

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

17 December 2018

Afghanistan

UN report on political, human rights and security developments

The UN Secretary-General's report of 07.12.18 includes information on the security situation noting that UNAMA (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) recorded a total of 5,854 security-related incidents between 16.08.18 and 15.11.18 - two per cent less than in the corresponding period in 2017. The highest number of incidents were reported in the southern region, followed by the east and south-east. More than half of the incidents involved armed clashes. The number of suicide attacks has fallen by 37 % compared to the corresponding period in 2017. Improved control measures by the security forces are identified as the probably reason for this drop. The number of persons internally displaced as a result of the prevailing conflicts has risen to around 290,000. In addition, over 250,000 people have left their home towns and villages on account of the drought and moved to the cities. These people are receiving the same support as those who are internally displaced as a result of conflict (see UN General Assembly: The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security – Report of the Secretary-General dated 07.12.18).*

Military operations

There are reports of military and police operations in the following provinces: Khost, Ghazni, Paktika, Paktia (South-East Afghanistan), Faryab, Sar-i-Pul, Balkh, Samangan, Jowzjan (North Afghanistan), Farah, Herat, Ghor, Badghis (West Afghanistan), Uruzgan, Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul (South Afghanistan), Kabul, Maidan Wardak, Logar (Central Afghanistan), Nangarhar, Kunar (East Afghanistan), Kunduz (North-East Afghanistan) and Daikundi (Central Highlands). Large numbers of civilians have been killed in particular in air raids in Kunar and Helmand provinces.

Bangladesh

Arrests ahead of elections

It has been reported in the media that almost 2,000 officials and supporters of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have been arrested ahead of the elections (planned for 30.12.18). According to BNP spokesman Rizvi Ahmed, the majority are still in custody and “hundreds of fabricated legal proceedings” have been instigated. The BNP boycotted the 2014 parliamentary elections. The party's leader, Khaleda Zia, is in custody on corruption charges.

* The UNHCR guidelines on assessing the international eligibility for protection of asylum applicants from Afghanistan (Eligibility Guidelines) of 30.08.18 have now been published in German.

Cameroon

Presidential pardons

On 13.12.18 president Paul Biya ordered the trials pending before military courts against 289 people who had been arrested against the backdrop of the anglophone crisis in the two English-speaking provinces of North-West and South-West Cameroon to be dropped. They are only to be released after hearings before the respective military courts on 14.12.18, however. The pardon does not extend to criminals, murderers, dangerous terrorists or people who played a leading role in the disturbances. According to information from the International Crisis Group, at least 500 civilians and more than 200 members of the security forces have been killed in the anglophone crisis to date.

Central African Republic

Suspected war criminal arrested

On 12.12.18 a high-ranking militia leader from the Central African Republic was arrested in France on an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. He is to be transferred to The Hague. According to the ICC, Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona is responsible for the crimes against humanity and war crimes which were committed in the west of the CAR between December 2013 and December 2014. The ICC alleges that Ngaïssona was one of the highest-ranking leaders and supreme coordinator of the predominantly Christian Anti-Balaka militia, which fought against the predominantly Muslim Séléka groups. A former Anti-Balaka commander, Alfred “Rambo” Yekatom” was arrested in Bangui, the capital of CAR, back in October 2018 and transferred to the ICC in November 2018.

China

Many members of a house church arrested

Since 09.12.18 the authorities have been taking action against the Early Rain Covenant Church, a Protestant house church which is not recognised by the state, in Chengdu (capital of Sichuan province). More than 100 leaders, students of a theological seminar and other church members have been arrested, including pastor Wang Yi and his wife, Jiang Rong. Some have since been released. Offices and institutions of the church have been closed. Wang Yi is accused of incitement to undermine the power of the state. The Early Rain Covenant Church has several hundred members. While many other unregistered house churches remain discreetly underground, this church operates openly, publishing sermons on the internet and going about missionary work in the street.

It is estimated that 80 million Protestants live in China, a substantial proportion of whom belong to house churches which are not recognised by the state. Observers note that the authorities have recently begun placing these churches under increasing pressure. They have been urged into affiliating with state-recognised churches, for example, or face closure. An amended act on religious issues has been in effect since February 2018, enabling local authorities to take firmer action. Wang Yi is one of the authors of a letter of protest against this act which was written in September 2018 and signed by more than 400 vicars.

Action against union activists

32 people are in state custody for demanding better working conditions and wages at a producer of welding devices in Shenzhen (Guangdong province) and forming an independent union to this end. Those arrested include employees of the company as well as members of an informal group of supporters called Jasic Workers’ Solidarity Group (JWSG). They were detained in nationwide raids in July, August and November 2018. The JWSG informal supporters’ group included graduates and students in Marxist and Maoist study groups from various universities in the country.

The sole authorised workers’ representative body is the state-controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU).

Arrest following individual protest, self-immolation

A teenage Tibetan monk who protested on his own against Chinese hegemony on 10.12.18 in the district of Ngaba (Chinese: Aba, Sichuan province) has been arrested.

According to various reports, a Tibetan burned himself to death in the Ngaba district between 08.12. and 12.12.18; a second case of self-immolation may also have occurred in the same period. As news from Tibetan regions is under strict surveillance by the authorities, no reliably confirmed information is available. Around 40 of the cases of self-immolation which are known to have occurred in China since 2009 have taken place in the Ngaba district.

Columbia

Violence by FARC dissidents

According to a report published by Human Rights Watch on 13.12.18, armed groups which have arisen from the demobilised rebel organisation Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) are active in the municipality of Tumaco (Pacific coast, Departamento Nariño). The United Guerrillas of the Pacific and the Oliver Sinisterra are reportedly responsible, among other things, for a strong rise in the murder rate and a high number of rapes in the area compared to the nationwide average. The report also cites abductions and disappearances. The increase in the strength of these groups is attributed to shortcomings in the demobilisation process and the failure to reintegrate former rebels into society.

DR Congo

Violence ahead of the elections

In the run-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 23.12.18, the police shot dead four people at an election rally by opposition candidate Martin Fayulu at the airport in Kalemie (south-eastern province of Tanganyika) on 12.12.18 and two people at another rally by Fayulu in Lubumbashi (south-eastern province of Haut Katanga) on 11.12.18. Along with Felix Tshisekedi, Martin Fayulu is one of the two opposition candidates with the best prospects of claiming the presidency.

Kinshasa: Fire destroys majority of ballot machines

The central warehouse of the electoral commission (CENI) burned down in the capital, Kinshasa, on the night of 12.12.18. Voting papers and almost 8,000 of some 10,000 ballot machines intended for Kinshasa were destroyed in the fire. The government and opposition camps are accusing each other of being responsible for the fire. The head of the electoral commission (CENI) has stated that preparations for the election are to go ahead. Ballot machines from other Congolese provinces are to be organised for the voters in Kinshasa, where around 17 of the 80 million Congolese live.

Ethiopia

On 13.12. and 14.12.18 fighting broke out between members of the Oromo and Somali ethnic groups in Moyale (southern Ethiopia). At least 21 people were killed and 61 injured. Hundreds reportedly fled to Kenya. The conflict has worsened in recent months.

India

Kashmir: People killed in clashes

At least 13 people died in clashes between security forces and separatists in the Indian part of Kashmir on 15.12.18. According to official information, a fray initially occurred in Pulwama in which a soldier and three suspected fighters of the militant Hizb-ul mujahideen were killed. This was followed by disturbances in which nine civilians died and ten were injured.

Iran

Political prisoner dies

Imprisoned opposition activist Vahid Sayyadi Nassiri has died in Langeroud prison in Ghom after 60 days on hunger strike. The prison authorities informed his family of his death on 12.12.18. Nassiri went on hunger strike in protest at atrocious prison conditions and demanded to be transferred to the Evin prison in Teheran or the prison in Karaj. Langeroud prison is known for its dire conditions.

Azad University: New rules on clothing in student hostels

The Azad University (Free University) has prohibited “casual home wear” for female students in student hostels. The students have been banned from wearing short-sleeved shirts or having “fashionable hair styles”. These are two rules from a long list of bans and requirements which the university’s management has published to “safeguard cultural dignity”. The management states that anyone disregarding these rules could be removed from the university register. The rules are not restricted to clothing. Students are also banned from using the internet in a manner which might erode morality. The private “Islamic Azad University” is the largest university in Iran, with some 1.7 million students and a staff of over 30,000.

Study on poverty threshold

On 11.12.18 the parliament’s research centre published a study on the poverty threshold in the Islamic Republic. According to the study, a family of four living in Teheran requires 2.728 million toman (approx. € 228) to avoid dropping below the poverty line. This means that the poverty line has been raised by 22 % in comparison to the summer of 2017. Many economics experts describe the poverty threshold defined by the research centre as unrealistic. The price of basic foods has risen by around 50 % in the past six months alone.

Iraq

AI report

In a report published on 13.12.18, the human rights organisation Amnesty International accuses IS, among other things, of systematically destroying the Yazidi’s necessities of life. The report alleges that IS fighters have poisoned and destroyed wells and irrigation systems, ruined farmland and orchards, stolen cattle and farming equipment and mined large swathes of land. One year on from the government’s declaration of military victory over Islamic State, this is still preventing internally displaced people from returning to their homes, the report says.

High-security zone partially reopened

According to a dpa bulletin on 11.12.18, the government has reopened the high-security “Green Zone” in Baghdad for public transport. As an initial measure, one of several bridges leading over the Tigris to the area in the centre of Baghdad has been opened for traffic. According to information from the government, the bridge is initially to be open for several hours in the evening as part of a test phase, after which other access roads to the zone could also be opened. The authorities had already removed high concrete walls which had sealed off the area in the past, the government said.

Basra Demonstrators injured

On 14.12.18 security forces in Basra used tear gas to break up a crowd which had assembled outside Basra’s provincial council building after Friday prayers. The number of people injured has not been disclosed. Demonstrations against corruption, a lack of jobs and poor services have been taking place on an irregular basis since the summer.

Israel

Druze threaten campaign of disobedience in protest at nationalities act

The Israeli Druze, who are traditional allies of the Jews, are threatening Israel with a campaign of disobedience because they consider the new nationalities act to discriminate against them. The new mayor of the Druze stronghold near Haifa, Bahij Mansour, spoke of a crisis in relations between the religious minority and the Jewish majority. He was incensed by Israel's right-wing coalition's plan to officially give the Jews preferential status and to recognise only Hebrew as the official language. He claimed that the act would turn the Arabic-speaking Druze into second-class citizens.

Israel/Palestinian territories

Series of attacks in the West Bank

On 09.12.18 two Palestinians shot at a group of Israeli civilians in a drive-by attack at a bus stop near the Jewish settlement of Ofra in the occupied territories. Seven Israelis were injured, some seriously, including a heavily pregnant woman whose child later died. The perpetrators escaped to Ramallah, where Israeli security forces later searched the offices of the Palestinian news agency, Wafa. The attackers died in a shoot-out with the security forces on the night of 11.12.18. They were allegedly also responsible for an attack in a factory (cf. BN of 08.10.18). Two Israeli soldiers were killed by an attacker on the morning of 13.12.18 in what appears to have been an act of revenge. The Israeli temporarily sealed off Ramallah – according to reports in the Palestinian media, this was the first time that this had happened since the end of the Second Intifada in 2005. A further fatal incident occurred on the evening of 13.12.18, when a Palestinian drove his car into a group of Israeli soldiers, slightly injuring one of them. The man was shot dead.

At the celebrations to mark the 31st anniversary of the founding of Hamas on 14.12.18, party leader Ismail Haniyeh referred to the recent series of attacks in a speech in front of tens of thousands. He praised the violence as another intifada. Israeli observers blame Hamas for the attacks and see them as part of a strategy to strengthen their influence in the West Bank. The Israeli government has announced measures to legalise several unauthorised Jewish settlements in the West Bank with retroactive effect and to approve 82 new buildings in Ofra.

Kazakhstan

Dissidents arrested

On 16.12.18, the anniversary of independence, security forces arrested numerous human rights activists who had gathered at the independence monument in Almaty to commemorate victims of police violence during the demonstrations in Zhanozen on 16.12.11 and in Almaty in December 1986. In the city of Oral in western Kazakhstan, the police arrested two journalists of the Uralskaya Nedelya newspaper. The police reportedly prevented other journalists from leaving their homes or obstructed them when they were leaving home.

Human rights activist convicted

On 10.12.18 a district court in Shymkent sentenced human rights activist Suin Abulda to five years' imprisonment for deliberate false testimony in a fraud case. Abulda and his supporters rejected the judgement as being politically motivated. The civil rights activist spent 15 days in custody back in May 2016 for involvement in demonstrations against the land reform. The protests against the land reform, in which thousands participated, led to numerous arrests and fines.

Libya

Benghazi

The head of Benghazi's security department, Salah Huwaidi, was replaced on 15.12.18, following an accumulation of security-related incidents in the city. He faced accusations of neglecting the safety and security of the public and not being up to the job.

Small contribution to medical treatment in the country

An American team from the US Novick Medical Foundations which has performed almost 200 complex cardiological operations in the past six months (including 175 such operations on children) has had its contract extended by a further six months. In view of the fact that complex operations were virtually impossible for many years owing to the unreliability and widespread collapse of public healthcare, this is intended to make at least a small contribution towards reducing the backlog of urgently needed heart operations and the need to have Libyans treated abroad.

Referendum process

The parliament in Tobruk (House of Representatives, HoR) has passed a series of addenda to the constitutional declaration in order to enable the application of electoral law for the forthcoming elections. Many key political bodies, in particular the High Council of State (HCS - the de facto government in Tripoli), are opposed to these addenda. In their view, many details of the new electoral law are counter to the provisions of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) of 2015. These provisions provide the basis for the election process, however.

Tripoli

The former head of the Tripoli security department died on 12.12.18 of injuries sustained in an attack. Shortly after the attack, the Special Deterrence Forces (SDF), also known as the Rada militia, took two suspects into custody. They have confessed to having carried out the attack. They allegedly acted solely on criminal motives.

On 13.12.18 three new training facilities for the Tripoli police were opened. Around 1800 police officers are to be trained in various roles at these facilities.

Derna

According to as yet unconfirmed rumours, fighters from the militias allied with Khalifa Haftar have allegedly appropriated property belonging to local residents in Derna. In particular, houses have reportedly been occupied. In addition, several homes of political opponents have allegedly been burned down in the area of Jajish Street.

Break-out of infectious disease

Over 65 cases of the infectious disease leishmaniasis have become known in the area around Sirte. This follows a break-out in Tawergha involving some 200 cases in November 2018. The widespread shortage of antibiotics and various other types of medication is promoting the spread of infectious diseases.

IS activities

On 16.12.18 the Jufra district government confirmed that six of ten people abducted from Fuqaha at the end of October 2018 have been executed by IS. For the remaining kidnap victims IS is demanding the release of imprisoned IS fighters by Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).

Mali

North-east: civilians killed

According to information from the military, armed attackers on motorcycles killed more than 40 civilians on the morning of 13.12.18. The group reportedly attacked a village in the Menaka district. The military suspects that the armed attackers were members of the nomadic Fulani pastoral tribe originating from Niger. Menaka is situated some 250 km to the east of the city of Gao, close to the border with Niger. Hostilities between settled farmers and nomadic groups over land and scant water supplies are a regular occurrence in the area.

Moldova

Council of Europe criticises prison conditions

In a new report, the Council of Europe's anti-torture committee calls on the Republic of Moldova to put an end to intimidation and violence against prisoners. Inspections took place at the prisons in Chisinau and Soroca, where many prisoners complained of physical and verbal abuse. The European Court of Human Rights criticised Moldova for poor prison conditions and the inhumane and degrading treatment of prison inmates back in 2016. In addition to degrading jail conditions, human rights organisations have repeatedly reported on cases of torture and abuse in the criminal justice system.

Nigeria

Gudumbali: Fighting between army and ISWA

Citing information from three members of the military, the Reuters news agency has reported that fighters belonging to ISWA (Islamic State in West Africa), a group which has broken away from the Boko Haram terrorist organisation, attacked an army base and a village near Gudumbali (seat of the Guzamala Local Government Area; federal state of Borno) on 14.12.18. At least twelve soldiers were reportedly killed, and dozens are missing. According to official information from the military, the terrorists attacked soldiers in Gudumbali who were distributing relief aid to the local population. One soldier and several attackers were allegedly killed when the attack was repelled.

Pakistan

Balochistan: Attack on security forces

Six members of the paramilitary Frontier Corps were killed in the south-western province of Balochistan, in the Kech district close to the border with Iran, on 14.12.18. 14 were reportedly injured. The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and the Baloch Raji Ajoie Sangar (BRAS) group - both armed Baloch separatist groups - have claimed responsibility for the attack.

Rwanda/Denmark

Genocide suspect extradited

On 11.12.18 Denmark extradited Wenceslas Twagirayezu, who is suspected of having participated in the 1994 genocide, to Rwanda. A court of appeal had granted permission for the measure in September 2018. Among other charges, Twagirayezu is alleged to have taken part in the murder of more than 1,000 people in the Busasamana Catholic Parish and at Mudende University in present-day Western Province. Rwandan authorities believe that most of the more than 850 still wanted genocide suspects are in the neighbouring countries DR Congo (356) and Uganda (250).

Serbia

Incendiary attack on journalists

A correspondent of the ZigInfo news portal who has reported on local corruption was the victim of an incendiary attack on 12.12.18. Unknown attackers threw a Molotov cocktail through a garage window in the night. They then shot at the door of the house, to prevent the journalist and his wife from escaping. In October the news portal's editor-in-chief was assaulted. Both journalists had been the targets of threats since July 2018, when their reports on corruption in the local community were published. The public prosecutor's office has reportedly been informed.

According to the EU Commission, the number of cases of threats, intimidation and violence against journalists remains a matter of concern. There were 57 attacks on journalists up to and including September 2018. Journalists' associations complain of inadequate investigation and prosecution.

Protests against the government continue

On 15.12.18 thousands of people protested once again at the “violence” perpetrated by president Aleksandar Vucic and his government against the opposition and media. Thousands of people took to the streets on 07.12.18. Several opposition parties belonging to the Alliance for Serbia had called for the protest (cf. BN of 10.12.18).

Somalia

Attacks

In attacks by Al Shabaab on military convoys, three Somali soldiers died in Mogadishu on 09.12.18 and several Ethiopian AMISOM soldiers died in the Wajid district (Bay region) on 11.12.18. On 09.12.18 a journalist in Bososaaso (Puntland) survived an attack by a member of the Puntland security forces unharmed. According to the journalist, the attack was ordered by Assad Osman, commander of the Puntland security forces, on account of his critical reporting. Osman is running for Puntland’s presidency in the elections which are due to take place in January 2019.

Sheikh Mukhtar Robow arrested

Ethiopian AMISOM units arrested Sheikh Mukhtar Robow, alias Abu Mansur, in Baidoa (Bay region) on 13.12.18. According to unconfirmed reports, Robow was allegedly tortured and taken to Mogadishu. Robow was one of the founders of Al Shabaab, its deputy leader and spokesman. According to unconfirmed reports, he allegedly defected to the government in 2013. In reaction to his arrest, his supporters staged violent protests in Baidoa on 13.12. and 14.12.18. Robow is running for the presidency of the federal state of South West in the elections scheduled for 19.12.18. The senators of the South West federal state in the upper house of the Somali parliament condemned Robow’s arrest and accused AMISOM of interfering in the country’s domestic politics and collaborating with the government in order to intervene in the forthcoming elections. The senators recommended that the elections be postponed in order to enable Robow to run.

340,000 IDPs have fled to Mogadishu

According to a report by the Norwegian Refugee Council of 11.12.18, more than 340,000 IDPs fled to Mogadishu in the first half of 2018 on account of conflicts, drought and flooding.

Sri Lanka

Head of government back in office

On 16.12.18 Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn back into office as prime minister once again by president Maithripala Sirisena. Wickremesinghe’s dismissal on 26.10.18 gave rise to a power struggle that led to a national crisis. A majority of MPs rejected Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had been nominated by Sirisena.

Syria/Turkey

Plans for Turkish offensive in northern Syria

In the wake of president Erdogan’s announcement that he intended to launch a new offensive against Kurdish troops in Syria, it was reported in the media on 13.12.18 that Turkish military vehicles were on their way to the border. Trucks carrying tanks and heavy artillery had reportedly arrived in the border province of Kilis and been forwarded to Turkish troops in Syrian territory. It has also been reported that the Turkish armed forces have instructed the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) to be at the ready with 14,000 men.

To date, Turkey only controls Syrian territories to the west of the Euphrates river. According to Erdogan, it now also intends to become active to the east of the Euphrates and above all to take action against the Kurdish YPG militia, which controls territories at the Turkish border and is fighting IS there. According to media reports, the USA is opposed to a further military offensive by Turkey against Kurdish troops in the north-east of Syria.

Thailand

Ban on election campaigning lifted

On 11.12.18 the military leadership announced that the ban on campaigning for the parliamentary election planned on 24.02.19 had been lifted.

Turkey

Members of the army detained in fresh wave of arrests

More than two years after the failed military coup, the government is still cracking down on suspected supporters of the Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen. On 13.12.18 the public prosecutor in Istanbul issued arrest warrants for 216 officers and non-commissioned officers in connection with the attempted coup of July 2016, including four colonels and five lieutenant-colonels. Numerous raids took place.

Demirtaş' conviction upheld

On 04.12.18 a court of appeal upheld the conviction of opposition politician Selahattin Demirtaş, who received a prison sentence of four years and eight months on 07.09.18 on charges of terrorist propaganda. This is the first unappealable sentence to be handed down to him. Further proceedings are pending against the former leader of the pro-Kurdish opposition party HDP.

Turkmenistan

President pardons hundreds of prisoners

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov pardoned 796 prisoners to mark the International Day of Neutrality (introduced by the United Nations on 12.12.2017). He has frequently granted amnesties to mark official holidays in recent years. These pardons often do not apply to political prisoners.

Ukraine

Martial law set to expire

President Poroshenko stated in Kiev on 16.12.18 that he would not be extending the 30-day period of martial law (in parts of the country) announced on 26.11.18 unless Russia launched a massive attack.

Yemen

Torture in Houthi-run prisons

Associated Press published a report on 07.12.18 which refers to widespread torture in prisons administrated by the Houthi rebels. The report claims that the rebels have arrested thousands of political opponents, activists, journalists and religious leaders since the beginning of the war in 2014.

60,000 killed in war

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), at least 60,223 people have been killed in the war since January 2016. 28,182 people have reportedly died so far in 2018 – an increase of 65 % since 2017. Thousands more have died from indirect consequences of the war, such as disease and hunger.

Peace talks – initial results

The peace talks between the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels, which began in Sweden on 06.12.18, ended on 13.12.18. In addition to an exchange of prisoners (cf. BN of 10.12.18), the parties have also reportedly agreed to withdraw their forces from Hodeida and to establish a corridor for humanitarian supplies to the city of Taizz. Many public servants living in the Houthi rebel-controlled regions who have received no salary for almost two years are to be paid again. The parties have also agreed to meet for further talks in January 2019.

