

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

24 February 2020

Afghanistan

Result of the presidential election announced

The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of Afghanistan announced on 18.02.20, almost five months after the vote, that the incumbent, Ashraf Ghani, had narrowly won the presidential election. The IEC said that Ghani had received 50.64% of the valid votes, while his main opponent in the election and current government partner (as CEO), Abdullah Abdullah, had only won 39.52%. It reported that all the other candidates trailed far behind on less than five percent. According to the IEC, of almost 9.7 million eligible voters (the population of Afghanistan is estimated at 27 to 32 million), only just over 1.8 million valid votes could be counted. Voter turnout was only around 18%. Abdullah has rejected the election result and declared himself the winner, also announcing that he will form his own parallel government. Other candidates and politicians such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar or Abdul Rashid Dostum have also criticised the elections and the result.

Agreement on reduction of violence enters into force

On 22.02.20, the agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban on a reduction of armed conflict came into force. Under this agreement, the Taliban undertake not to carry out any attacks in or on cities, roads, U.S. military bases or headquarters of the Afghan security forces for seven days. In return, the Afghan security forces and NATO will not engage in any offensives. At the end of this seven-day truce, on 29.02.20, the U.S. and the Taliban are to sign a peace agreement. Taliban talks with the Afghan government could then take place, but the government is divided.

UNAMA Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2019

Last year, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 10,392 civilian casualties (3,403 dead and 6,989 injured) as a result of the armed conflict, representing a five per cent decrease as compared to 2018 and the lowest overall level of civilian casualties since 2013. This reduction was driven by a decrease in civilian casualties caused by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP). Civilian casualties caused by the other parties increased, particularly by the Taliban and by the international military forces. The use of IEDs in both suicide and non-suicide attacks accounted for 42% of the overall total of civilian casualties. The provinces most affected were Kabul (1,563 casualties) and Nangarhar (1,070 casualties), followed by Helmand (675), Ghazni (673) and Faryab (665).

Algeria

First anniversary of mass protests

On 16.02.19, the people of Kabylia took to the streets for the first time, and since 22.02.19 there have been regular mass protests for democratic reform in many cities throughout the country every Friday after prayer. The demonstrations led to an announcement by then-President Abdelaziz Bouteflika that he would not be seeking a fifth term in office and would be standing down. The presidential election, held on 12.12.19, was won by a former confidant of Bouteflika, Abdelmadjid Tebboune. After the election, protests intensified again, with the population demanding more far-reaching political reforms, a government made up of new members with no connection to the old government, and a civilian state, not a military one. The protest movement has begun to organise itself in the past few weeks since it risks not achieving its goals otherwise. Particularly in

the weeks prior to the presidential election, the security forces repeatedly intervened in the demonstrations and arrested people.

Burkina Faso

Church attack kills dozens

On 16.02.20, suspected jihadists attacked a Protestant church during a weekly service in the village of Pansi in the northeastern province of Yagha, killing 24 people, including the pastor, wounding 18 and kidnapping several others.

China

Xinjiang: leaked internal documents on re-education camps published

A confidential document leaked to the International media and published in excerpts on 17.02.20 contains information on 311 detainees in re-education camps who come from Karakax County (also: Qaraqash, Chinese: Moyu) in Hotan Prefecture. The information in list form includes the reasons for their detention, information on the families of the persons concerned and their social environment, as well as assessments on whether they can be released. This so-called Karakax List shows the range of behaviours that lead to detention. It also provides an insight into the bureaucratic decision-making processes involved and into government measures that take effect after release. According to the Karakax List, reasons for internment include having more children than allowed under family planning policy, absence from daily flag ceremonies and elements of religious practice, such as fasting or praying at home, growing a beard or wearing a veil, a pilgrimage to Mecca or a donation to a mosque. 90% of those detained are men, the majority aged between 25 and 49. The document also shows that, once released, detainees are monitored in their home community or in some cases are released into possibly forced labour.

Activist arrested

The activist Xu Zhiyong was arrested in Guangzhou (Guangdong province) on 15.02.20. He had attended a meeting of human rights lawyers and dissidents in Xiamen (Fujian province) in December 2019 and had subsequently gone into hiding. Several other participants were also arrested. Xu, co-founder of the New Citizens' Movement, a network of grassroots activists, was sentenced to four years in prison in 2014.

Further spread of Covid-19

The Covid-19 respiratory virus continues to spread. So far, China has officially recorded 77,150 infections and 2,592 deaths. Outside mainland China, more than 2,200 infections and 27 deaths have been reported to date.

Ethiopia

Attack on rally

On 23.02.20, a bomb attack took place on a rally in support of Ethiopian Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner Abiy Ahmed in the city of Ambo some one hundred kilometres west of the capital, Addis Ababa. The police stated that 29 people were injured, and the top police official in Ethiopia's Oromia region said that six people had been arrested. The attack was believed to be the work of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA).

The attack occurred just two days after the targeted killing of the police commissioner of the city of Burayu, a special zone surrounding the capital. The background is still unclear, with 17 people reported to have been taken into custody. However, the OLA is also suspected to have been responsible for that killing.

The OLA, led by Abbaa Gadaa, is the armed wing of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF-Shane Gumii), which wants to continue the armed struggle against the government – unlike most of the formerly terrorist OLF.

Ghana

Members of separatist group arrested

On 17.02.20, 21 suspected members of a separatist organisation called the Homeland Study Group Foundation (HSGF) were arrested in a forest area in the Ketu North Municipality in the Volta Region, where they are reported to have been undergoing paramilitary training. Members of this organisation were arrested on a number of occasions in 2019. One of its aims is to achieve independence for the Volta Region under the name Western Togoland. In July 2019, however, the Attorney General dropped corresponding charges against several leading members of the HSGF who had been arrested.

Iran

Conservatives and ultraconservatives win parliamentary elections

Parliamentary elections were held on 21.02.20. Although the final result will not be announced until 24.02.20, the conservative coalition's top candidate, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, is considered the clear winner of the election and new parliamentary president. However, the turnout of only 42.5% was significantly lower than expected by the political leadership. The news agency Fars reported that in Tehran's largest constituency, only just under 30% of eligible voters cast their votes. Numerous supporters of the moderate camp had announced that they would not go to the polls out of frustration with the political leadership. The reformers led by President Hassan Rohani had already been dealt a difficult hand in this year's election as almost 75% of their candidates had already been disqualified in advance by the Guardian Council.

Iraq

UN criticises excessive violence during protests

On 17.02.20, the head of the UN mission in Iraq, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, once again criticised the use of excessive violence against demonstrators critical of the government. Between 14.02. and 16.02.20, at least 50 people were injured by stones, incendiary bombs and the use of hunting rifles loaded with birdshot. Hennis-Plasschaert called on the Iraqi authorities to clarify the identity of unknown armed actors and protect demonstrators.

Although the protests critical of the government have continued, they have lost strength since Moqtada al-Sadr withdrew his support (see BN of 27.01.20).

Poverty rate in Iraq

On 16.02.20, the Iraqi Ministry of Planning published current figures on the poverty rate, based on a study from 2018. According to the survey, the poverty rate has dropped to 20% (compared to 22.5% in 2014). There are significant differences between the individual provinces: while the poverty rate in Suleimaniya province is the lowest at 4.5%, it is 52% in Muthanna province.

Approximately 355,000 children and young people not in school

According to a UN report published on 17.02.20, approximately 355,000 children and young people have no access to the education system. The report states that children who became adolescents or young adults under the IS regime can hardly make up for the missing school years or have no alternatives to the conventional education system. Children and adolescents living in IDP camps are also affected by restrictions on their freedom of movement or sometimes do not have the necessary civil status documents for registration at a school.

Kazakhstan

Arrests ahead of the planned founding congress of the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan

The founding congress of the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, which was to have taken place in Almaty on 22.02.20, was cancelled after a number of party supporters were arrested and detained. Police arrested three

opposition activists on their way to attend the congress. Kazakh law requires the participation of at least 1,000 people in the founding congress of a political party for the party to be officially registered. According to party leaders, supporters of the party were prevented from leaving for the congress. Some opposition activists complained of efforts to prevent them from attending the congress by various forms of intimidation, including violent attacks either threatened or carried out by unknown persons.

Arrests prior to demonstrations critical of the government

On 22.02.20, police blocked opposition rallies critical of the government in Almaty and other cities by preventing local people from meeting and detaining more than 100 people planning to attend the rallies. The unregistered Democratic Party of Kazakhstan and the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK) movement, which has been banned as an extremist organisation since 2018, had planned to hold rallies that day. Zhanbolat Mamai, a leading figure in the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, was also arrested and sentenced to three days in administrative detention.

Kenya

Attack by al-Shabaab kills three people

Three people were killed and others injured in an attack by al-Shabaab on a bus in Kenya. The attack occurred on 19.02.20 on the route from Mandera to Nairobi. It was reported that the Islamists deliberately took Christians off the bus and when two of them could not recite the Islamic creed, the Shahada, they were executed. A Muslim was apparently killed in an attempt to protect the Christians from the attackers. Other passengers and the driver were injured.

Kenya has been the target of repeated attacks because of its support of the African Union's Amisom mission in the fight against Islamists in Somalia.

Libya

Negotiations continue despite fragile ceasefire

On 20.01.20, UN representatives continued their talks with rival groups regarding a ceasefire. It was reported that there had been separate talks between Special Envoy Ghassan Salamé and the internationally recognised government of Prime Minister Fayed al-Sarraj and envoys of General Khalifa Haftar. Al-Sarraj's government initially withdrew from the talks after Libyan rebels had again fired on the capital, Tripoli, on 18.01.20. Tripoli port was attacked with more than 15 missiles, killing three civilians and injuring five others, according to the Ministry of Health.

On 21.02.20, the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, confirmed to journalists in Istanbul for the first time the presence of pro-Turkish fighters in support of Libya's unity government. Members of Syrian militias were in Libya as well as a Turkish training unit. In an interview with the Russian news agency RIA, published the same day, Libyan General Khalifa Haftar set conditions for agreeing to a ceasefire. Turkey would have to withdraw its fighters from Libya and stop supplying arms to Tripoli.

Mauritania

Fight against terrorism

On 23.02.20, the ministers of the G5 Sahel states (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad) met in the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott, to prepare the sixth summit on 25.02.20. The meeting focused on the strategic framework for improving security in the five countries. A joint Action Plan for 2020 specifically provides for the restructuring of the Permanent Secretariat of the G5 Sahel and the expansion of the joint armed forces in the event of an increase in terrorist attacks. According to the Permanent Secretary of the G5 countries, Maman Sambo Sidikou, the resurgence of terrorist attacks in recent months is forcing the G5 member states to strengthen the operational measures of the joint forces and to implement concrete measures on the ground, particularly in the border region of Burkina-Niger-Mali. Improving the security and development policy of the five countries will be the main topic of the summit on 25.02.20.

During a visit to Nouakchott by Senegalese President Macky Sall on 18.02.20, he and his Mauritanian counterpart, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, signed several bilateral agreements aimed at combating jihadism.

Arrest of several human rights activists

On 20.02.20, Amnesty International (AI) reported the arrest of several people, including the activist Mekfoula Mint Brahim and members of her group Pour une Mauritanie Verte et Démocratique, as well as members of L'Alliance pour la Refondation de l'État Mauritanien (AREM). They were reportedly accused of having assembled without state authorisation, thereby endangering state security. AI sharply criticised the arrests.

Nigeria

Villagers killed in Katsina State

On 15.02.20, according to civilians, approximately 150 bandits attacked the two villages of Dankar and Tsauwa (Katsina State, Batsari Local Government Area). In Tsauwa, 21 inhabitants and 40 animals were killed and more than 70 houses burned down. In Dankar, nine people were killed. In contrast to similar incidents in Katsina, however, no one was abducted. Neither food nor animals were looted. Katsina, along with Sokoto, Kaduna and Jigawa, is one of the states in northwestern Nigeria where, for several years now, hundreds of people have been killed, many abducted and thousands displaced in frequent attacks by bandits on villages. The lack of security forces, especially in rural areas, means that they are not able to combat banditry effectively.

Pakistan

High-ranking Taliban escapes

On 17.02.20, Pakistan's Ministry of Interior confirmed that Ehsanullah Ehsan escaped from military custody at the beginning of 2020. Ehsan, a former high-ranking leader of the Pakistani Taliban Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and later spokesman for the radical Islamist group Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), was captured in early 2017. The background to the escape is not known. The military did not issue a statement. The TTP is responsible for carrying out numerous deadly suicide bombings as well as other attacks on civilian and security targets.

Ehsan distanced himself from the TTP in August 2014 and joined the renegade faction JuA, led by a former Pakistani Taliban commander, which is responsible for a number of attacks, including on a Pakistan-India border crossing, Christian churches, an Easter celebration in Lahore, and mosques, police officers and courthouses.

Suicide bombing in Quetta

On 17.02.20, a suicide bombing in Quetta (Balochistan) killed at least seven people, including two police officers, and injured about two dozen people. The attack was carried out on the fringes of an event organised by the Barelvi Party Jamaat-e-Ahle Sunnat. No one claimed responsibility for the attack. In 2006, the radical Islamist Deobandi group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) carried out a major attack on the party in Karachi (Sindh), killing at least 55 people.

The predominantly Sunni Muslims in Pakistan are divided intra-denominationally into two main groups, Deobandi and Barelvi, who accuse each other of unbelief (kufr). The majority of Pakistan's non-Pashtun population belongs to the Barelvi school of thought. The stronghold of Barelvism is the province of Punjab. Deobandi consider Barelvi to be sectarian, among other things because of their practice of Sufi shrine worship.

Russian Federation

Suspended sentence after demonstration for free elections in Moscow

According to media reports, a Moscow court handed student Andrei Barshai a three-year suspended sentence for attacking a national guard during a demonstration for free elections in Moscow on 27.07.19. The sentence was far less than the prosecution's demand for a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence. In an open letter, 140 Russian scientists and scholars had called for the 21-year-old's release. During the demonstration, which was

attended by several thousand people, the police took extremely heavy-handed action against demonstrators and arrested 1,372 people. The prosecutions against protesters at the demonstration provoked a public outcry. Moscow courts announced reduced sentences against the accused demonstrators.

Rwanda

Oppositionist dies in custody

According to the police, Kizito Mihigo, an opponent of the Rwandan regime, committed suicide while in custody. He was arrested near the border with Burundi on 13.02.20 and found dead in his cell on 17.02.20. He was accused of corruption and attempting to illegally cross the border into Burundi to join terrorist groups.

After what Mihigo said was a forced confession, he was sentenced to ten years in prison in 2015 on charges which included forming a criminal organisation. Mihigo was released in 2018 under a prisoners' amnesty.

Somalia

Al-Shabaab attacks military bases

On 19.02.20, al-Shabaab is reported to have attacked two military bases in the Lower Shabelle region. In one attack, al-Shabaab stormed the el-Salini military base and occupied it briefly, taking weapons and vehicles. The second attack took place at a military base in the city of Qoryooley, where Somali and Ugandan AMISOM soldiers are stationed. An unknown number of soldiers were killed.

Journalist killed

The television journalist Abdiwali Ali Hassan was shot dead in the town of Afgoye on 16.02.20. Although no one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack, the journalist had reportedly received death threats earlier. This is the first targeted killing of a journalist in 2020.

South Sudan

Formation of a joint government

On 22.02.20, President Salva Kiir and opposition leader Riek Machar agreed on a joint transitional government to end the suffering of the people and not lead the country back into war, Kiir and Machar said. More than two million refugees were asked to return to the country.

The cooperation between rebels and the government is part of a peace agreement that aims to end the civil war that has been going on for more than six years. The government was formed shortly before the deadline set by the United Nations, the U.S. and a number of East African states for Southern Sudan last year. Originally, a government was to be formed as early as March 2019, and a three-year transition phase was to begin with the drafting of a new constitution. However, the parties could not agree on the formation of a joint national army, among other things.

Syria

Northwest: fighting and flight of civilians in Idlib

On 21.02.20, two members of the Turkish military died in air strikes in Idlib. On 22.02.20, the Turkish Defence Ministry confirmed the death of another soldier who was killed in an attack by Syrian government troops. This brings the number of Turkish soldiers killed in Idlib since the beginning of the month to 16.

For almost a year now, Syrian government troops, supported by allied militias and the Russian military, have been advancing in the last rebel stronghold in Idlib and adjacent areas. Since Turkey sent additional troops to the region in February 2020 (cf. BN of 10.02.20) in order to support the rebels, direct clashes between the respective protecting powers have repeatedly occurred.

According to the UN, more than 300 people have been killed in Idlib and Aleppo since the beginning of the year. Approximately 900,000 civilians, mostly minors, have reportedly been forced to flee fighting since 01.12.19, after they left their homes in the course of the latest offensive aimed at recapturing the last rebel stronghold. Satellite images show large tent cities near Kafaldin and Deir Hassan near the Turkish border. It is reported that nearly 50,000 people are currently seeking refuge under trees or in the open air. Meanwhile, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which is closely linked to the opposition, has reported Russian air strikes on Ariha and Qmenas, west of Saraqeb.

Aleppo again connected to important traffic routes

On 22.02.20, the Transport Minister announced that the M5 highway between Damascus and Aleppo could be put back into service for the first time in eight years. The road, often referred to as the lifeline of the Syrian economy, connects the urban centres of Damascus, Homs and Hama with the industrial city of Aleppo to the north. The M5 connection shortens the journey between Syria's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, by 90km.

On 19.02.20, a passenger plane from Damascus was able to land in Aleppo for the first time since 2012.

Occupied north: switch to Turkish lira due to the decline of the Syrian currency

According to media reports, the administration in the Turkish-occupied areas in and around Azaz has started to use the Turkish lira in everyday transactions. The Syrian opposition enclave, which has been maintained by a Turkish military presence since 2016, is estimated to be home to about three million people. Recently, the government in Damascus imposed penalties for trading in foreign currencies.

Togo

Gnassingbé wins presidential election

According to provisional results, incumbent Faure Gnassingbé (governing party Union pour la République – UNIR) won the presidential election of 22.02.20. His strongest challenger, former Prime Minister Agbéyomé Kodjo (Mouvement patriotique pour le développement et la démocratie – MPDD), received 18% of the vote, while opposition leader Jean-Pierre Fabre (Alliance nationale pour le changement – ANC) received 4%. A further four candidates ran for election. Around 76% of the 3.6 million eligible voters voted. The divided opposition was not able to agree on a common candidate. Kodjo claimed victory for himself on election day and spoke of election fraud. After the peaceful elections, the military temporarily surrounded Kodjo's home and that of the former Catholic Archbishop of Lomé and Kodjo supporter, Philippe Kpodzro, officially for their own protection.

Faure Gnassingbé has been in office since the death, in 2005, of his father, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who had come to power in a coup in 1967. A constitutional amendment in 2019 will allow him to be re-elected until 2030 following the term of office that has now begun. Ranking 167th out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Togo is one of the least developed countries. Roughly half of its almost eight million inhabitants live on less than US\$1.90 a day.

Turkey

Acquittals in the Gezi Park protests trial and new arrest warrant

On 18.02.20, Osman Kavala and eight other defendants in the Istanbul Gezi protests trial were acquitted as the court found that there was insufficient evidence to prove the defendants' guilt. The court also ordered the release of Kavala, who has been in pre-trial detention for more than two years. According to media reports, the case against seven other defendants will continue.

After the acquittal, the Council of Judges and Prosecutors began an investigation into the panel of judges responsible, to check whether there were errors in the verdict. In addition, the Public Prosecutor's Office announced that it would lodge an appeal.

A short time later, a new arrest warrant was issued against Kavala, citing an investigation into the failed coup attempt of July 2016. He was re-arrested and an Istanbul court again remanded him in custody on the grounds that there was strong evidence that he had been involved in the decision-making process of the attempted coup. In addition, there was a risk of flight.

New wave of arrests

According to media reports, on 18.02.20, the Turkish Public Prosecutor's Office again issued around 700 arrest warrants on charges of supporting the Gülen movement, in particular against soldiers, police officers and judicial officials. Approximately 160 people had already been arrested, and further suspects were still being investigated nationwide.

In Ankara, the Public Prosecutor's Office is targeting Justice Ministry employees. Anadolu Agency reports that 71 people have been arrested there, while in investigations against air force employees, the arrest of 157 people has been ordered, including 101 active officers. According to the report, another 467 people are accused of having manipulated a police selection procedure in 2009 in order to get Gülen supporters into important positions.

Ukraine

Fighting in eastern Ukraine

During fighting between the Ukrainian army and pro-Russian rebels, one Ukrainian soldier was killed and four injured in eastern Ukraine on 18.02.20. According to the Ukrainian army, pro-Russian rebels attacked Ukrainian positions close to the villages of Novotoshkivske and Krymske, in one of the three sectors from which both parties to the conflict intended to withdraw in accordance with an agreement signed last year. President Volodymyr Zelensky spoke of a cynical provocation by pro-Russian rebels, which undermined efforts to resolve the conflict and to which he intended to respond decisively.

A further summit meeting between Ukraine and Russia, mediated by Germany and France, is planned for April 2020 to resolve the six-year conflict.

Uzbekistan

Persons arrested on suspicion of supporting Islamist groups

On 19.02.20, the police arrested 21 people who, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, have links to a militant Islamist group in Syria. According to the police, the arrested men were allegedly under the ideological influence of an Uzbek who is a member of the Islamic group Katiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, which has been banned as a terrorist organisation since 2016. The arrested men had planned to financially support the group and join it. In recent years, thousands of Uzbek nationals have joined various Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq.

Yemen

Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula announces new leader

In an audio message delivered on 23.02.20, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) confirmed the death of its leader, Qassim al-Rimi, weeks after the U.S. announced that al-Rimi had been killed in a military operation (cf. BN of February 10, 20). His successor is reportedly the former deputy leader and spokesman of the group, Khalid bin Umar Batarfi.

Fighting south of the port of Hodeida

Last week, fighting between Houthi rebels and Yemeni government troops was reported in the town of Durayhimi, south of the port of Hodeida. Among other things, the Yemeni government accused the Houthi rebels of shelling the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on 21.02.20. According to reports, several soldiers were killed. A UN-brokered ceasefire had led to a decrease in fighting in Hodeida, one of Yemen's main ports for commercial goods and humanitarian aid.

Yemen/Saudi Arabia

Houthi rebels carry out attack on Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia claims to have intercepted and destroyed several ballistic missiles fired from Sanaa, Yemen, by Houthi rebels on 21.02.20. The missiles were aimed at cities and civilians in Saudi Arabia. The Houthi rebels claimed that they had successfully attacked the Saudi Arabian state oil company Saudi Aramco and other sensitive targets in the coastal town of Yanbu, but without providing evidence.

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BN-Redaktion@bamf.bund.de