

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

25 March 2019

Afghanistan

New Year's Day attacks

At least 6 persons were killed and 23 were wounded in a number of bombings that took place in a Shia residential area in the west of Kabul (Kart-e Sachi) on 21 March 2019. A Shia mosque, the so-called Blue Shrine is located in this area where the Persian New Year celebrations take place every year. Security forces managed to foil another attack near the university. ISIS, which carried out a suicide attack a year ago in the same place, killing many, has claimed responsibility for the attack. Three persons were killed and 31 were wounded in further attacks at an agricultural show in Lashkar Gah (Helmand Province, South) on 23 March 2019. The attacks were carried out in the same place a year ago. The Taliban claimed that attacks were aimed at high government officials.

Presidential election postponed again

The presidential election, which had already been postponed from April to June, 2019 will now take place on 28 September 2019. According to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), neither a safe and transparent election nor a complete voter registration can be guaranteed beforehand. Observers assume that no new president will be elected this year. It is to be expected that no candidate will receive the required majority in the first ballot and that no run-off elections will be held during the winter.

Flooding claims lives and destroys homes

According to UN figures, heavy rainfall has led to severe flooding in 14 provinces and that recent flooding in Afghanistan has left more than 122,600 people in need of assistance. So far this year, 63 people have died as heavy rains and flooding swept away their homes. The provinces of Farah, Kandahar, Helmand, Herat, Kapisa, Parwan, Zabul and Kabul have been hit the hardest, where nearly 5,000 houses have been destroyed and more than 7,500 homes have been damaged.

Millions of children suffering from malnutrition

According to UNICEF, almost two million children under the age of five are suffering from chronic malnutrition. About 1.4 million children under the age of five need treatment for acute malnutrition every year, including about 600,000 who suffer from severe acute malnutrition.

Algeria

Protests continue

For weeks people in Algeria have been taking to the streets to demonstrate against the current government and a fifth term in office of the ailing President Bouteflika. In the meantime, the military and party of the Algerian president, the “Liberation Front” FLN, have joined the demonstrating population. On 23 March 2019, thousands of lawyers organised a mass rally and called on Abdelaziz Bouteflika to resign. The mainly peaceful protests led to Bouteflika announcing on 11 March 2019 that he would not run for office again and postponing the election planned for 18 April 2019 indefinitely. A national assembly is to work out reforms.

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister have been replaced. People are determined to continue protesting until democratic reforms and a change of regime have taken place.

Benin

Protests

Thousands of opposition supporters demonstrated on 11 March 2019 in Cotonou against the exclusion of five opposition parties from the parliamentary elections planned for 28 April 2019. On 5 March 2019, on the basis of a new electoral law that came into force in 2018, the Electoral Commission admitted only two parties close to President Patrice Talon (Union progressiste, Bloc républicain) to the elections. According to the police, the demonstration went off peacefully.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Radovan Karadžić sentenced to life imprisonment

More than 20 years after the massacre in Srebrenica, the International Court of Justice in The Hague, in an appeal, sentenced Radovan Karadžić, leader of the Bosnian Serbs in the Bosnian War of 1992-95, to life imprisonment for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Karadžić had been sentenced to 40 years by a court of first instance in 2016. The tribunal thus followed the indictment, which had called for a much stricter sentence. In the summer of 1995, Serb units had taken the former UN protection zone of Srebrenica on the orders of Karadžić. Under the command of Ratko Mladić about 8,000 Muslim men and boys had been systematically shot.

With the verdict, the international judiciary's legal treatment of the Yugoslavian wars has almost come to an end. The appeal verdict against Mladić, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2017, is still pending. The UN proceedings against more than 160 defendants have been concluded.

China

Strategy paper on Xinjiang

Since 2014, according to a Chinese government strategy paper on the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang published on 18 March 2019, "1,588 violent and terrorist gangs have been dismantled, 12,995 terrorists arrested, 2,052 explosive devices seized, 30,645 people punished for 4,858 illegal religious activities, and 345,229 copies of illegal religious material confiscated". There have been 30 incidents of violence since 1990, the last in 2016. In the process, 458 people were killed and at least 2,450 persons were wounded. With this paper, the government justifies its internationally criticized measures to combat extremism, separatism and terrorism among the Muslim population of Xinjiang. According to estimates, up to more than one million mostly Muslim inhabitants of the region are or have been detained in re-education camps. According to the government, these are education and training centres.

India

Incidents in the run-up to the parliamentary elections

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections beginning in April, a further increase in Maoist violence has been observed. There have been reports of clashes between security forces and Maoist rebels in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Odisha.

In the southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, election campaign events led to clashes between political parties.

In northern India, the strongest Aam-Aadmi Party (AAP) in the Delhi Regional Assembly since 2015 launched protests against the two major Indian parties, the incumbent Hindu Bharatiya-Janata Party (BJP) and the secular Congress Party (INC), which achieved the worst election result in its history in the last parliamentary elections in 2014.

Extremist organisations banned in Kashmir

On 22 March 2019, the central government, in a string of decisions against terror camps and separatist leaders in Jammu and Kashmir, banned the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front under the UAPA

(Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) for a period of five years. It claimed their activities were aimed at disrupting the sovereignty of India by supporting militant separatists. The leader of the JKLF had already been arrested in February.

For the same reasons, the Islamist organisation Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), also active in Kashmir, was banned for a period of five years on 28 February 2019 (see Briefing Notes of 4 March 2019) and its leader was also arrested a few days before the ban.

Iraq

Developments in Sinjar

On 17 March 2019, armed riots erupted between the Iraqi army and members of the Yezidi militia YBŞ (Shingal resistance unit; Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şingal) in Hasawik (Sinjar district). Two Iraqi soldiers were killed. The reason for the riots is said to have been a dispute over securing the Iraqi-Syrian border crossing.

On 18 March 2019, the administration in Sinjar published a statement indicating that the Iraqi government had not protected the Yezidi community from ISIS attacks [2014] and had blocked the escape routes by force of arms during the attack on Sinjar [2014]. It says the government is preventing the return of the Yezidi to their home villages. The administration condemns the attack on the Yezidi community by the Iraqi army and calls for resistance and self-determination.

On 19 March 2019, there were again armed riots between the two groups. The Iraqi army sent additional units to the sub-district Snuny (district Sinjar) to secure the Syrian-Iraqi border.

On 21 March 2019, Iraqi media reported that the security situation in Sinjar was under control after representatives of the Iraqi government met with local representatives.

On 24 March 2019, security media publish that three suicide bombers had been arrested by security forces in Sinjar.

Basic services in the province of Basra

Hadi al-Ameri, head of the influential Iranian-backed Badr organisation, was officially commissioned by Prime Minister Adel Abd al-Mahdi on March 19, 2019 to oversee the basic government supply of water and electricity in Basra Province.

Court proceedings commence against foreign ISIS fighters

On 15 March 2019, trials began against 14 suspected ISIS fighters of French nationality. All 14 defendants are said to have signed confessions.

On 18 March 2019, the Belgian national Bilal al-Marchohi (23) was sentenced to death by hanging.

Children and wives of foreign ISIS fighters in the Iraqi Justice System

On 21 March 2019, Reuters published a special report on more than 1,000 children and women of foreign ISIS fighters, including those in women's prison in Baghdad and special camps. So far at least seven children and three women have died as a result of the prison conditions. The identification of women and children is a challenge, since often they do not have any verifiable identity documents and have severed relations with their countries of origin.

Israel/Palestinian Autonomous Territories

Missiles from Gaza hit residential area in Central Israel

A rocket fired from the Gaza Strip struck a residential building in Mishmeret, central Israel early in the morning of 25 March 2019, injuring seven people. Prime Minister Benjhamim Netanjahu announced he was cutting his visit the USA short in light of the attack. This is the second missile attack on the Israeli heartland since the Gaza War of 2014, after the first alarm had been sounded in and around Tel Aviv on 14 March 2019 (cf. Briefing Notes of 18 March 2019).

Yemen

Situation in Hodeidah

Mohammad Ali al-Houthi, leader of the Houthi rebel movement, said in an interview with the Associated Press on 19 March 2019 that their fighters will be withdrawn from the port of Hodeidah without giving up overall control of the port. This withdrawal is part of the peace agreement struck in Stockholm in December 2018. Its implementation has stalled because of disagreements over who will control the port following the withdrawal of Houthi rebel troops and Saudi Arabian-led coalition troops.

Hostilities

The Saudi Arabian-led coalition is said to have attacked Houthi rebel facilities in the capital Sanaa, including the al-Dailami airbase, on 23 March 2019.

On 16 March 2019, pro-government troops attacked the Houthi rebels in the Taiz Governorate. Furthermore, clashes between formal government loyal troops (35th Armoured Brigade led by Abu Abbas' and the 22nd Armoured Brigade associated with the Islah Party) were reported in the city of Taiz on 19 March 2019 and 21 March 2019. These two brigades are formally under the control of the Yemeni government, but are linked to different coalition partners, which has already led to fighting between them in the past.

Kazakhstan

President Nursultan Nazarbayev resigns

The 78-year-old Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev unexpectedly resigned from office. Nazarbayev's decision was announced in a televised address to the nation on 19 March 2019. Nazarbayev had been president since 1991, but before that he had been in power as a communist party leader during the Soviet Union. His successor will be Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Chairman of the Senate. Nazarbayev said that Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, will act as head of state until new elections. The 65-year-old new president is considered to be a loyal follower of Nazarbayev. He was Kazakhstan's Prime Minister from 1999 to 2002. Nazarbayev will likely retain considerable power even after his presidency, partly because of his position as "Leader of the Nation" has been written into the Constitution. A title awarded to him in 2010, officially against his own will. Since last year, he has also been Chairman of the State Security Council for life. Nazarbayev had dismissed his government at the end of February 2019. He had justified his decision with the fact that it had not raised the standard of living and had not made the economy less dependent on oil and natural gas. In future, the focus will be more on supporting the poor and improving living conditions, Nazarbayev said. Previously, Kazakh women had demonstrated for more financial support and safer housing after five people had died in a fire.

Kosovo/Serbia

20 years of Kosovo conflict

On 24 March 1998, NATO actively intervened in the Kosovo conflict. It was the first "humanitarian war mission" in which Germany also participated. It was intended to put an end to the violence and displacement of the Kosovars by Serbian troops in the province of Kosovo, which at that time still belonged to Serbia. Since 1998, an armed uprising of the Albanian Liberation Army (UCK) had spread throughout the predominantly Albanian-populated province. Nine years earlier, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic had abolished Kosovo's autonomy. The Serbian security forces fought the uprising with brutal severity. Time and again civilians were massacred and whole villages were displaced. After failed negotiations, NATO began to launch airstrikes on targets in Serbia in spring 1999.

After Milosevic's withdrawal, the former Serbian province was initially administered by the UN (UNMIK) between June 1999 and 2008, until it declared itself independent in 2008. To the present day, Serbia and Russia as well as seven EU countries refuse to recognise Kosovo as a state. On the anniversary of the

airstrikes, more than 20,000 people gathered in the Serbian city. President Vucic declared that his country would always regard the events as a crime. According to Serbian sources, about 2,500 people died in the NATO attacks.

Currently, both Serbia and Kosovo want to join the EU, but the EU demands the resolution of all disputes and a recognition of Kosovo by Serbia beforehand. But mutual accusations, deeply rooted nationalism and mistrust are putting a strain on relations. Since 2013, both sides have been negotiating a “normalisation process” under EU leadership. (cf. Briefing Notes of 4 March 2019).

Libya

Mass grave discovered in Murzuk

The first two bodies of the 17 bodies recovered from in a recently discovered grave in Murzuk have been identified. Both were members of the Tebu tribe, apparently imprisoned for their ethnicity as part of the Haftar forces' offensive.

Mali

More than 130 people killed in attack by enemy tribe

Armed men reportedly dressed as traditional hunters have killed 134 people, including women and children, and injured at least 55 persons during an attack on a village in central Mali, according to the United Nations. The attack was directed against nomadic Fulani herdsman in the villages of Ogossagou and Welingara and was perpetrated by Dogon ethnic hunters, according to military sources. The UN's MINUSMA stabilisation mission in Mali provided air support through a rapid response force to prevent further attacks and evacuate casualties. Over the past four years, ethnic conflicts have intensified between the Fulani (Fulbe), who are cattle breeders, and the Dogon and Bambara, who are farmers. This is associated with the appearance of the preacher Amadu Kufa, who recruits mainly among the Fulani fighters. The Dogon and Bambara, for their part, set up “self-defence groups”, with more than 500 civilians killed in the conflict last year, according to the UN. This attack is said to have been the bloodiest so far in this region of Mali, according to a statement issued by the Reuters news agency.

Morocco

Teachers continue to protest

On 23 March 2019, teachers again demonstrated in Rabat for better social benefits and permanent contracts. 55,000 teachers have been hired on fixed-term contracts in recent years. These teachers are not covered by health insurance or pension insurance. The security forces have intervened, using water cannons and batons to disperse teachers taking part in the protests. No information has yet been provided about the number of casualties.

Nicaragua

Demonstration: dialogue

On 16 March 2019, during a demonstration in Managua, the police temporarily arrested about 100 opposition members who were protesting for the release of detainees in the context of the internal political crisis. The opposition alliance then announced on 18 March 2019 that it would suspend its participation in talks with the government until all prisoners had been released. The government declared on 20 March 2019 that it would release all those detained in connection with the conflict that had begun on 18 April 2019 within 90 days. The parties to the dialogue then reaffirmed the roadmap for further talks.

In recent weeks, some 150 people have already been released and, according to the opposition, more than 700 are still in prison.

Nigeria

Result of presidential election challenged

On 18 March 2019, Atiku Abubakar, the runner up in the presidential election held on 23 February 2019 according to official election results, challenged the election in the Supreme Court of Nigeria for irregularities. The court must reach a decision within 180 days. On 27 February 2019, the INEC Election Commission confirmed in office the former President Muhammadu Buhari, who had received more than 15.2 million of the votes cast. Around 11.3 million voters had voted for Abubakar.

Boko Haram launches attack on Michika

On the evening of 18 March 2019, fighters of the terrorist organisation Boko Haram attacked the city of Michika (headquarters of the local government area of the same name, state of Adamawa) and tried to rob a bank located there. They are said to have set the bank and some houses on fire. After extended clashes with the army, the attackers were driven away.

North Korea

Parliamentary elections

In the elections to the Supreme People's Assembly on 10 March 2019, according to reports in the state media on 12 March 2019, all 687 candidates were elected with 100 percent of the votes cast. The turnout was 99.99 percent. In the country there is an obligation to vote. In each constituency, there was only one candidate for seats in parliament nominated by the governing parties (Party of Labour of Korea and two bloc parties). There is no opposition.

Pakistan

Judgments in case of student killed two years ago for alleged blasphemy

In the case of the student killed two years ago on the campus of Mardan University in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province by a crowd of people for alleged blasphemy, two men were sentenced to life imprisonment on 21 March 2019. 31 persons were sentenced and 26 persons acquitted in this case in February 2019.

Signs of détente with India on National Day

On Pakistan's national holiday on 23 March 2019, signs of conciliatory exchange with India were visible. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent congratulations on the holiday. His Pakistani counterpart Imran Khan initiated a comprehensive dialogue with India, saying it was time to build a new relationship based on peace.

Pakistan Day commemorates the Lahore Resolution adopted in 1940, which was an important step on the road to the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1947. On that day, large-scale military parades took place in the capital Islamabad.

Russian Federation/Chechnya

Human rights activist sentenced to prison

On 18 March 2019, human rights activist Ojub Titiev was sentenced to four years imprisonment in a penal colony by a court in Grozny on charges of possession of drugs. The defence is considering appealing.

Titiev headed the office of the Memorial Human Rights organisation in the Russian republic of Chechnya in the North Caucasus. He was arrested in January last year and has been in custody ever since. Memorial say prosecutors fabricated the charges and staged a sham trial in order to obstruct the work of the organisation. This is a common method, especially in Chechnya, to imprison human rights activists and opponents of the regime. Memorial, one of the best-known human rights organisations in Russia, has repeatedly reported on collective punishment, kidnappings and torture in the Islamic Caucasus Republic. Ramzan Kadyrov, Chechnya's head of republic, has long been increasingly harsh on human rights defenders. Kadyrov said that "Chechnya will not be liberated until the last human rights activist has left the Republic or is in prison".

Syria

Baghus seized

On 23 March 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), supported by the USA and led by Kurds, announced the capture of Baghus after weeks of fighting. They declared that ISIS had been defeated and that the last territory held by ISIS in Syria had been liberated. At the same time, however, both politicians and the military warned that submerged ISIS fighters continue to pose a threat. Although ISIS had been destroyed, it still had military units hidden in the desert areas of Syria and Iraq.

Venezuela

Two Russian military aircraft land in Venezuela

Two Russian military aircraft landed at Caracas airport on 23 March 2019. According to Venezuelan media, they were a transport plane Antonov 124 and an Ilyushin 62, carrying 99 military personnel and a cargo of 35 tons. The Russian delegation was led by Vasily Tonkoshkurov, Chief of Staff of the Russian Land Forces. The Russian military had come to Caracas within the framework of military cooperation between Russia and Venezuela.

Guaidó's office manager arrested

On 21 March 2019, Juan Guaidó's office manager Roberto Marrero was arrested under suspicion of terrorism during a raid. The opposition accused the government of planting the weapons found during the raid, thereby creating false accusations.

Proof of torture

The CASLA Institute (Centre for Studies and Analysis for Latin America) presented new documents and statements on torture in Venezuela on 20 March 2019. Accordingly, the use of torture in Venezuela increased significantly in the first quarter of 2019. More than 40 cases were documented by the Institute, including military personnel as well as civilians and minors of both male and female.

Desertions

On 18 March 2019, an Army General, Carlos Rotondaro, deserted to Colombia for the first time and joined Guaidó. For several years, Carlos Rotondaro was director of an institute responsible for medical care for the chronically ill. In interviews he described the Maduro government as "incompetent and corrupt". According to the Colombian Immigration Service, more than 700 military personnel have deserted to Colombia since the escalation on 23 February 2019. Brazil has not released any figures so far.