

## Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

# Briefing Notes

4 February 2019

### Afghanistan

#### Latest SIGAR Quarterly Report

The Quarterly Report of the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) covering the period between 1 October 2018 and 31 December 2018 was published on 30 January 2019. SIGAR examines how taxpayers' money is used in Afghanistan for the United States Congress. The information on the security situation is largely based on information provided by NATO Mission Resolute Support (RS) as of 22 October 2018. The report contains information on the spheres of influence of the government and the insurgents as well as on the population in the respective areas. Hardly any changes have occurred since the previous quarter. According to SIGAR, on 22 October 2018, 63.5 percent of the population, or 21.1 million persons, lived in areas that were under government influence or control, some 500,000 fewer than in the previous quarter.

10.8 percent or 3.6 million lived in areas under the influence or control of insurgents, 25.6 percent or 8.5 million in contested areas. Of the 407 districts, 219 are under government control (74) or influence (145), seven fewer than in the previous quarter. The insurgents have 50 districts under their control (12) or influence (38). Slightly more than one-third of the districts (138) are considered to be contested areas. However, the provincial centres are all under the influence or control of the government. The provinces with the most insurgent-controlled or -influenced districts are Kunduz (five of seven districts), and Uruzgan (four of six districts), and Helmand (nine of 14 districts).

The report also contains information on the number of security-related incidents, which remained at about the same level, based on data supplied by the UN's Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and RS. According to RS, more than half of the insurgent attacks occurred in the eight provinces of Badghis, Farah, Faryab, Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan and Herat.

According to RS, the number of civilian casualties amounted to 8,260 between 1 January and 16 November 18, with Kabul (1,703) and Nangarhar (1,517) showing by far the highest numbers of civilian casualties. It can be assumed that the figures soon to be published by UNAMA will be higher. This is because of the different survey periods and methods used.

#### Food supplies

According to the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET), Afghanistan remains dependent on food supplies. The drought, conflict and below-average remittances from abroad (partly due to the return of many Afghans from Iran) have led to an unusually high need for food assistance in the low yield season. On a five-level scale used to measure food insecurity (from minimal to starving), parts of the provinces of Daykundi and Badakhshan are at level four (emergency). In a forecast that extends to May, this level is also expected for Badghis province, where conflict and drought have caused crop failures. Large parts of the rest of the country are at stages three and two (tense or critical).

### China

#### Activist sentenced

On 29 January 2019, a court in the city of Suizhou (Hubei province) sentenced activist Liu Feiyue to five years imprisonment for “inciting subversion of state power”. Liu founded the non-governmental organisation Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch, on whose website he reported on human rights issues such as the detention of activists and dissidents in psychiatric institutions. He was arrested in November 2016 and his sentence will end in November 2021.

### **Tibetan lessons banned**

According to various reports from late January 2019, the authorities in Nangchen County, Qinghai Province, banned informal education in monasteries during school holidays in December 2018 because they saw it as a possible covert expression of political resistance. Such teaching, especially in Tibetan, is popular in Tibetan areas, especially since the language is being taught less and less in many state schools. Similar restrictions are known from some places in the neighbouring Autonomous Region of Tibet (Xizang).

Under President Xi Jinping, China is pursuing a policy of singling out the Buddhist-Tibetan, Muslim and Christian religions and cultures, which means assimilating them to the culture of the Han Chinese majority and adapting them to the political goals of the party and government.

## **El Salvador**

### **Bukele wins presidential elections**

Nayib Bukele, the candidate of the conservative Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANU), won the presidential elections on 3 February 2019 ahead of the entrepreneur Carlos Calleja (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista de El Salvador - ARENA) and the former foreign minister Hugo Martínez (government party Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional - FMLN). The former mayor of the capital, San Salvador, received almost 54 percent of the votes cast, according to the preliminary results.

The country’s current problems include pronounced social inequality, a lack of economic prospects and strong migration pressure, as well as a high rate of violent crime, particularly from rival youth gangs. More than three million of the approximately ten million Salvadorans live abroad, most of them in the USA.

## **Iraq**

### **Security situation**

Security-related incidents continue to occur. On 2 February 2019, an Iraqi writer and cartoonist was shot dead by unknown gunmen in Karbala. So far, no group has assumed responsibility for the attack. One pilgrim was killed and at least three others were wounded when a bus carrying Iranian visitors was attacked on a road between Samarra and Baghdad about 80 kilometres north of Baghdad in the Balad district, Salahaddin province. In the town of Buhriz, south of Baquba, Diyala province, one guard was killed and another guard was wounded in an attack carried out by an ISIS fighter on a checkpoint at a refinery. Also on 2 February 2019, an Iraqi border guard was killed and another was injured in an attack by ISIS fighters in Al-Qaim, about 350 kilometres west of Ramadi, Anbar province. Three inhabitants were kidnapped and killed by ISIS fighters in the village of Haftaghar in the district Daquq, province Kirkuk, on 1 February 2019. The village is inhabited by both Arabs and Kurds.

On 29 January 2019, armed men killed three persons and wounded one other person at a café in Tarmiya, about 30 kilometres north of Baghdad.

## **Iran**

### **Trial against environmental activists begins**

On 30 January 2019, the Tehran Revolutionary Court opened the trial against eight Iranian environmentalists on charges of espionage. Freely chosen lawyers of the accused were not admitted to the trial, instead they were assigned lawyers by the judiciary. The environmentalists were arrested by the Pasdaran on 24 January 2018 and have been in pre-trial detention ever since. The judiciary accuses them of collecting strategic information under the guise of environmental protection and passing it on to foreigners.

### **Concert ban for pop singer**

According to sources at the Iranian Ministry of Culture of 3 February 2019, all concerts featuring

the Iranian pop singer Hamid Askari have been temporarily banned. On 30 January 2019, Askari sang a duet with his guitarist Negin Parsa after which the microphone was turned off. The reason for the concert ban was that Askari had failed to observe current regulations. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, women have been banned from singing solo in front of mixed audiences in Iran. According to the Shiite rulers, the female voice seduces men into amorality. In Iran, female singers are only allowed to sing together with men in choirs or ensembles.’

## **Israel/Palestinian Autonomous Territories**

### **Several persons wounded in Gaza protests**

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, 32 persons were injured by shots fired by Israeli troops on 1 February 2019 during the weekly Friday protests. The Israeli army claims around 10,000 protesters threw burning tires, stones and explosive devices in the direction of the soldiers. Meanwhile, representatives of the divided Palestinian leadership from Gaza and the West Bank met once again for talks in Cairo. Egypt is trying to calm the situation in the Gaza Strip.

## **Cameroon**

### **Main opposition leader arrested**

On the evening of 28 January 2019, Maurice Kamto, president of the opposition party Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon (MRC), was arrested in Douala together with his supporter Albert Dzungang (two-time presidential candidate) and another person at his home and were taken to Yaounde. After a ban was imposed on demonstrations by the authorities on 31 January 2019, the MRC cancelled all four rallies planned for 1 and 2 February 2019 in several cities against the arrest of Maurice Kamto. Kamto was apparently arrested in response to MRC rallies in four cities in Cameroon on 26 January 2019. A total of over 100 participants who protested against the official result of the presidential election in October 2018 were arrested (see Briefing Notes of 28 January 2019). Around 50 of them were released on 27 January 2019.

## **Kirgizstan**

On 29 January 2019, the protestor Guljamila Saparalieva was sentenced to two months in prison by a court in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek for “incitement to ethnic hatred” during a protest against Chinese policies in the north-western region of Xinjiang. Saparalieva was among the 500 demonstrators who protested on 17 January 2019 on Ala Too Square in the capital against the persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang. On 11 January 2019, President Soorinbai Jennbeko responded to the frequent protests of recent months with the warning that anyone who tried to disrupt the Kyrgyz-Chinese partnership would face criminal prosecution.

## **Kosovo**

### **National army established**

The Ministry of Security Forces was officially renamed the Ministry of Defence at a ceremony held on 21 January 2019. On 14 December 2018, the Kosovar parliament passed a resolution to form a regular army. The 2,500-strong Kosovo Security Force (KSF), which has so far only been deployed to protect civilian facilities and respond to crises, is being transformed into a national army with around 5,000 members in active military service and around 3,000 reservists.

Serbia, which does not recognise the independence of its former province of Kosovo, sees the formation of an army as a violation of UN Resolution 1244, the Kosovo constitution and a threat to regional security (cf. Briefing Notes of 10 December 18).

## **Lebanon**

### **New government**

After months of disputes within the various political camps, Lebanon’s Prime Minister Saad Hariri has formed a new unity government. He introduced his cabinet on 31 January 2019. Three of the 30 ministers

belong to Hezbollah. For the first time, the Ministry of the Interior is headed by a woman. Hariri announced financial and economic reforms and called on the ministers to work closely together.

## **Montenegro**

### **Ongoing Mafia war**

On 3 February 2019, another bomb attack was carried out in Podgorica in which one man was killed. The attack is presumably related to the feud between two Montenegrin Mafia clans, which has escalated since 2017 (cf. Briefing Notes of 9 April 2018).

The gang war between the Kavacki and the Skaljarski (the names refer to residential quarters in Kotor) claimed one death in Vienna as recently as 21 December 2018. Around Kotor alone, more than 30 persons are said to have been killed since 2013. The media speak of 143 Mafia murders in the region. 60 percent of the cases remain unsolved. People from the security apparatus are also said to be involved in the business of the clans. Journalists who report on links between politics and organised crime are also being threatened. In the past ten years, there have been over 25 physical attacks against employees of the daily newspaper "Vijesti" alone (cf. Briefing Notes of 9 April 2018).

## **Nigeria**

### **Boko Haram: at least 60 killed when the city of Rann was recaptured**

On the morning of 28 January 2019, Boko Haram insurgents captured the village of Rann without a fight (Borno State, administrative headquarters of the Kala Balge Local Government Area), located about seven kilometres from the Cameroonian border in the Lake Chad region. According to Amnesty International, they killed at least 60 residents and burned down hundreds of buildings as an analysis of satellite images indicates. The Nigerian army had left the city the day before the terrorist attack, after the Cameroonian units of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), also stationed in the city to protect the population, had been withdrawn shortly before. Boko Haram had already occupied the town of Rann which also houses a camp of tens of thousands of internally displaced people, for 24 hours on 14 January 2019 after fighting with the army. According to UN figures, a total of 35,000 civilians fled across the border to Cameroon in the wake of the two attacks by the Boko Haram on Rann.

## **Pakistan**

### **Christian woman Asia Bibi acquitted**

On 29 January 2019, the Supreme Court confirmed that the death sentence against Christian woman Asia Bibi, convicted of blasphemy in 2010, had been lifted (cf. Briefing Notes of 5 November 2018), upholding the acquittal pronounced in October 2018.

## **Russian Federation**

### **Thousands protest for waste disposal reform**

On 3 February 2019, thousands of people throughout the country protested for a waste disposal reform. Many of the protesters are angry that waste from Moscow is moved to the regions bordering the capital. They fear that the improper storage of waste will damage the health of the residents and the environment. In the city of Arkhangelsk which is located about 1,200 km north of Moscow, most people are said to have protested, according to the organisers. The region is one of many that is supposed to receive garbage from the capital. Several smaller demonstrations also took place in Moscow in front of the State Duma buildings and on Pushkin Square.

According to media reports, on 31 January 2019, 14 activists were searched in Kolomna, about 100 km south of Moscow, and one activist was arrested. In recent months, activists and other local residents have protested against waste disposal from the capital.

## **Serbia**

### **Protests continue, also in North Kosovo**

On 2 February 2019, thousands of people took to the streets nationwide for the weekly protest rally against Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić (cf. Briefing Notes of 28 January 2019). So far, the political goals of the demonstrators, whose spectrum ranges from left to far right, remain vague. The focus is on the fight against corruption, a new legal framework for fair elections and an end to the state control of many media. For the first time, a protest rally was also held in Mitrovica in the northern part of Kosovo inhabited by Serbs.

## **Zimbabwe**

### **Zimbabwe activist pastor Evan Mawarire released on bail**

On 30 January 2019, the pastor and activist Evan Mawarire was temporarily released from prison on bail. He had been arrested and imprisoned on 16 January 2019 after calling on social media for the population to take part in the strike against the petrol price hike announced by President Emmerson Mnangagwa on 12 January 2019 (cf. Briefing Notes of 21 January 2019). He is accused of seeking to overthrow the government and of inciting violence on social networks, which can be punishable with up to 20 years imprisonment.

## **Somalia**

### **Bombings**

Two civilians were killed and five others were injured in a car bomb explosion on 29 January 2019 in the Bondhere district of Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab claims to have killed seven government employees.

Four civilians, including two foreign engineers, were injured in a booby trap explosion outside Mogadishu on 29 January 2019.

Al-Shabaab fighters murdered a Somali army officer outside his home in the Hamar Weyne district of Mogadishu on 31 January 2019.

Suspected Al-Shabaab fighters murdered a community elder in Afgoye (Lower Shabelle region) on 30 January 2019. The victim had participated in the selection of delegates for the 2016/2017 parliamentary election.

### **Fighting**

Suspected Al-Shabaab fighters fired grenades at a security checkpoint in Jowhar (Middle Shabelle region) on 28 January 2019. The number of casualties is not known.

AFRICOM killed 24 extremists in an airstrike near Shebeeley, Beled Weyne, Hiraan region, on 30 January 2019.

Al-Shabaab fighters attacked a Puntland security force barracks near Boosaaso (Puntland) with grenades on 28 January 2019.

On 28 January 2019, there was an armed conflict between Al-Shabaab and ISIS near Boosaaso (Puntland). On 31 January 2019, ISIS lost control of Mirale and Shebaab to Al-Shabaab. ISIS retreated into the mountains.

## **Syria**

### **Situation in Idlib**

Idlib is the only province in Syria that is still controlled by opponents of Assad after almost eight years of war. It is home to around three million people living in a very confined area, half of whom are internally displaced persons. Up to now, a major Syrian offensive in the Idlib region has been prevented with the aid of the Russian-Turkish agreement of September 2018 on the establishment of a demilitarised zone. Under the agreement, radical Islamic groups were required to withdraw from a buffer zone with their heavy weapons. However, this has only occurred to a limited extent. The Islamist militia alliance Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which also has many former Al-Qaeda fighters in its ranks, defeated moderate militias at the beginning of January 2019 and now controls large parts of the province. The Syrian army responded with increased artillery and missile fire. According to the Syrian Human Rights Observatory, which has close links to the opposition, at least eleven people have been killed in shelling in the outer regions of Idlib in recent days.

## **Ukraine**

### **Poroshenko announces bid for second term**

On 29 January 2019, speaking to around a thousand supporters in Kiev, President Petro Poroshenko announced that he would be running for a second term in office in the upcoming presidential elections scheduled to take place on 31 March 2019. Poroshenko has been Ukraine's head of state since 2014 and opinion polls put him behind his most serious rival Yulia Tymoshenko, who declared her candidacy for the presidency last week.

## **Central African Republic**

### **Peace deal agreed**

On February 2019, representatives of the government and 14 rebel groups reached a peace deal in Khartoum (Sudan) following talks which had begun on 24 January 2019. The government said the peace deal would be signed in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, soon. Details of the agreement have not been released. Since 2012/2013, thousands of people have died in the conflict, which began when mainly Muslim Seleka rebels seized power, prompting reprisals from mostly Christian militias. Approximately 585,000 refugees have fled to neighbouring countries and some 650,000 people have been displaced within the Central African Republic.