

Group 22 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

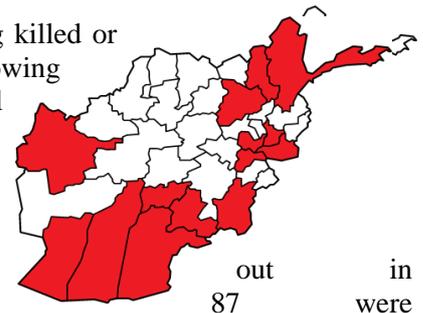
Briefing Notes

23 January 2017

Afghanistan

Armed conflicts

Armed conflicts, attacks and bombings in which civilians are also being killed or wounded continue unabated. According to press reports, the following provinces were affected in the past week: Jawzjan, Balkh, Sar-i-Pul (northern Afghanistan), Nangarhar (eastern Afghanistan), Khost, Paktia, Paktika (south-eastern Afghanistan), Kandahar, Uruzgan, Zabul, Helmand (southern Afghanistan), Kapisa (central Afghanistan), Farah (western Afghanistan), Kunduz and Baghlan (north-eastern Afghanistan). According to government sources, 81 military operations were carried out in Nangarhar in the past three months in which 251 insurgents were killed, wounded and 184 were captured.



Suicide bombings and attacks

On 16 January 2017, ISIS militants set another 20 civilian homes on fire in the Kot district of Nangarhar (eastern Afghanistan) (cf. BN of 16 January 2017). A 19-year-old woman committed suicide by hanging herself in Sar-i-Pul (northern Afghanistan) to avoid a forced marriage. Another young woman hanged herself for the same reason in Jawzjan (northern Afghanistan) on 21 January 2017.

Security forces managed to destroy a bomb factory run by the Taliban in Balkh province (northern Afghanistan) on 17 January 2017.

On 18 January 2017, two persons were killed when fighting broke out over land rights in Logar (central Afghanistan). Two police officers were killed in a bomb blast in Kabul.

On 19 January 2017, a father gunned down his daughter in Badghis (western Afghanistan) for allegedly having an illicit relationship with a man.

On 20 January 2017, an employee of the Health Ministry was abducted in Parwan (central Afghanistan). Two children were killed in a bomb blast in Farah province (western Afghanistan). A military commander and two other persons were killed while playing a game of Buzkashi in Balkh province (northern Afghanistan).

A military court judge was abducted in Kunduz on 21 January 2017.

Attacks on journalists

In 2016, 13 journalists were killed, ten by the Taliban, according to the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee. Of 101 cases recorded, 51 cases of threats and violence against journalists were caused by government officials, making the government responsible for 50 percent of the cases. The Taliban account for around 25 percent of the cases while other groups have been involved in the rest of the cases.

Pakistan

Suicide bombing in Kurram Agency

At least 25 people were killed and over 87 others suffered injuries when a bomb went off during peak business hours at the crowded vegetable market of Parachinar on 21 January 2017 (Kurram Agency, FATA). The Lashkar-e-Jhangvi group, which has ties with the Taliban, has claimed responsibility for the explosion.

Iran

Lengthy prison sentence for charity worker who holds dual citizenship

A court in Tehran has sentenced 37-year-old Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe who has been detained for the past ten months to five years' in prison on charges of espionage and attempts to overthrow the regime, according to a statement issued by the news agency Fars on 22 January 2017. Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has dual British-Iranian citizenship.

Iraq

Operation by allied forces against ISIS

The operation by allied forces against ISIS in the eastern part of Mosul is apparently progressing. According to UN sources, around 150,000 residents of the city have meanwhile been displaced by the offensive. ISIS is using increasing force against those fleeing the city. Family members are reporting that people are being recruited by force and are being taken hostage. On 22 January 2017, the UN demanded that an inquiry be launched after a video circulated on the Internet showing Iraqi troops carrying out arbitrary acts of torture and executions in Mosul.

Fighting is on the rise in Anbar province too; several dozen ISIS militants have reportedly been killed in a series of clashes and airstrikes.

Kurdistan

The US government has announced that it will be opening a consulate in Erbil. With a budget of US\$ 600 million for the building on a site spanning 200,000 m², it is likely to become the largest US consulate in the Middle East.

On 20 January 2017, the Erbil Governorate and the Iraqi government announced that they were launching a joint operation by the army and Peshmerga to terminate the presence of armed groups; observers suspect that this operation will also be aimed against the presence of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in the region. On 23 January 2017, the President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, Masoud Barzani, threatened to declare unilateral independence if Nuri al-Maliki (who is a Shia Muslim) ever returns to office as prime minister of Iraq.

Turkey

Parliament approves constitutional amendment

On 21 January 2017, MPs approved constitutional reforms following additional fistfights during the second reading, with a three-fifth majority voting in favour of the reforms that will grant broad powers to the President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In April 2017, the people will vote on the reform package in a referendum which will merely require a simple majority. According to the new Constitution, the President will be able to appoint and dismiss his vice-presidents, ministers, public officials and twelve of the 15 constitutional judges without having to consult Parliament. He will also be able to issue laws by decree and dissolve Parliament. The proposal also allows him to become leader of a political party. The office of Prime Minister is to be abolished and the number of MPs is to be increased from 550 to 600. However, his oversight function over the executive is to be greatly limited.

Public prosecutor demands 142 years in prison for HDP politician

According to a statement issued by the official news agency Anadolu on 17 January 2017, Turkey's public prosecutor has demanded a prison sentence of up to 142 years for the Kurdish opposition leader Selahattin Demirtas, co-leader of the left-wing pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Demirtas has been in pre-trial detention since November 2016. He is accused of having ties with the outlawed PKK and of spreading terrorist propaganda.

Istanbul nightclub shooting suspect arrested

According to media reports, the gunman who killed 39 people in the New Year's nightclub terrorist attack in Istanbul has been arrested by police at an apartment in the Esenyurt district of Istanbul. According to the governor of Istanbul, Vasip Sahim, he was reportedly born in Uzbekistan and underwent training in Afghanistan. He said the gunman confessed to the shootings and was most certainly acting on the instructions of ISIS which claimed responsibility for the attack. Four other suspects were also arrested.

Syria

Peace talks begin in Kazakhstan

New peace talks begin today in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. The talks were brokered by Russia and Turkey. They are to be attended by representatives of at least 14 armed groups, Syria's Ambassador to the UN as well as delegates from Iran, Turkey and Russia, the UN special envoy to Syria, Mr Staffan de Mistura, and EU diplomats. The aim of the talks is to consolidate the shaky ceasefire and to pave the way for further negotiations under UN auspices.

ISIS in Palmyra

According to media reports, ISIS terrorist militia destroyed other antiquities after taking back the historical city of Palmyra that was once a Silk Road oasis last week, including parts of the Roman amphitheatre and the tetrapylon. Twelve prisoners, including four teachers and government employees were reportedly killed by ISIS in Palmyra on 18 January 2017. They were beheaded in front of a museum.

Bahrain

Bahrain executed three men by a firing squad in the early hours of 22 January 2017, according to a report issued by the Kingdom's new agency. These were the first executions to be carried out since 2010. The three men had been convicted of killing three police officers in a 2014 bombing, including an official from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The widely unknown al-Ashter Brigade claimed responsibility for the bombing. The executed men belonged to a militant Shia group. Clashes erupted between security forces and anti-government protestors in the capital of Manama before the executions took place. Rumours spreading shortly before the executions fuelled tension between the government and the opposition.

Israel / Palestinian Autonomous Territories

Construction of hundreds of settler homes approved

Shortly after the new US President Donald Trump took office, Israel approved building permits for the further expansion of Jewish settlements in annexed east Jerusalem on 22 January 2017. Building permits for 566 settler homes in annexed east Jerusalem had been postponed in late December 2016 until US President Donald Trump took office. The settlements are to be built in the settlement neighbourhoods of Pisgat Zeev, Ramot and Ramat Shlom in East Jerusalem. According to government sources, said plans for some 11,000 other homes were also in process in east Jerusalem. Around 430,000 Jewish settlers are living in the occupied West Bank and over 200,000 are living in East Jerusalem which was annexed by Israel. The building of settler homes is considered by the international community to be one of the main obstacles to peace in the Middle East.

Yemen

Heavy fighting erupts again

According to a statement issued by representatives of the security forces and medics on 22 January 2017, air strikes by a Saudi-led coalition and fighting near the strategic Bab Al-Mandab strait have killed at least 52 fighters among Shiite Houthi rebels and allied troops loyal to ex-president Ali Abdullah Sale in the region of Mokha on the Red Sea since 21 January 2017. Fourteen members of the pro-government forces were also killed. Government troops have regained control over the strategically important Bab al-Mandeb strait between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Houthi rebels subsequently withdrew to the port city of Mokha 20 km north.

Libya

Tripoli

At the beginning of the week, the 12th Brigade, a largely Amazigh (berber) militia, set up several road blockades and arrested residents in the Suq al-Juma district in retaliation for their leader Sifau being grabbed by Rada militia. Armed security is meanwhile being provided for Tripoli's cooking gas cylinders. Power cuts continue to occur in large parts of the city.

Benghazi

According to reports, fighting continues for the Islamist enclave Ganfouda.

Fezzan

The supply crisis in the South (where there are massive shortages in the supply of gas, oil and electricity) led to an outburst at the Parliament in Tobruk where several MPs from the Fezzan region walked out. The supply of oil and gas is apparently being disrupted by Third Force militia from Misrata whereas other groups in Az-Zawiya are controlling the power network, above all the Obari nuclear power plant (the most important nuclear power plant in Libya). The power shortages can be attributed to a dispute between residents of Az-Zawiya and the Wishefana tribe who reportedly kidnapped several residents of Az-Zawiya and seized a truck containing smuggled goods (tobacco) destined for Tunisia.

Derna

Army units of Khalifa Haftar resumed airstrikes on 17 January 2017. Derna has been under the control of Islamist militia since June 2016.

Tunisia

State of emergency extended once again

President Beji Caid Essebsi announced the extension of the state of emergency throughout Tunisian territories by another month owing to the ongoing risk of terrorist attacks. The state of emergency was declared in November 2015 following a terrorist attack on presidential security guards.

Gambia

President Yahya Jammeh stands down after 22 years

Former President of Gambia, Yahya Jammeh, departed Gambia on 21 January 2017 and arrived in Equatorial Guinea in Central Africa the following day, thereby preventing a military escalation of the crisis which had lasted weeks. Senegalese troops had crossed the border to Gambia on 19 January 2017 in a bid to persuade Jammeh to hand over power to his successor Adama Barrow. Troops from Nigeria and Ghana were on standby. Nigeria had combat aircraft circle overhead and deployed the warship NSS Unity to the Atlantic

coast. The Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS) suspended its military intervention for a last-ditch mediation attempt by Mauritania and Guinea. Just a few hours prior to the intervention, the winner of the presidential election, Adama Barrow, took the oath of office at Gambia's embassy in the Senegalese capital of Dakar, promising to bring about reform and to strengthen democracy. ECOWAS, the African Union (AU) and the United Nations published a joint declaration, praising Jammeh for going into exile and terminating the military operation. A member of Adama Barrow's staff announced on 22 January 2017 that Yahya Jammeh reportedly received the sum of at least US\$ 12 million (EUR 11.2 million) from the Central Bank of Gambia after he lost the election and during the dispute over the transition of power.

Mali

Worst suicide attack in years

A suicide bomber blew himself up in front of a military base in the city of Gao on 18 January 2017 when Mali troops and former rebels were gathering for a meeting. According to official sources, 77 persons were killed and over 100 persons were wounded. Mali's President, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, declared three days' of national mourning. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) claimed responsibility for the attack. The joint patrols by troops and former rebels who the suicide bomber was obviously targeting, are one of the most important elements of the peace agreement to stabilise the country. They aim to integrate the former rebels.

Somalia

Famine

According to UN sources, there is a risk of famine in several parts of Somalia. Hundreds of thousands of people are being affected by serious shortages in the supply of food and drinking water owing to the long period of drought. A total of five million persons – more than 40 percent of the population – are reliant on humanitarian aid and 320,000 children are already suffering from malnutrition.

Clashes

Al-Shabaab militants raided Somali army bases on 15 January 2017 as well as a police station in Qoryooley (Lower Shabelle Region) taking control of the city. Qoryooley is around 20 km from the strategically important port city of Merka.

Units of the Somali and Kenyan Army drove al-Shabaab militants out of the village of Nusdariq near Beled Hawo (Gedo Region) on 16 January 2017.

Al-Shabaab seized the village of Bariire (Lower Shabelle Region) after the Somali government units and AMISOM, which had captured the town the previous day, withdrew from the area on 18 January 2017. Bariire is located around 50 km south-west of Mogadishu.

Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for an attack against AMISOM units near Jowhar (Middle Shabelle Region) and for a second attack carried out near El Baraf (Middle Shabelle Region) on 18 January 2017. Seven AMISOM troops were killed near Jowhar. Several Somali troops were killed in an al-Shabaab enclave in Bakool regions on 19 January 2017.

Child soldiers of al-Shabaab

According to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Islamist militia are composed mainly of children and adolescents. According to estimates, minors account for more than 50 percent al-Shabaab militants. At least 60 percent of the group's "elements" captured in Somalia's semi-autonomous Puntland region in March 2016 were youngsters. Some of those children said they were approached with the promise of education and jobs.

Burundi to withdraw troops from AMISOM

Burundi announced on 16 January 2017 that it would begin withdrawing its troops from AMISOM (Burundi's contingent comprises around 5,400 troops). The Burundi government is accusing the EU of failing to pay the soldiers for the past twelve months. The EU had frozen the funds for Burundi as part of the sanctions imposed against the country. Burundi is currently in the throes of a political, social and economic crises since President Pierre Nkurunziza decided in April 2015 to run for a third presidential term. The EU is considering bypassing the Burundi government and paying the AMISOM troops direct. After EU finance for

AMISOM was slashed by 20 percent in July 2016, other countries deploying troops such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda have now also threatened to withdraw their troops.

Violent clashes in Galmudug

Violent clashes erupted between members of the Somali secret service and local police officers in Adado on 17 January 2017 (Galgudud Region), fuelled by a vote of no confidence in Parliament against Abdikarim Guled, President of the Galmudug Interim Administration (GIA). Guled declared the vote of no confidence unlawful and unacceptable and imposed a three-month state of emergency.

Nigeria

Violent pro-Trump rally by the IPOB

On 20 January 2017, a demonstration of support for US President Donald Trump organised by the secessionist Pro-Biafra-Organisation IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra) took place in the southern oil hub of Port Harcourt in southern Nigeria. According to police sources, the march was not authorised and had disturbed the public order. In order to disperse the crowds, police officers used tear gas and arrested around 65 members of the Indigenous People of Biafra. IPOB sources claim police attacked protestors who were not armed, killing 11 persons and arresting 57. Twenty seven persons reportedly received gunshot wounds. Emmanuel Kanu, the brother of the IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu who has been detained since October 2015, has said that Trump has the backing of the IPOB because he supports the right of self-determination.

Refugee camp accidentally bombed

A Nigerian fighter jet searching for Boko Haram members on 17 January 2017 accidentally dropped two bombs on a camp for displaced people near Rann (Kala-Balge Local Government Area) in Borno State close to the border with Cameroon. The bombs were intended for members of the terrorist organisation Boko Haram who were thought to have been in Rann. Doctors Without Borders, the medical charity, said its teams in Rann had counted around 90 dead. Most of the dead were women and children. It said it had reports from residents of Rann that the death toll could be around 170.

Boko Haram: suicide attacks in north-eastern Nigeria

According to police reports, three female suicide bombers launched separate attacks on the University of Maiduguri (capital of Borno State in north-eastern Nigeria) in the early hours of 16 January 2017. The first suicide bomber, a young girl of around 12 years of age, was gunned down close to the University's back entrance, setting off her suicide device. Shortly afterwards, a second suicide bomber blew herself up at a mosque on the University campus, killing a professor and two other persons. Around two hours later, another suicide bomber, a girl of around 12, wearing an explosive belt was gunned down by police behind the university in the village of Bara Karaya. The leader of at least two Boko Haram group factions, Abubakar Shekau, claimed responsibility for the attacks. He said the bombings were carried out because the University was mixing Islam with democracy.

On 13 January 2017, three suicide bombers blew themselves up before being searched at a checkpoint manned by vigilantes in front of the market in Madagali (north-eastern Adamawa State). Two of the women had a baby strapped to their back. Two of the local hunters manning the checkpoint were also killed.

Cameroon

Boko Haram: successes of the army

According to a statement issued by government spokesperson Issa Tschiroma Bakary on 11 January 2017, Cameroon's army has been carrying out military operations alongside the Nigerian army along the border on Nigerian soil near the town of Ngoshe since 19 December 2016. He says the Cameroonian Army killed around 100 militants of the terrorist organisation Boko Haram, captured around 30 militants and freed hundreds of hostages who had been kidnapped by Boko Haram. He said three Cameroonian troops had been killed. On 11 January 2017, two young girls and two boys had tried to carry out suicide attacks in the Far North province of Cameroon. Only the bombers died in the attempted attacks which were foiled by security forces and local vigilantes.

Côte d'Ivoire

Troops killed in renewed unrest

Two mutinying soldiers were killed in clashes in the capital, Yamoussoukro, on 17 January 2017. Reports that other soldiers were killed in Bouaké remain unconfirmed. Disgruntled soldiers also took part in protests in Daloa, Man, Bondoukou and Dimbokro. They were protesting that only some members of other army units received bonus payments following the agreement reached last week. They too had taken part in the mutiny, had set up road blockades and had gained control in some places. The mutiny ended when President Alassane Dramane Ouattara accepted their core demands.

The situation returned to normal in the early hours of the evening of 17 January 2017.

Kosovo / Serbia

Massive tension caused by train

A passenger train that took off from Belgrade for the first time in 18 years on 14 January 2017 aiming for Kosovska Mitrovica in northern Kosovo which has a large Serbian population but halted at the border has triggered a dramatic escalation of tensions between the two countries. The train which was painted in Serbia's national colours bore the inscription "Kosovo is Serbian" in 20 world languages. Kosovo-President Hashim Thaci called this a provocation and gave orders for the train to be stopped. A special unit of the Kosovar police armed with guns and armoured fighting vehicles was called in. Kosovo-Serbs from the region then surrounded the police officers. "In order to avoid bloodshed", Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic ordered the train to turn back. At a meeting of the National Security Council, the Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić threatened to send in the army if there was any threat to Serbs in Kosovo.

The incident marked a renewed low point in the difficult relations between the two countries and has reignited old tensions. The EU has urged the two countries to show reason, to resume the dialogue and has scheduled talks for 24 January 2017. Observers suspect that the Serbian provocation is linked above all to the forthcoming presidential election due to be held in April 2017, but also with the growing influence Russia is having on the region, given the interest Russia has in destabilising the Balkans.

Backdrop

The Republic of Kosovo (which has a population of 1.8 million) separated from Serbia in 1999 amidst violent conflict. It declared independence from Serbia in 2008 as the Republic of Kosovo which is today recognised by 108 of the 193 UN member states. Serbia continues to consider Kosovo part of its national territory. Approx. 40,000 Kosovo-Serbs live mainly in three municipalities in northern Kosovo and in the northern part of Kosovska Mitrovica. The vast majority of people in the Serb-majority municipality of North Mitrovica do not accept the Kosovar state and maintain parallel structures financed by Serbia in the area of administration, justice and the police force. In April 2013, yielding to pressure from the EU, an agreement was signed on the normalisation of relations, regulating the transition of the illegal parallel structures to Kosovo's legal regime. However, only parts of the agreement have been implemented so far.

Columbia

Peace talks with ELN

Peace talks between the Colombian government and the rebel organisation Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) are to begin in the capital of Ecuador Quito on 8 February 2017. There were originally supposed to

begin in October 2016. The government had said that peace talks could only begin after the release of Odin Sanchez, who was kidnapped in April. In April 2016, he handed himself over to the group, securing the release of his older brother Patrocinio Sanchez who had been abducted by ELN. The ELN agreed to free Sánchez by 2 February 2017. The ELN which is the second-largest rebel group in Colombia after Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) has between 1,500 and 2,500 combatants and is financed by trafficking in drugs and kidnappings.

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ivs-anfragen@bamf.bund.de