

Group 62 - Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

23 September 2019

Afghanistan

Attacks

On 19 September 2019 at least 20 people were killed and over 90 wounded in a Taliban suicide bombing in front of a hospital in Qalat (capital of the southern province of Zabul). The hospital was heavily damaged and the victims included patients as well as doctors and nurses. Several ambulances were destroyed.

In the night of 17 to 18 September 2019 at least 30 civilians lost their lives and 40 were wounded by a misguided drone in the eastern province of Nangarhar. The attack had been directed against IS fighters.

A bombing near a campaign rally of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani killed at least 26 people on 17 September 2019. The president escaped unharmed. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack in central Parwan province.

High number of victims in August

BBC reported that 611 incidents happened in August in which 2,307 people died and 1,948 were wounded. The figures include 473 dead and 786 wounded civilians. The count was exclusively based on hospital reports and only two other sources which were credible and verified. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded three times as many victims in August than in Syria or Yemen, the BBC said.

Albania

Former interior minister sentenced

On 19 September 2019 the Tirana Special Crime Court handed down a suspended sentence of three and a half years for abuse of office in connection with the activities of a criminal gang against Albania's former interior minister Saimir Tahiri.

The prosecutor had demanded a twelve-year prison sentence. Tahiri held the office of interior minister from 2013 to 2017, he was charged with bribing high-ranking officials, abuse of power and international drug trafficking. The prosecution accused Tahiri of using his office as a minister to protect a group of drug traffickers he was related to and to facilitate their criminal activities.

The co-defendant, former policeman Jaeld Cela, was also sentenced for abuse of office. According to the research network BalkanInsight he has been on the run for two years, though.

The governing Socialist Party of Prime Minister Edi Rama had expelled Tahiri as soon as the accusations had surfaced.

Algeria

More protests although election date has been set

Although the presidential elections have been scheduled for 12 December 2019, numerous people again demonstrated in many cities, because they feel excluded from political processes. The protests are also directed against the election date that was determined 'from above' as well as against the independent election committee chaired by former justice minister Mohammed Charfi, that was established last week. The protesters demanded more extensive changes based on dialogue and are afraid that free and fair elections will be impossible in the current situation. In recent weeks security measures have been progressively

tightened which exacerbated the situation. Army Chief Gaid Salah instructed the security forces to take harsher action and to prevent protesters from outside of Algiers from participating in any protests in the capital.

China

Hong Kong: Protests

On 22 September 2019 a large turn-out of security forces prevented protesters from interfering with traffic at Hong Kong airport. Access to the means of transport to the airport was controlled and only travellers with plane tickets were allowed to enter the airport. Also, on 22 September 2019 protesters rioted in a shopping mall mainly targeting companies that are suspected of siding with the Chinese central government. On 21 September 2019 an authorized protest of several hundred people escalated violently. Several people were taken into custody.

Hong Kong: Police force against protesters

On 19 September 2019 Amnesty International reported that the use of force against protesters by the police has been escalating since the beginning of the recent round of protests in June 2019. The human rights organisation documented arbitrary arrests and cases in which the police refused or delayed access to legal counsel and medical care to those arrested. The organisation said that more than 1,300 arrests had been made and unnecessary and excessive force had been exercised when making arrests. People had been beaten and abused in custody, in some cases even tortured.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Top military FDLR leader shot by government soldiers

A spokesperson of the military announced on 18 September 2019 that on the same day Sylvestre Mudacumura, supreme commander of the military wing (Forces Combattantes Abacunguzi – FOCA) of the Rwanda Hutu militia Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and the people in his party had been shot by government soldiers in Rutshuru territory, North Kivu province. The International Criminal Court in The Hague had issued a warrant of arrest against Mudacumura in 2012. Nine charges of war crimes have been brought against him including attacks on civilians, murder, mutilation, rape and torture, these acts were committed by FDLR fighters in the two eastern Congolese provinces of North and South Kivu between 2009 and 2010. The FDLR had been formed in 2000 by Rwandan Hutus who had fled to eastern Congo after the Hutu majority group's genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994. According to UN information it consists of about 500 to 600 active fighters.

Egypt

Protests against President As-Sisi

The first protests against the rule of President As-Sisi and the military were held on 20 September 2019. The people in Cairo and other cities took to the streets after the building contractor Mohamed Ali had released several documents from Spain and had called for protests in recent weeks. Ali had cooperated with the regime for many years and then fell out of favour. He accuses As-Sisi, his wife and most members of the government of massive corruption which he said he can prove with his company's documentation. On the same day already, the first arrests were made. The human rights organisation Human Rights Watch demanded the release of 74 protesters whose names were known. On Saturday a much stronger presence of the security forces could be observed in most Egyptian cities. Mohamed Ali called for further protests for Friday.

Georgia

Opposition protests

On 20 September 2019 thousands of members of the opposition again protested against the difficult economic situation and the alleged growing Russian influence on Georgia on Rustaveli Boulevard in Tbilisi. In recent months there had already been a number of protests. The criticism focuses on former interior minister Giorgi Gakharia who was elected as the new prime minister by Georgia's parliament on 08 September 2019. During his term as interior minister the police treated protesters with excessive force on 21 June 2019; at the time over 240 people were injured and about 300 temporarily arrested. While the opposition had demanded Gakharia's resignation as interior minister, he was promoted to the office of prime minister. This was masterminded by the likewise controversial head of the governing party Georgian Dream, the billionaire Bidsina Ivanishvili, who is Georgia's wealthiest man and the most influential person within the governing party.

India

Supreme Court on the Kashmir situation

India's Supreme Court published a statement on 16 September 2019 saying that a normal life must be restored for the population in the Kashmir valley, in particular access to public services like hospitals and schools. The Indian military is progressively scaling down its restrictive measures. It is said that schools reopened and the public mobile phone provider shall be allowed to resume operations.

The situation remains tense. There is information that about 250 people, most of whom were arrested under the Public Safety Act, were taken to prisons outside of Kashmir. This law allows authorities to imprison someone for up to two years without charge or trial.

After the revocation of its autonomy rights the former northernmost Indian federal state will be divided into the two union territories Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and Ladakh. While the federal states have local governments, the union territories (UT), of which there will now be nine, are directly administered by the central government in the capital New Delhi. Two union territories, the national territory of the capital Delhi and south-eastern Puducherry, which was the capital of former French India, have local assemblies of their own and more autonomy.

Iran

Sahar Khodayari died

Sahar Khodayari, a female football fan, has died after setting herself on fire. In March she attempted to circumvent the ban on visiting football stadiums for women by disguising herself as a man. She was discovered, though, and arrested. After two days in prison she was released against bond. Nevertheless, Tehran's prosecution brought criminal charges for 'insulting the public order' and 'resistance against the police'. When the 29-year-old learnt that she might face up to six months in prison she doused herself with gasoline and set herself on fire. Thousands of Iranians are now denouncing the ban on visiting sports stadiums for women and demand its abolition. Even Majlis deputy Parvaneh Salahshouri (President of the 'Women's fraction' in the Majlis) supports this demand. Meanwhile the ministry for sports has responded to the FIFA intervention (threat to exclude Iran from the world cup). Women will be admitted to the next qualifying match of the Iranian national team on 10 October 2019. However, it is still open whether this announcement will really apply for all women and also for the future.

Libya

Fight for Tripoli stepped up

The fighting around Tripoli has clearly intensified since 18 September 2019. The focal points are the (non-operational) international airport of Tripoli as well as Khalat Al-Furjan, Sbea and Aziziya. On their respective propaganda platforms both sides are announcing victories and conquests of the other side's materials to prove that the respective other side is supported by foreign powers - Turkey for the Government of National Accord (GNA), France and Russia for the Libyan National Army (LNA). It is assumed that by the ramp-up both sides are trying to improve their negotiating positions for the upcoming Libya conference, organized by Germany.

Pakistan

Accusations of blasphemy

In Ghotki in the north of Sindh province a Hindu principal was officially taken into protective custody on 15 September 2019. Earlier a student had accused the headmaster of blasphemy thereby sparking protests by the local majority Muslim population. A private school and a Hindu temple were attacked, a motorway was blocked.

In Pakistan the frequent accusations of blasphemy allegedly committed by religious minorities are a sensible subject and a recurrent phenomenon. There are incidents of group violence because of alleged blasphemy. Several dozen lynchings for this reason have been documented. Under the Pakistani criminal code blasphemy can be punished by death. According to the US report on religious freedom at least 77 people were in detention for committing blasphemy, 28 of them on death row in 2018. Up until now the death penalty has not been executed for any blasphemy convictions.

Torkham border crossing opened

Since 18 September 2019 the Torkham border corridor between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been open around the clock. Both countries share 2,600km of border line. Pakistan closed the official border crossings to Afghanistan in 2017. At the end of 2017 the crossing in Torkham near the historical Khyber Pass, the route linking the Afghan capital Kabul and Pakistani Peshawar, was reopened for twelve hours per day for humanitarian reasons. In 2019 Pakistan also started to fortify the north-western border equipping it with surveillance devices to monitor movements along the border.

Serbia

Restriction of the freedom of the press

On 17 September 2019 the German daily TAZ reported on the Serbian government's increasing restrictions of the freedom of the press. For long the opposition has been critical of the enforced conformity of the media, the government's control of all TV stations with nationwide reach, of the yellow press and of almost all local media. The opposition says that the media were increasingly misused as platforms for the glorification of President Aleksandar Vučić or to wear dissidents down. The US NGO Freedom House ranked Serbia as a country with 'limited freedom of the media' in its annual report for 2019 and deplored the intimidation of journalists.

Serbia's opposition parties came together in the Alliance for Serbia in early 2019 and announced their intention to boycott the parliamentary and local elections in spring in protest. Opposition politician Borko Stefanović demanded the opening of information programmes of stations broadcasting on nationwide frequencies, specifically state TV, to dissidents as well. This also was one of the key demands of the months-long protest movement at the beginning of the year.

Salary hike in public service sector

With an eye to the upcoming parliamentary elections in spring 2020 the Serbian government decided on 17 September 2019 to raise the salaries in the public service sector by eight to 15%. Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and Finance Minister Siniša Mali said that about 600,000 employees in the administration, the health and educational systems, the police and the armed forces would benefit from this increase. They said that the increase had been approved, because of a surplus in the treasury.

As recently as last year the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Serbia had signed a three-year agreement on policy coordination assisted by the IMF. As part of this coordination the IMF had recommended that Serbia should not raise salaries by more than six percent.

Somalia

Attacks

Several people, including civilians, were killed and wounded in an al-Shabaab attack in the capital Mogadishu on 18 September 2019. The attack targeted a government official who survived.

Fighting

Last week several clashes of al-Shabaab on the one hand with the Somali National Army, AMISOM and regional security forces on the other were reported. Such as in the cities of Jalalaqsi and Bulo Burde (Hiraan region) and Jamame (Lower Shabelle region). US fighter jets (US AFRICOM) flew raids against al-Shabaab in Kismayo on 17 September 2019.

Syria

Talks in Ankara: Parties to the conflict seeking diplomatic solution

In a joint statement the presidents of Russia, Iran and Turkey announced their agreement on the key aspects of ending the Syrian conflict on 16 September 2019. These include the composition of the committee to draw up a new constitution for Syria as well as the consistent implementation of the de-escalation zone in Idlib and the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity.

In their individual statements the presidents then explained their own emphases: President Erdogan said that the Kurdish YPG militia was the greatest risk to peace, while President Putin was also worried about a renewed strengthening of IS. He said that Russia would participate in anti-terrorism operations of the Syrian government in the future as well. Rohani repeatedly demanded the withdrawal of US troops from the north-east and along the Iraqi-Syrian border.

On 18 September 2019 UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres confirmed that the establishment of a constitutional committee could be facilitated. This initiative dates back to the UN peace plan of 30 June 2012 that the Security Council could agree on at the time. New elections shall be held in Syria, once a new constitution has been drawn up.

IS appeals to liberate of its prisoners

Also on 16 September 2019 the Islamist militia published an audio message allegedly recorded by its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In his message he calls for coordinated attacks on Syrian internment camps in which hundreds of IS followers are held captive. This was the first message from al-Baghdadi since April 2019. The ransom for him is USD 25 million which makes him the world's most wanted person.

Dier ez-Zor: Air raids targeting militias, protests against military presence

At least ten people died in an attack by an unidentified drone in Boukamal in Dier ez-Zor governorate near the Iraqi border on 17 September 2019. An Iraqi security official said that the attack had targeted an arms storage of Shiite militias.

On 20 September 2019 pro-opposition media reported protests near Salhiyah demanding the withdrawal of Syrian government troops and Iran-supported militias. It is said that the protesters have meanwhile occupied two army posts. Reportedly soldiers started to fire and killed one person.

Tunisia

Presidential elections - outsider candidates in run-off election

24 male and two female candidates stood for election on 15 September 2019. They included a former president, two former heads of government, eleven former ministers and many former members of parliament as well as the current Prime Minister Youssef Chahed. The voter turnout was merely 45% and two outsider candidates came in first. 18.4% of the vote and thus the best result, was achieved by the constitutional lawyer Kaïs Saïed who is independent of any political party and known for his ultra-conservative views, the runner-up at 15.6% of the vote is media mogul Nabil Karoui who has been in custody since August on charges of tax evasion and money laundering. They will compete in the run-off elections in October.

During the election campaign both candidates distanced themselves from the ruling political figures. Eight years after the ousting of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali many Tunisians are disappointed by democracy which they had once welcomed enthusiastically. The economic situation has not improved, but rather deteriorated especially for young people and in the country's interior.

Former dictator dead

Tunisian media reported the death of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali at the age of 83 in the Saudi Arabian port city of Jeddha on 19 September 2019 from health problems. He was Tunisia's president from 1987 to 2011 and the first leader to be ousted by the Arab uprisings in 2011. Since he was toppled and fled to exile on 14 January 2011 he had been living in Saudi Arabia.

For a long time, he had been considered a partner that guarantees stability. His government was authoritarian; he was accused of suppressing the liberal leftist opposition just as the Islamic-religious opposition; there were also allegations of torture practised by his police and intelligence services. At the time, the Arab Spring also led to the ousting of then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Libya's strongman Muammar al-Gaddafi.

Venezuela

Zambrano released

Edgar Zambrano, vice-president of Venezuela's parliament, who had been imprisoned since May, was conditionally released on 17 September 2019. He may not leave the country and must regularly report to the authorities. In his first public statement he urged all concerned sectors in Venezuela to work for the release of political prisoners, be they civilians or members of the military.

Blackouts

On 20 September 2019 there were further extensive blackouts in eastern Caracas and at least in Miranda state (according to official sources). On social networks people were talking about major blackouts in a total of ten states. A minimum of five hours of blackout could be confirmed for Zulia state, located on the border to Colombia. This state is affected much more severely by the crisis than the city of Caracas. Violence and looting are a regular feature in Zulia's capital Maracaibo.

Opposition-government relations starting to move

While most of the members of the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática opposition alliance do not see any perspective for an agreement with Maduro and are demanding new elections after the Oslo talks failed, three of the alliance's smaller parties achieved an agreement with the Maduro government. The US sanctions are rejected by both sides. The government promised to release political prisoners and announced the return of the deputies of the socialist governing party to the National Assembly.

US impose new sanctions

On 17 September 2019 the US announced new sanctions directed against three individuals involved in trading food for the CLAP system and a total of 16 companies linked with these individuals. These three individuals were sanctioned because of accusations of massive corruption as they allegedly defrauded the CLAP system for enormous amounts by issuing significantly exaggerated invoices due to their close ties to the ruling elite of Venezuela. Although this will probably restrict these individuals' chances to benefit from the system, there is the risk that, at least in the short run, Venezuela's problems to secure basic supplies will be exacerbated in view of its strong dependence on imports.

Yemen

Houthi rebels intend to stop attacks on Saudi Arabia

On 20 September 2019 the Houthi rebels announced that they will stop all attacks on Saudi Arabia. The announcement is made one week after the Houthi rebels assumed responsibility for the attack on two Saudi

Arabian oil facilities. However, it is widely assumed that it was actually Iran that was behind the attack (see BN of 16 September 2019). Saudi Arabia did not immediately comment on the Houthi rebels' declaration. The Houthi rebels also threatened to attack the UAE.

Fighting

Last week armed confrontations, air raids and attacks by different armed groups were reported from various regions in Yemen. Among them Hodeida, Sadaah city, Abs (Hajjah Governorate), Radhun district (Shabwah Governorate), Shaqra (Abyan Governorate), Shibam (Hadramawt Governorate) and Lahij Governorate.

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