro-Iranian militias on US troops in the region. According to the US military, there were no indications of collateral damage or civilian casualties. According to media reports, the retaliatory strike involved a precision drone attack on a vehicle in eastern Baghdad. Contrary to the US military's statement, Iraqi militia social media channels report that three people were killed in the attack, one of whom was Abu Baker al-Saidi, a leading KH commander.<sup>15</sup>

## **Lebanon**

### **Situation in southern Lebanon and northern Israel**

Hezbollah and the Israeli army continue to trade fire on a regular basis.

A study, the results of which were presented on 08.02.24, put the economic costs of the conflict in the border region at around USD 1.2 billion to date; this is largely due to damage caused to infrastructure, but markedly also due to the decline in business activity.

On 10.02.24, an airstrike was targeted at several Hamas members and one Hezbollah militant in Jadra, about 60 km north of the border. One Syrian and one Lebanese national were killed and the suspected target, a Palestinian Hamas commander, was wounded. One civilian was killed and nine were wounded in a drone attack on the town of Houla on 11.02.24. Since fighting began in Lebanon, 227 people have been killed, 200 of them fighters.<sup>16</sup>

### **Violent protest**

Protests by retired army personnel against further cuts to their pensions turned violent on 08.02.24 when around 2,000 protestors attempted to prevent a cabinet meeting from taking place. Several ministers were initially prevented from attending, while others managed to avoid the protestors, partly because they kept a low profile. The police used tear gas to disperse the crowds and the cabinet meeting was held after an hour's delay.<sup>17</sup>

## **Nigeria**

### **Katsina State: dozens kidnapped**

Gunmen described as bandits kidnapped around 60 wedding guests in Damari village in Sabuwa Local Government Area (LGA) of Katsina State on 01.02.24 and killed at least three members of the local vigilante group. According to media reports, most of the wedding guests kidnapped, including the bride herself, were women and girls who had attended the wedding ceremony. At least two kidnappers were disguised as security forces. The armed gunmen published a video on 06.02.24 in which they threatened to marry the bride to someone else unless they receive a ransom of NGN 100 million (approx. EUR 65,600 as of 12.02.24) for her release. According to media reports, three of the kidnapped women can be seen in the video begging to be rescued. Kidnappings for ransom have already occurred in the northwestern state of Katsina in the past (cf. BN of 30.10.23, 13.11.23 and 29.01.24).<sup>18</sup>

### **Perception of corruption remains high**

Nigeria has moved up five places in the Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2023 published by the NGO on 30.01.24, Nigeria now ranks 145th out of 180 in the global ranking. It shares this ranking with Liberia, Madagascar and Mozambique. The media report that this ranking is still alarming according to experts. The CPI, arguably the most widely used global corruption ranking in the world, measures how corrupt each country's public sector is perceived to be.<sup>19</sup>

## **Pakistan**

### **Balochistan: ISIS attacks near polling stations**

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections held on 08.02.24, around 30 people were killed and dozens injured in two bomb attacks carried out near polling stations in the province of Balochistan on 07.02.24. The ISIS offshoot that is active in the region has claimed responsibility for both attacks.<sup>20</sup>

### **Balochistan: attacks by the Balochistan Liberation Army**

Insurgents are said to have attacked several government facilities, including a prison, in Balochistan province in a series of well-coordinated attacks at the end of January 2024, according to independent news agencies. Although there were no casualties according to official reports, these sources report at least 50 people were killed as a result of an attack in which insurgents are said to have entered a military facility after an explosion. It was reported that the Balochistan Liberation Army had claimed responsibility for the attack. The insurgents had also taken control of some areas in the region.<sup>21</sup>

### **No governing majority after parliamentary elections; protests and arrests**

According to the Election Commission, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party of imprisoned former prime minister Imran Khan won the most seats in the nationwide elections held on 08.02.24, together with the independent candidates running for them, which won 102 seats. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), which dominates Punjab and is led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, won 73 seats, followed by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which dominates Sindh, with 54 seats. The remaining seats were distributed among a number of smaller parties. For example, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, a regional party from Karachi that is open to a coalition with the PML-N, surprisingly managed to win 17 seats. The PML-N and the PPP led by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari issued a declaration of co-operation in order to bring about political stability. A simple majority of 169 seats is required to form a workable coalition. After the elections, several parties called for protests due to suspected vote rigging. Supporters of the PTI and the Jamaat-e-Islami party protested in Karachi on 10.02.24. After the elections, thousands more protesters took to the streets in several cities because the counting of votes was delayed, which was officially attributed to restrictions imposed on telecommunications on election day for security reasons. There were isolated reports of arrests on the fringes of the protests. The situation has since eased.<sup>22</sup>

## **Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel**

### **Current developments**

According to media reports issued on 07.02.24, fighting continued in the Gaza Strip. Israeli forces said that armed terrorist cells had been eliminated in and around the city of Khan Younis and numerous weapons had been seized. Armed Hamas fighters reportedly also confirmed an attack on Israeli soldiers in the west of the city on 07.02.24. According to information provided by the Hamas-controlled Palestinian Health Authority on 09.02.24, around 107 Palestinians were killed and 174 others were injured within 24 hours during further fighting.

On 09.02.24, Israeli forces launched bombardments on targets in the city of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, which is considered to be overcrowded. According to a report issued by the Palestinian news agency Wafa, more than 100 people were killed and others injured in the Rafah area in a series of Israeli attacks carried out on 12.02.24. Meanwhile, the Israeli armed forces announced that two hostages had been rescued during the night-time operations. The situation in Rafah is described as extremely problematic: the city is overcrowded, with many people living in tents without sufficient food or access to electricity or water.

According to Israeli and Palestinian reports, three Palestinians were killed in the West Bank on 07.02.24. According to the Israeli army, three armed men were involved. One of the individuals had been suspected of being involved in terrorist activities.

According to Israeli media reports issued on 09.02.24, large demonstrations took place in Jerusalem against negotiations with Hamas and in favour of a continuation of the Gaza war. At the same time, demonstrations took place in Tel Aviv in favour of an agreement to release the hostages still being held in the Gaza Strip. On 07.02.24, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected a proposal by the Hamas leadership for a three-stage agreement for a ceasefire, partly due to the conditions imposed.<sup>23</sup>

## **Senegal**

### **Date for presidential election and mandate extension for President Sall; unrest with deaths and arrests**

The presidential election has been postponed until 15.12.24. Originally, a postponement from 25.02.24 to 25.08.24 had been planned. After hours of heated debate, the parliament voted in favour of a corresponding amendment to the law on 05.02.24 with one dissenting vote and opposition largely absent. Numerous opposition MPs from the Yewwi Askan Wi (YAW) coalition and from Taxawou Sénégal stormed the main podium and tried to prevent the vote. They were taken away by the police. The amendment extends the mandate of the outgoing President Macky Sall. He will remain in office until the inauguration of his successor. The police used tear gas to disperse the crowds who wanted to protest against an election postponement before the start of the debate in front of parliament. Several people were reportedly arrested.

While the cancellation of the election at short notice immediately before the start of the election campaign had led to isolated protests and riots (cf. BN of 05.02.24), the expected major protests following the postponement of the election initially failed to materialise. A large police presence was deployed in the capital Dakar and its suburbs. The authorities also blocked mobile internet access from the evening of 04.02.24 to 07.02.24, which made it difficult to organise protests and mobilise. As with the deadly riots in June and July 2023, this was justified by the spread of hateful and subversive messages on social media and the risk of disrupting public order (cf. BN of 05.06.23 and 07.08.23).

Following a call by a coalition of various civil society groups and initiatives, there was a wave of protests and also violence in Dakar and elsewhere on 09.02.24. There are reports of violent clashes between protesters and the police and a number of arrests. The police used tear gas and allegedly rubber bullets against the protesters, who in turn responded by throwing stones, setting tyres on fire and erecting barricades. According to the NGO Reporters Without Borders, police forces in Dakar attacked at least five journalists and arrested one journalist. He later suffered a fainting spell while in police custody. Other journalists reported that tear gas had been used against them. While violent protests continued in Ziguinchor on 10.02.23, the media described the situation in most other cities as calm at the weekend. Organisations and groups have already called for further protests on 13.02.23.

According to current information, three people are reported to have died during the previous protests. On 09.02.24, a student died in Saint-Louis under as yet unexplained circumstances. Some Senegalese media reported that he had died from a bullet. The Ministry of Interior announced an investigation into his death. In Dakar, one demonstrator

reportedly succumbed to a gunshot wound and another died of his injuries in Ziguinchor. There are reports of other protesters in Ziguinchor, some of whom were seriously injured.

A Senegalese media outlet also reported that over 150 demonstrators had been arrested in several cities, most notably Dakar, during the protests against the election postponement that took place on 04.02.24 and 05.02.24. Some people had reportedly been released after a short time, and most had been taken into police custody. The presidential candidate Anta Babacar Ngom, who was arrested on 04.02.24, and the former Prime Minister Mimi Touré, who was not allowed to stand for election, had since been released (cf. BN of 05.02.24). Furthermore, police forces prevented an election campaign event organised by the "Diomaye Président" coalition from taking place on 06.02.24. Three opposition MPs and other people are said to have been temporarily arrested. The coalition supports Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who is officially registered for the presidential election. He is the replacement candidate for Ousmane Sonko. Faye has also been in custody for months (cf. BN of 05.02.24).<sup>24</sup>

## **Somalia**

### **Attacks in Mogadishu**

On 10.02.24, at least five people, including Somali military personnel and soldiers from the UAE and Bahrain, were reportedly killed at a military base. Military representatives from the UAE and Bahrain are in Somalia for training purposes. The attacker is said to have been a Somali soldier who had previously been a member of the al-Shabaab terrorist militia. The militia has already claimed responsibility for the attack.

At least 10 people were killed in several explosions that occurred on 06.02.24. The attack took place at one of Mogadishu's largest markets, the Bakara market. Al-Shabaab is suspected of being behind the attack but has not yet officially claimed responsibility.<sup>25</sup>

### **Attack in southern Somalia**

On 05.02.24, at least seven people, including six Ethiopian nationals, were reportedly killed in Gedo (Jubaland). The attack occurred in Beled Hawo, a town situated on the Somali-Kenyan-Ethiopian border, which is also inhabited by Kenyan and Ethiopian nationals. Authorities suspect al-Shabaab of being behind the attack.<sup>26</sup>

### **Gender-based violence**

Media report three femicides and one attempted femicide within a few days in January/February 2024. The attacks took place in the regions of Mogadishu and Lower Shabelle (including in Qoryooley and Afgooye). The suspected spouses are in custody, but no charges have yet been brought. Gender-based violence is still widespread in Somalia. Due to the inadequate legal framework, protection against assault is not guaranteed across the whole country.<sup>27</sup>

## **South Sudan**

### **Ongoing intercommunal clashes**

Up to 26 people are reported to have been killed in renewed clashes that erupted between local groups in the Bahr al-Ghazal region. The region borders Sudan, the disputed Abyei region and Warrap State, where the most recent attacks took place. Although the clashes of the last few days (cf. BN of 29.01.24 and 05.02.24) are said to be not directly related, access to and control of land and natural resources are the decisive factor in all clashes.<sup>28</sup>

### **Attack on UN aid convoy**

According to reports, an armed group attacked a humanitarian convoy in Macdit (Jonglei State). The peacekeepers of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) who were escorting the convoy were able to repel the attack. It is unclear when the attack occurred.<sup>29</sup>

## **Sudan**

### **General situation**

Since the beginning of February 2024, communications have been partially or completely cut off in large parts of Sudan. The government holds the paramilitary group Rapid Support Forces (RSF) responsible for the network outage as it largely controls the areas in which the providers operate. The RSF has denied the accusation. The network disruption primarily affects the civilian population, who are dependent on information and online payments to be able to buy food, among other things. Communications outages of this kind have occurred frequently during the conflict, including months of power cuts in parts of Darfur and Kordofan, which in some cases are still ongoing.<sup>30</sup>

### **Humanitarian situation**

According to the aid organisation Doctors Without Borders, at least one child dies every two hours in Zamzam Camp (North Darfur), one of the largest camps for internally displaced persons. It says that, in total, up to 13 children per day die due to a lack of food. Aid deliveries and healthcare are inadequate and irregular. UNICEF has also reported that in 2024, more than 700,000 children will be at risk of severe acute malnutrition (SAM) and 3.5 million children will be at risk of acute malnutrition.<sup>31</sup>

## **Syria**

### **Airstrike on US base**

According to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), six of their fighters were killed at a training facility during a drone attack carried out on the US military base at al-Omar in the Deir ez-Zor governorate on 05.02.24.

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an alliance of Iraqi militias supported by Iran, claimed responsibility for the attack. These are the same groups that had already killed three US military personnel in an attack on a US military base in Jordan in January 2024 (cf. BN of 29.01.24). The attack took place two days after the US military had carried out numerous airstrikes against militias affiliated with Iran in Syria and Iraq).<sup>32</sup>

### **Israeli airstrikes**

According to the Syrian military, Israeli airstrikes carried out on targets in Homs city and nearby areas on 06.02.24 killed and wounded several civilians. According to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), at least 11 people, including six civilians, were killed in the attacks.

A few days later, on 10.02.24, according to a Syrian military source, Israeli airstrikes were again launched on targets on the outskirts of Damascus. According to the SOHR, at least three people were killed in the attack. For the moment, it is unclear whether they were Syrian or foreign nationals.

Israel did not confirm either of the attacks on targets in Homs and Damascus. As a rule, the Israeli military does not comment on individual attacks, but it has stated that it has also attacked militias affiliated with Iran in Syria in the past. According to a statement issued by the Israeli military on 03.02.24, the military has hit more than 50 facilities of the Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria since the start of the war in Gaza on 07.10.23.<sup>33</sup>

### **Three dead on the Syrian-Jordanian border**

Three people who were attempting to smuggle drugs from Syria into neighbouring Jordan were killed in clashes between drug smugglers and the Jordanian military on the Jordanian-Syrian border. In addition, a Jordanian border guard was wounded.<sup>34</sup>

### **Government announces price rises and increase in public salaries**

On 05.02.24, the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad issued two new decrees, No. 7 and No. 8/2024, increasing public salaries and pensions by around 50%. At the same time, the Ministry of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection announced an upcoming increase in the subsidised price of bread bundles for those who are entitled to state support. The price of a bundle containing 1.1 kg of bread is set to rise from SYP 200 to SYP 400 going forward. This significant price increase is being justified by the increased costs to the Syrian treasury of maintaining the subsidy due to rising prices.



People who are not entitled to the subsidised price have already been forced to pay around SYP 3,000 for such a bundle in the past.<sup>35</sup>

## **Ukraine**

### **Civilian war casualties**

According to Ukrainian authorities, at least four people were killed and one person was injured in a Russian attack on the city of Kherson on 05.02.24. The mayor of the city of Mykolaiv, Oleksandr Sienkevych, said that a Russian missile attack carried out on 06.02.24 had killed one person and damaged at least 20 residential buildings. On the same day, a Russian attack with two S-300 missiles on the village of Zolochiv in Kharkiv Oblast is said to have destroyed a three-storey hotel and damaged 30 other civilian buildings, killing an infant and injuring three people. At least four people were reportedly killed and over 40 injured in a Russian missile attack on the capital Kyiv carried out on 07.02.24. A Russian drone attack is said to have hit an oil depot in the city of Kharkiv on the night of 10.02.24. The resulting fire is reported to have destroyed 15 residential buildings, killed seven people, including three children, and injured 57 people.<sup>36</sup>

### **Development of the war**

During a night-time operation in the Black Sea carried out on 06.02.24, Ukrainian special forces blew up a drilling platform that the Russian army was allegedly using to extend the range of its drones.

According to the Ukrainian armed forces, the Russian army has carried out 815 attacks using illegal chemical weapons since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 229 of them in January 2024 alone, particularly in the vicinity of Andiiivka. The compound 2-Chlorobenzylidenemalononitrile, better known as tear gas, is said to have been used in high concentrations. The substance is not necessarily lethal, but it can still have harmful effects, especially if inhaled. The Russian Federation ratified the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction on 11.05.97.<sup>37</sup>

### **Change of leadership in the Ukrainian armed forces**

On 08.02.24, following prolonged disagreements between the political and military leadership, President Volodymyr Zelensky dismissed the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces, Valery Zaluzhny, and replaced him with the current commander of the ground forces, Colonel General Oleksandr Syrsky. President Zelensky emphasised the need to renew the armed forces after two years of war. The new commander-in-chief, Syrsky, was born in Vladimir Oblast near Moscow in what was then Soviet Russia and graduated from the Soviet General Staff Academy before moving to Ukraine in 1980. At the beginning of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, he successfully led the defence of Kyiv and the counter-offensive near Kharkiv in the summer of 2022, which enabled part of southeastern Ukraine occupied by Russian troops to be recaptured.

Nevertheless, the replacement of the top military leadership has met with little enthusiasm among Ukrainian frontline troops, especially as Syrsky also has a reputation as a "Soviet-style general" who is said to care little for the lives of the troops under him. Syrsky is also said to be responsible for the ultimately unsuccessful strategy for the defence of Bakhmut, in which numerous soldiers were killed.<sup>38</sup>

## **Venezuela**

### **President of Control Ciudadano arrested on conspiracy charges**

On 09.01.24, the president of the NGO Control Ciudadano, Rocío del Carmen San Miguel Sosa, was arrested at Maiquetía airport in Caracas. Her whereabouts since then are unknown. According to the Attorney General's Office, her arrest is also related to investigations into recent conspiracy allegations made by the government and the alleged planning of an attack on President Maduro (cf. BN of 29.01.24). The NGO Control Ciudadano focuses on security issues and the armed forces, among other things. Numerous national and international NGOs have criticised the arrest as politically motivated and have demanded the immediate disclosure of San Miguel's whereabouts or her release.<sup>39</sup>

## Yemen

### Homosexuals sentenced to death

A court in Ibb governorate, which is under the control of the Houthis, sentenced a total of 13 people to death on charges of homosexuality on 04.02.24 (according to other reports, this happened back on 01.02.24); three people were sentenced to lashes. A further 35 people were reportedly also arrested in Ibb on charges of homosexuality.

On 23.01.24, a criminal court in the governorate of Dhamar, which is also under Houthi control, sentenced nine people to death on charges of homosexuality. According to Amnesty International, seven of them face death by stoning and two of them face death by crucifixion. A further 23 people, also accused of homosexuality, were sentenced to prison terms of up to 10 years.

On 24.01.24 and 25.01.24, videos were circulated on social media showing two individuals being flogged in public by individuals wearing security uniforms. The videos are believed to have been shot in front of the men's homes and in the presence of Houthi officials.

According to Article 264 of the Yemeni penal code, homosexuality is punishable by lashes or stoning. Attacks against LGBTIQ people take place regularly, including in areas under the control of internationally recognised governments, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) or various militias.<sup>40</sup>

### Prime Minister sacked

On 05.02.24, the Prime Minister of the internationally recognised government, Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, was sacked by the presidential council. He has been replaced by former Foreign Minister Ahmed Awad Bin Mubarak.

According to media reports, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) announced a coup against the internationally recognised government on 31.01.24. The deteriorating economic situation in southern Yemen was cited as the reason. The STC, which is supported by the UAE, is itself part of the government, but is still pursuing its own agenda, aiming to secede southern Yemen within the borders of 1990.

It is unclear whether the coup announcement is related to Saeed's removal from office.<sup>41</sup>

### Situation in the Red Sea

The situation in the Red Sea remains, by and large, unchanged. On 07.02.24, two cargo vessels in the Red Sea were attacked using anti-ship missiles, causing material damage. The Houthis have claimed responsibility for the attacks. Meanwhile, the US-led coalition for the protection of shipping in the Red Sea attacked further Houthi targets on 08.02.24, including vessels loaded with explosives and rocket launchers.

On 12.02.24, another ship was attacked by missiles in the Red Sea, but was able to continue its voyage.<sup>42</sup>

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