

## Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

# Briefing Notes

13. January 2020

### **Afghanistan**

#### **Preliminary election result announced**

On 22.12.19, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) announced the preliminary result of the presidential elections held on 28.09.19. The result indicates that incumbent President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani received 50.64% of the votes cast, while his main challenger Abdullah Abdullah, who currently shares power with Ghani in a unity government, received 39.52%. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (3.85%), Rahmatullah Nabil (1.86%) and Faramarz Tammana (0.99%) followed in third to fifth place. According to a map published by the IEC, Ghani won in the south, south-east and east (in mainly Pashtun areas) and in Kabul, whereas Abdullah won most votes in the entire north and north-east (in non-Pashtun and Hazara areas). However, more than 4,000 complaints have been filed contesting the election, which the IEC says will take another five weeks to process. Abdullah said he would not accept the results, as fake votes had also been counted. A final result is not expected before mid-February 2020.

### **Albania**

#### **EU welcomes election of new Prosecutor-General**

The EU ambassador to Tirana has congratulated Albania's parliament for electing a new Prosecutor-General, Olsian Cela in December 2019, seeing it as a major step forward in the battle to fight high-level corruption and organised crime more effectively.

Cela secured 101 of the 140 votes of MPs in parliament. The 42-year-old is the first Prosecutor-General to be elected on the basis of ongoing judicial reforms which are aimed, inter alia, at making the prosecutorial service more politically independent (cf. BN of 25.11.19).

The Prosecutor-General (Prokurori i Përgjithshëm) is the highest judicial authority in Albania for prosecuting persons and organisations.

#### **New media law**

The Albanian parliament passed a controversial media law on 18.12.19 despite national and international protest. Critics see this as a step backwards on the path towards meeting European standards.

The package of laws, literally called the Anti-Defamation Package (Paketa anti-shpifje), opens up the possibility to tighten regulation of online media in particular. For instance, the Albanian Media Authority (AMA) will in future be able to order the media to remove content from their websites if they publish "untruths". If they fail to do so, they could face fines of up to EUR 6,500 or have their activity suspended.

### **Algeria**

#### **President Tebboune announces constitutional reform**

On 08.01.20, the presidential palace announced that President Abdelmadjid Tebboune was setting up an Expert Committee in charge of drawing up proposals on the Constitution revision. Through this decision, President Tebboune is working to fulfil one of his commitments made during his electoral campaign. The Constitutional Committee is headed by Professor Ahmed Laraba, a nationally and internationally renowned lawyer.

## **Belarus**

### **Protests against closer integration between Belarus and Russia**

On the weekend of 20.12.19 to 22.12.19, protests took place in Minsk in the aftermath of the signature by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin of new integration treaties for the two countries on 20.12.19. The more than 1,500 demonstrators were voicing their opposition to closer integration between Belarus and the Russian Federation. No arrests were made during the demonstrations, but at least two opposition activists had already been arrested prior to the protests.

Since the Union State (Union State of Russia and Belarus) was established in 1999, the two countries have maintained close collaboration in the fields of scientific and technological, economic and military cooperation. Supplies of gas and oil at discounted prices mean that Belarus is economically dependent on Russia, which in the past has repeatedly led to trade policy conflicts between the two countries.

### **Death sentence carried out**

According to media reports, the death sentence on Alexander Asipovich was carried out on 17.12.19. In January 2019, Asipovich was sentenced to death for the murder of two women in Baruysk. At least four people are reported to have been executed in Belarus in 2019.

Belarus is the only country in Europe that still imposes and executes the death penalty. There are no exact figures on the death sentences carried out. According to human rights organisations, some 400 people have been executed since the country gained independence in 1991. Media and human rights organisations reported four executions in 2018.

## **Burkina Faso**

### **Series of attacks**

On 04.01.20, a roadside bomb exploded on the road between the villages of Toeni and Tougan in the north-western province of Sourou when a bus carrying school children passed by. 14 persons were killed, most of them school children. The bus was part of a convoy of three buses carrying high school students returning to their schools after the Christmas holidays.

In the evening hours of 25.12.19, suspected jihadists attacked an army patrol in the village of Hallale in the northern province of Soum. Eleven soldiers and five terrorists were killed.

On 24.12.19, about 200 heavily armed suspected Islamist fighters attacked the town of Arbinda as well as the nearby military base in the northern province of Soum. According to official statistics. The attack and subsequent battle lasted several hours, resulting in the deaths of 35 civilians, seven soldiers and 80 terrorists. President Roch Marc Christian Kabore declared two days of national mourning. The attack is considered to have been the deadliest since Islamist attacks erupted in 2015.

## **Cameroon**

### **Parliament decides on special status for anglophone regions**

On 19.12.19, both houses of parliament granted "special status" to the two conflict-ridden English-speaking regions Northwest and Southwest. Among other things, it provides for the establishment of assemblies of traditional leaders (chiefs), regional assemblies and regional councils. Each of these institutions will have elected presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries and controllers for the management of public affairs. Three commissioners will be responsible for matters which, according to the bill, serve economic, health, social, educational, sporting and cultural development. The elected mayors are to be given more powers, including the authority to employ hospital staff and teachers. The granting of special status to the two Anglophone regions in which at least 3,000 people have been killed and over 500,000 displaced since 2017, cannot be expected to ease the conflict. The special status has already been rejected by some of the militant separatists who are calling for a split between the two regions. Denis Kemlemo, spokesperson of the largest opposition party represented in parliament, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), has criticised that the special status granted to the Anglophone regions neither granted legislative competence nor financial autonomy. The

members of the SDF in the House of Commons, which has its base in the Anglophone regions, either abstained or voted against the bill.

## **China**

### **Hong Kong: protests**

On 12.01.20, according to the Hong Kong Civil Assembly Team, 36,000 persons gathered for a rally in the Central District, or up to 3,000 according to police sources, in preparation for a demonstration to be held on 19.01.20 to call on the international community to impose sanctions on China if the Hong Kong government fails to meet the demands of the protest movement which is demanding that persons who have been arrested so far be released, that protests stop being called riots, that an independent investigation be carried out into police behaviour towards demonstrators and that democratic elections be introduced. The withdrawal of a controversial draft law on the extradition of criminals, the fifth demand and the original trigger for the protests, which have been ongoing for about seven months, has now been met.

According to the organisers, more than one million people took part in a demonstration organised by the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) on 01.01.20, whereas the police were expecting 60,000 participants. Due to violent incidents, the police broke up the rally after several hours and arrested many people.

Protests took place in shopping centres, among other places, between 24.12.19 and 26.12.19 and on 28.12.19 which led to violent clashes between demonstrators and the police. On 22.12.19, the police dispersed a demonstration organised in solidarity with the Uighurs in Xinjiang.

### **Camp imprisonment abolished as punishment for prostitution**

On 29.12.19, the police practice introduced in the 1990s of punishing prostitution with up to two years of administrative detention in re-education camps ended. Those still in custody will be released. According to reports, detainees were forced to work in the camps, making toys and household goods, among other things. Prostitution remains illegal and carries punishments of up to 15 days in detention and fines of up to EUR 645.

### **Pastor receives prison sentence**

On 20.12.19, a Chinese court in Chengdu (capital of Sichuan province) sentenced Wang Yi, the pastor who founded the underground Early Rain Covenant Church to nine years in prison for subversion of state power and engaging in illegal business operations. He had been arrested together with his wife Jiang Rong and dozens of members of his congregation in December 2018. However, most of them have since been released. Among other things, Wang was active as a human rights lawyer and campaigned for religious freedom.

## **Egypt**

### **Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue reopened**

On 10.01.20, the Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue in Alexandria was unveiled by Egypt's Antiquities and Tourism Minister Khalid al-Anani having undergone three years of renovation. The Egyptian government wants to set a sign of tolerance with the renovation.

## **Guinea-Bissau**

### **Leader of the opposition wins presidential election**

Umaro Sissoco Embalo has won the presidential election after winning a run-off vote against another former prime minister on 29.12.19, garnering 53.5% of the votes according to the National Electoral Commission. Domingos Simoes Pereira, leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde PAIGC and another former prime minister obtained around 46.5% of the votes. Pereira won the first round of the election well ahead of Embalo. The turnout was about 72%. After the results were announced, Pereira said there was evidence of electoral fraud and that he will be challenging the result.

## **India**

### **Protests against citizenship law continue**

Mass protests against the new citizenship law continued in December 2019 (cf. BN of 15.12.19), ebbing off slightly in the New Year. According to media reports, at least 25 persons have been killed in the protests. The most recent major protest involving 30,000 participants took place on 11.01.20 during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to eastern Kolkata (West Bengal).

### **Nationwide protests against privatisation**

On 08.01.20, millions of workers protested against the government's plans to liberalise economic policy and the privatisation of state-run companies with nationwide strikes, marches and rallies in India's largest cities. The largest trade unions in the country had called for the strike. In the states of Assam and Punjab, demonstrators blocked roads and railways.

### **Kashmir: Supreme Court ruling on Internet ban**

On 10.01.20, the Supreme Court of India ruled that the digital lockdown in Kashmir, which had been imposed on 05.08.19, violates the basic rights of the Kashmiri population. Access to the internet, like freedom of the press, is a right of freedom derived from Article 19 of the Indian Constitution. The government now has one week to at least partially restore access to the Internet. Critics doubt it will be implemented. Some Kashmiri cities have isolated government-operated Internet cafés.

## **Iraq**

### **Violent crackdown on government critics and demonstrators**

On 10.01.20, huge rallies were held in Baghdad and other cities in southern Iraq to mark 100 days of protests. The journalist Ahmed Abdul Samad and his cameraman Safaa Ghali were shot dead by unknown gunmen in Basra. Samad had been covering the protests. According to Reporters Without Borders, six journalists have been killed by unknown gunmen since the protests began (cf. BN of 02.12.19). Local media reported that 166 activists were kidnapped or disappeared between 01.10.19 and 28.12.19. The Iraqi High Commission on Human Rights (IHCHR) estimates that 68 people were abducted or disappeared and documented 33 assassination attempts in which 14 persons were killed.

## **Iraq/USA/Iran**

### **Events concerning the drone attack on General Qassem Soleimani**

On 27.12.19, a missile attack - presumably by the pro-Iranian Iraqi militia Kata'eb Hezbollah (KH) - took place on an Iraqi military base, killing one American contractor and injuring four American and two Iraqi soldiers. Attacks on American troops and targets in Iraq had already been on the rise (cf. BN of 16.12.19). On 29.12.19, the US carried out retaliatory strikes on three Kataib Hezbollah facilities, several KH fighters were allegedly injured and killed. On 31.12.19, Kataib Hezbollah supporters and followers of the Popular Mobilisation Front demonstrated in front of the American Embassy within the heavily fortified Green Zone in the centre of Baghdad. Demonstrators stormed the entrance area of the Embassy and set it on fire. It is unclear how they were able to pass the security checkpoints to the Green Zone.

On 03.01.20, the U.S. carried out a targeted drone attack killing the Iranian General Qassem Soleimani (Commander of the Quds unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard) and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Deputy Leader of the Iraqi People's Mobilisation Front) among others near Baghdad International Airport. Iran carried out a retaliatory strike on 08.01.20 on two Iraqi military bases in Anbar province and Erbil, causing material damage. Since then, repeated missile attacks have been carried out against Iraqi military bases housing American troops, presumably by pro-Iranian Iraqi militias. Most recently, on 12.01.20, four Iraqi soldiers were injured in an attack on a military base in Salah ad-Din; no American troops were in the base at the time of the attack.

### **Impact of tension between Iran and the U.S. on anti-government protests**

The anti-government protests have continued in large parts of Iraq since 25.10.19. The current government is being criticised not only for corruption and mismanagement, but also for Iranian influence on domestic politics.

Since the 2018 elections, representatives of pro-Iranian militias have been represented in parliament in the form of the Fatah Alliance. Since the protests began, General Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, among others, have been publicly criticised. Soleimani had travelled to Baghdad several times in recent months and was said to be largely behind the government's violent response to the protests (cf. BN of 02.12.19).

## **Iran**

### **Renewed demonstrations**

According to the news agency ILNA, up to 3,000 people demonstrated in Azadi Square in the capital on 12.01.20. The demonstrations were reportedly fuelled by the Iranian leadership's cover-up of facts about the shooting down of a Ukrainian passenger aircraft on 08.01.20. Initially, the Iranian authorities had said that a technical defect was responsible for the crash. It was not until 11.01.20 that the military admitted the plane had been shot down accidentally. According to reports, the demonstrators demanded the resignation of all participating officials. Civilian police and security forces had already sealed off access to the universities, especially to the entrance hall of Beheshti University, in advance of the demonstrations. The police chief of Tehran stated that the security forces had been instructed to act calmly and tactically against the unauthorised demonstrations, which are said to be mainly attended by students.

### **Journalists arrested**

The organisation Reporters Without Borders claimed on 07.01.20 that four Iranian journalists had been arbitrarily arrested on 26.12.19. The journalists were arrested along with many other participants during an event held in the northern city of Sowme'eh Sara to pay tribute to a demonstrator killed during a protest in November 2019. All those arrested have been released from custody except the four journalists Jelveh Javaheri, Kaveh Mzadari, Forough Sameinia und Ahmad Zahedi Langroudi for whom payment of 100 million tomans (EUR 28,000) in bail was demanded. No reasons have yet been given for the detention and neither the family members nor lawyers have been able to visit the detainees in Lakan prison near Rasht.

## **Kazakhstan**

### **Anti-government protestors arrested**

Demonstrations for political reforms, freedom rights, the release of political prisoners and the end of the political influence of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev took place in the country's largest city, Almaty, and the capital Nur-Sultan, on 16.12.19. Among others, activists of the youth movement Oyan, Kazakhstan (translated: Wake up!, Kazakhstan) took part in the protests. The police arrested more than 50 people in the capital and about 40 people in Almaty. Dozens of opposition and human rights activists were arrested in connection with the protests.

## **Kenya**

### **Several persons killed in al-Shabaab attacks**

Several persons have been killed in a series of attacks carried out by the radical Islamist terrorist group al-Shabaab in the east of the country since the beginning of 2020. On 07.01.20, four schoolchildren were shot dead when the militia attacked the dormitory of a school in Garissa province on the border with Somalia. On the same day, an al-Shabaab commando attacked a telecommunications mast near Dadaab. Security forces who fended off the attack shot two of the attackers, according to local police. Six people were killed in an attack carried out by al-Shabaab on a checkpoint near the village of Saretho. Among the victims are four civilians and two of the gunmen.

### **U.S. military personnel killed in al-Shabaab attack**

On 05.01.20, a U.S. soldier and two private members of the U.S. military were killed and two other soldiers injured in an attack carried out by al-Shabaab on the Manda Bay airfield near the Kenyan island of Lamu. Several U.S. planes were also destroyed. The U.S. military is training security forces of East African states at the base and also repeatedly flies air strikes in Somalia against al-Shabaab.

### **Casualties in attacks on buses**

Three days earlier, two attacks had already been carried out against buses in the same region. Four passengers died in the attack. Bus traffic was temporarily suspended after the attacks. Members of al-Shabaab were also responsible for this attack.

Kenya has repeatedly been the target of attacks by al-Shabaab because of its support for the African Union's AMISOM mission in the fight against Islamists in Somalia.

## **Kyrgyzstan**

### **Demonstration for freedom of speech, press freedom and the fight against corruption**

Hundreds of people gathered in the capital Bishkek on 18.12.19 to take part in a demonstration in which participants called on the government to guarantee freedom of speech and freedom of the press and to initiate investigations into corruption in the customs service. Reports of large-scale corruption in the customs service had previously caused public outrage and protests.

## **Kyrgyzstan/Tajikistan**

### **Gunfire exchange along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border**

Shots were once again fired on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border on 10.01.20. According to the Kyrgyz Border Service, the shots were fired from Tajik territory. Kyrgyz authorities reportedly evacuated 254 Kyrgyz citizens from the village of Damkha. The Tajik Border Service blamed residents of the Kyrgyz border village Kok-Tash for the shooting. In the southern part of the Batken region, there had already been at least ten clashes in the border area in 2019. On 18.12.19, six Kyrgyz nationals and three Tajiks were wounded. The border area is disputed between the two states.

## **Libya**

### **Attack on military academy**

According to authorities, at least 28 people were killed and dozens injured in an attack on a military academy in Tripoli on 05.01.20. General Khalifa Haftar's troops are being blamed for the attack.

### **Ceasefire violated**

A ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey on 12.01.20 was reportedly broken immediately. The parties to the conflict are blaming each other; the government in Tripoli that is recognised by the United Nations said gunfire erupted immediately after midnight when the ceasefire was supposed to come into force. A commander of the so-called Libyan National Army, led by General Khalifa Haftar, again stated that "militias" of the government in Tripoli had violated the ceasefire "on various fronts with different types of weapons". According to media reports, the two parties to the conflict are now expected in Moscow to sign the agreement, which has already entered into force.

## **Mali**

### **Persons injured in attack on military base**

Eighteen United Nations peacekeepers and two civilians were wounded in a mortar attack on a military base in Tessalit in the Kidal Region that is used by UN bluehelmets as well as French and Malian troops.

### **Malian soldiers killed**

Five Malian soldiers were killed on 06.01.20 when their convoy hit a homemade bomb and then came under fire near Alatona (Ségou Region) close to the Mauritanian border. So far, no-one has claimed responsibility for the attack.

### **33 jihadists killed**

French soldiers killed 33 jihadist militants in a military operation on 21.12.19. The operation took place in Mopti region (Central Mali) near the border with Mauritania. Two Malian police officers, who had previously been taken hostage, are also said to have been freed during this operation.

## **Montenegro**

### **Montenegrin parliament adopts religion law**

The Montenegrin parliament passed the controversial Freedom of Religious Law on 27.12.19 which the Serbian-Orthodox Church thinks is designed to allow the government to strip it of its holdings. Pro-Serbian opposition parties are the sharpest critics in Montenegro of the so-called Freedom of Religion law, which was signed the following day by the Montenegrin President. The controversial law, which sparked nationwide protests and road blockades on 26.12.19 and 27.12.19, includes a register of all religious objects and sites that authorities say were owned by the independent kingdom of Montenegro before it became part of the Serb-dominated Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, later renamed Yugoslavia. Under the law, religious communities will have to provide clear evidence of ownership in order to retain their properties.

## **Morocco**

### **Prison sentence for activists**

On 09.01.20, activist Abdel Bahmad, known as Bouda Ghassan, was sentenced to two years in prison and fined 10,000 Moroccan dirhams. The former member of the National Union of Students of Morocco (UNEM) was charged with insulting the flag and violating territorial integrity. He had commented on the HIRAK march in Paris in October 2019 on Facebook, claiming he “could not afford to buy matches to burn the Moroccan flag while he was hungry”.

## **Nepal/China**

### **Chinese nationals expelled**

On 08.01.20, Nepal expelled 122 Chinese nationals. Officials said that the persons concerned had entered the country on tourist visas, but “then rented apartments and houses and pursued other activities”. The eight women and 114 men were arrested a good two weeks ago in the suburbs of the capital Kathmandu. The police seized more than 500 laptops and mobile phones. The “Kathmandu Post” newspaper reported at the time that the suspects were rounded up in raids following information that they had used the internet in Nepal for economic crimes in China.

Human rights activists in Nepal criticised the government for failing to investigate the crimes. Nepal and China do not have an extradition agreement, but since October 2019 they have a joint declaration on combating crime.

## **Nicaragua**

### **Prisoners released**

At the end of the year, the government freed 91 prisoners on conditional release, who had been arrested in connection with protests in 2018. It is thus fulfilling a demand of the opposition. 620 prisoners had already been released by June 2019.

Starting with protests against a reform of the social security system, a spiral of repression and ever more anti-government protests began in April 2018. Several hundred people fell victim to the violence and hundreds more were arrested.

## **Niger**

### **Attack on military camp**

On 09.01.20, 89 soldiers were killed in an attack by jihadists on an army post near the town of Chinogodar, about 200 km north of the capital Niamey on the border with Mali. According to government spokesperson Zakaria Abdourahame, 77 jihadists were killed. According to the country's military authorities, unknown gunmen drove motorcycles and cars to the base and opened fire. The military carried out counter-attacks with the support of the Nigerian Air Force and partners which prompted the military to start clearing the area. This has been the deadliest strike on the nation's forces since the beginning of Islamist-motivated violence in the country in 2015. The government declared three days of national mourning.

## **Nigeria**

### **ISWAP ambush near Monguno**

On 07.01.20, fighters of the Islamic terrorist organisation Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) travelling in several vehicles attacked the garrison town of Monguno, located in the Lake Chad areas. Depending on the source of the information, between three and 20 soldiers are said to have been killed. A grenade hitting the large camp for internally displaced persons near the town set several hundred tents on fire. The ambush came just three days after Chad withdrew 1,200 soldiers stationed in the region, including several hundred in Monguno, across the border, thus ending a nine-month mission to fight Boko Haram.

### **ISWAP executes eleven hostages**

ISWAP released a video clip lasting 56 seconds on 26.12.19 through its "news agency" Amaq, showing ten men having their throats cut (other reports say they were beheaded) and one man being shot dead. A spokesperson in the clip said it was part of its recently declared campaign to avenge the death of its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his spokesperson who had been killed during a U.S. operation in October 2019. The killing of persons allegedly abducted in recent weeks in the province of Borno is intended to be a warning to Christians.

### **Oppositional Sowore released on bail**

In the evening hours of 24.12.19, Omoyele Sowore (human rights activist, founder of the online news portal Sahara Reporters and presidential candidate of the AAC - African Action Congress - party in the February 2019 elections) and Sambo Dasuki (National Security Advisor to former President Goodluck Jonathan from 2012 to 2015) were released on bail by order of the Federal Prosecutor Abubakar Malami. Sowore had been arrested on 03.08.19 by the domestic secret service DSS, after he had called for nationwide protest demonstrations against the government under the hashtag #RevolutionNow for 05.08.19, claiming, among other things, that the presidential election of February 2019 was rigged. On 20.09.19, the public prosecutor's office had brought charges against Sowore in seven points, including treason, money laundering and cyberstalking against President Buhari. Dasuki had been accused by the SSS (former name of Nigeria's State Security Service) in December 2015 of diverting public funds to the tune of 2.1 billion U.S. dollars, which had been earmarked for the fight against the Islamist terrorist organisation Boko Haram. In the past, both Sowore and Dasuki have been ordered by various courts to release the two defendants on bail. However, the State Security Service failed to act on these orders. Sowore had been released on 05.12.19 but was arrested again in the courtroom the following day (cf. BN of 09.12.19).

## **Nigeria/Cameroon**

### **Explosion on bridge at the border claims lives**

A bomb ripped through the Nigerian side of the El Beid bridge separating the town of Gamboru in Nigeria's Borno state from Fotokol (Extreme North Region) in Cameroon on 06.01.20, killing at least nine Nigerian nationals and injuring 21 Nigerians and five Cameroonians. According to Cameroonian sources, a young man searching for scrap metal is said to have found the explosive device in a container on the bridge. According to Nigerian information, it is suspected that a suicide bomber blew himself up.



## **Pakistan**

### **Death sentence for former Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf**

On 17.12.19, a special court in the capital Islamabad pronounced a death sentence for high treason against former Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf for declaring a state of emergency in November 2007, suspending Pakistan's constitution and replacing the chief judge. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto, twice Prime Minister and then opposition leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), also took place during this period.

Following a military coup in October 1999, Musharraf deposed the then incumbent Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) and was President of Pakistan from 2001 until he resigned and went into exile in August 2008. After his return in 2013, several lawsuits were filed against him under the re-elected Prime Minister Sharif and a travel ban was imposed. After this was lifted in 2016, Musharraf travelled to Dubai for medical treatment. The former leader said in a video statement that he was innocent and the treason case was baseless. The government and military also criticized the verdict.

### **Death sentence for university professor for blasphemy**

A university professor from Multan (Punjab) was sentenced to death for blasphemy on 21.12.19. He had been arrested in 2013 for allegedly posting derogatory remarks about Prophet Mohammed on social media. The blasphemy laws introduced in the 1980s provide for the death penalty as the maximum penalty for insulting Islam or the Prophet Mohammed. For years, the abuse of the laws has been criticised, as the accusations are often directed against religious minorities or are made in connection with personal disputes.

### **Attacks in Quetta**

On 07.01.20, two security forces died when an improvised explosive device attached to a motorcycle detonated by remote ignition in a market square in Quetta, capital of Belochistan province. At least 14 people were injured. Separatists active in the province claimed responsibility for the attack.

On 10.01.20, at least 14 people were killed and more than 20 others wounded in a bomb attack on a mosque during sunset prayers in the southwest Pakistan city of Quetta. Among those killed was a senior police officer who is said to have been the target of the attack. No-one has claimed responsibility for the attack.

## **Russian Federation**

### **Jehovah's witness receives prison sentence**

A court in Penza sentenced Jehovah's witness Vladimir Alushkin to six years in prison on 13.12.19, after finding him guilty of extremist activity according to Jehovah's witnesses. His wife and four other members of the religious group were handed suspended two-year prison sentences. The Supreme Court had classified the organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses as extremist and banned it in April 2017.

### **Amendment to the law allows for heavy fines for violations of the Agents Act**

President Vladimir Putin signed legal amendments on 16.12.19 on the basis of which individuals violating laws governing foreign agents may be slapped with high fines. Organisations will therefore have to pay the equivalent of up to EUR 14 731 for the first infringement. For further infringements, they will face fines of up to EUR 73,653. Individuals who commit more than two offences in a twelve-month period may be fined up to the equivalent of EUR 147, and for repeated offences up to the equivalent of EUR 1,473 or 15 days in prison. Under a law passed in 2012, organisations receiving money from abroad will be declared foreign agents and will be subject to conditions. Only two weeks before the above-mentioned amendment to the law, President Putin had made it possible for individual journalists to be registered as foreign agents (see BN of 09.12.19).

### **Fine imposed against human rights organisation Memorial**

The Russian human rights organisation Memorial was fined the equivalent of EUR 4,419 by a Moscow court on 25.12.19 for failing to add a "foreign agent" label to its websites in accordance with the Foreign Agents Law (see previous article). For Memorial, this was the 19th fine based on this law. The head of the organisation was fined the equivalent of EUR 1,473 on the same grounds.

### **Police officers sentenced to prison terms for torturing a woman**

A court has sentenced three police officers to prison terms for torturing a woman suspect, suffocating her with a plastic bag and using electric shocks in order to force her to “confess”. According to a statement issued by the public prosecutor’s office on 18.12.19, a court in Russia’s Far Eastern island of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk sentenced the police officers to 3 years, 4 years and 3 months, and 4 1/2 years in prison. Police brutality in Russia has been endemic for years.

### **Convictions after demonstration for free elections**

On 24.12.19, a court in Moscow sentenced a Russian man to two and a half years in a penal colony for attacking a policeman during the unauthorised demonstration for free elections held in Moscow on 27.07.19. In the context of the same demonstration, another man was fined the equivalent of EUR 1,473 by another Moscow court on the same day, taking into account that he had been held in custody for more than three months, for attempting to assault police officers. During the demonstration, which several thousand persons took part in, the police had acted with great severity against demonstrators and arrested 1,372 people. In view of the summer 2019 demonstrations for free elections, courts have so far handed down eleven sentences of between one and five and a half years’ imprisonment.

### **Attack on police officers in Ingushetia**

One police officer was killed when he was hit by a car and several police officers were stabbed in the Igush capital of Magas on 31.12.19. According to official sources, three other police officers were wounded in the incident. One of the attackers was killed when police opened fire and the other was wounded. ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attack. Islamist attacks on government employees have been occurring repeatedly in the North Caucasus for years.

## **Serbia**

### **Protests against Montenegro’s law on religion**

On 02.01.20 and 08.01.20, followers of the Serbian Orthodox Church took to the streets of Belgrade to demonstrate against the Montenegrin law on religion passed on 27.12.19. Thousands of ultranationalists had joined the protests on 02.01.20 and had tried to burn the flag in front of the Montenegrin Embassy.

## **Somalia**

### **Series of attacks**

On 21.12.19, a car bomb went off in front of the Global Hotel in Galkayo in the Mudug region frequented by military personnel. Six persons were reportedly killed and ten injured. Such attacks are relatively rare in the capital of the Mudug region. No group has claimed responsibility for the incident, but al-Shabaab regularly carries out attacks on hotels in the Mudug region.

On 28.12.19, a car bomb exploded at a busy checkpoint in Mogadishu. About 90 people are said to have been killed and at least 125 people injured. Many of the casualties were students returning to the city after the weekend. The terrorist group al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for the attack and announced that it was aimed at an enemy convoy of Turks. Hundreds of people, including government representatives, gathered in Mogadishu on 02.01.20 to show solidarity with the victims and their families. The attack is the worst attack to be carried out in Mogadishu since the truck attack in 2017, in which several hundred people were killed.

On 08.01.20, a car bomb of al-Shabaab exploded at a checkpoint near the presidential palace and other important government buildings in Mogadishu. Several people were killed or injured - including two government officials.

## **Sudan**

### **People killed in Darfur clashes**

More than 50 people are said to have been killed and over 60 injured in clashes between Arab and African tribes. The fighting broke out in the city of El Geneina, the capital of the state of West Darfur on 29.12.19. Camps for internally displaced persons are also reported to have been attacked and tents and houses set on fire. Several thousand people are said to have been displaced. According to the Red Crescent relief organisation, a hospital plane that was supposed to fly injured people to the capital Khartoum crashed on 01.01.20 shortly after take-off from the airport of the city of El Geneina, killing all 18 passengers.

The Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok travelled to the region with other members of the Sovereign Council.

## **Syria**

### **Offensive in southern Idlib triggers new wave of refugees**

The UN has documented more than 312,000 people from the northwest of the country in and around the province of Idlib who are said to have left their homes and fled mostly north towards the Turkish border between 01.12.19 and 08.01.20. The proportion of women and children is estimated at 80%. Maarat an-Numan and its surroundings are said to have been virtually deserted.

Tens of thousands are also said to have fled to the Turkish-occupied areas around Afrin and Azaz.

### **Idlib: ceasefire implemented with hesitation**

On 10.01.20, Russian state media announced that a new ceasefire for the Idlib province had come into force on 09.01.20 that had been brought about by negotiations between Russia and Turkey. However, less than 24 hours after it entered into force, heavy fighting erupted once again between the rebels and Syrian government troops. On 11.01.20, at least 17 persons are said to have been killed and more than 40 injured at various locations in Idlib. According to observers and eyewitnesses close to the opposition, air strikes in the provincial capital Idlib and the surrounding villages of an-Nerab and Binnish were the cause. The air strikes by the Syrian government are said to have ended on 12.01.20. The Turkish Ministry of Defence confirmed that the ceasefire had been largely observed. According to rebel sources, the Syrian government instead dropped leaflets on residential areas near the front line urging the civilian population to leave the rebel areas.

### **Protests in Daraa, attack in Rif Dimashq**

The US-based Think Tank Institute for the Study of War (ISW) reported violent protests against the Assad government in the village of Musaykah in Daraa, as well as a deadly attack on a checkpoint in Telfita (about 20 km north of Damascus) in which up to four persons were killed on 01.01.20. The rebel group Saraya Qasioun has reportedly claimed responsibility for the attack.

### **North-east: four Turkish soldiers killed in car bomb attack**

Four members of the Turkish military were killed in a car bomb attack on 09.01.20 in the Turkish-occupied north-east of the country. This time, the Turkish Ministry of Defence did not name anyone responsible for the attack.

### **UN aid only across Turkish border**

On 10.01.20, the UN Security Council voted for a six-month extension of humanitarian aid to Syria. This was the last chance to avert a non-renewal of the aid after Russia had already vetoed a simple extension of the existing provisions the previous month.

UN aid will now only reach Turkey via two border crossings, one to north-west and one to north-east Syria, and no longer via the Iraqi and Jordanian borders, where aid had reached Syrians in other parts of the country.

Russia argued that they could now expect help from the Syrian central government.

China and Russia, the U.S. and UK abstained in the vote. All other eleven Security Council members voted in favour of the scaled-down resolution.

## **Tajikistan**

### **Report of detention of suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood**

The radio station Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported on 07.01.20 and 09.01.20 that it had been informed by Tajik security sources that at least 27 suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been banned as extremist since 2006, had been detained. According to this information, the authorities had carried out dozens of raids against a suspected cell of the organisation in the capital Dushanbe as well as in the provinces of Sughd and Chatlon in the week of the turn of the year 2019/20 and arrested the persons in the process. A spokesperson for the Ministry of the Interior denied these arrests on 07.01.20. In 2016, about 20 imams had been arrested in Sughd Province on charges of being members of the association, spreading its ideology and receiving money from abroad.

### **Police accused of torture handed prison sentences**

On 16.12.19, a Tajik court sentenced the deputy head of the criminal police of the capital Dushanbe to 17 years in prison; three police officers under his authority received sentences of between seven and nine years. All four persons were found guilty of torturing a man on charges of illegal possession of drugs. Tajik authorities had launched investigations after the alleged victim had made allegations of torture against the police to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Human rights groups accuse the country's police of using torture to extort confessions.

## **Turkey**

### **Deployment of troops to Libya**

Turkish troops began deploying to Libya in a bid to prop up the UN-recognised government in Tripoli on 05.01.20 with the backing of the Turkish parliament. This has given President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, permission to launch a one-year military intervention in Libya in order to back the internationally recognised government under Prime Minister Fajis al-Sarradsch in Tripoli, which is involved in a power struggle with the influential General Khalifa Haftar. The Libyan government had officially requested Turkish support. How many soldiers and what kind of troops would be sent remained unclear at first.

### **Ruling on Wikipedia blockade**

On 26.12.19, the Turkish Constitutional Court ruled that the blockade of Wikipedia in Turkey ordered by the government in April 2017 was illegal. In the court's opinion, the blockade is a violation of the freedom of opinion. According to the state news agency Anadolu, the verdict was passed by ten votes against six of the judges. The reason given for the blockade was that the website falsely claimed that Turkey supports terrorist organisations.

### **Raids against ISIS supporters**

150 suspected ISIS supporters were arrested in nationwide raids on 30.12.19. These are mainly suspects from Iraq and Syria. The police also confiscated weapons, ammunition and electronic equipment. 20 suspected ISIS supporters were also arrested last week during a major police operation in Istanbul.

## **Ukraine**

### **Exchange of prisoners**

As agreed at the Ukraine summit held in Paris on 09.12.19, Ukraine and the East Ukrainian separatists exchanged 200 prisoners on 29.12.19. This was the first exchange of prisoners since 2017, and among those released by Ukraine were five suspected gunmen from Maidan who had been part of the Berkut Special Forces in 2014. One day before the exchange, the trial against them was surprisingly dismissed. In addition, some terrorists who had already been convicted are said to have been among the prisoners whom Ukraine handed over to the separatists. The release of the five members of the Berkut Special Forces was not uncontroversial in Ukraine, as they are alleged to have been suspected killers. Protests were held outside the Kiev remand prison against their release. According to the office of the Ukrainian President, Ukraine and Russia are planning another prisoner exchange. Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Ukrainian President reached a

hasty agreement on lists for the release of Ukrainians in Crimea and Russians held in Russia and Ukraine, according to the Selenski's office.

## **Vietnam**

### **Several persons kills in clashes over land ownership**

Four persons, including three police officers, were killed in violent clashes over land ownership between the police and villagers near the capital Hanoi on 09.01.20. Farmers in Dong Tam community are using the land claimed by a military airport and accuse the military of having illegally taken possession of it. The conflict, which has been going on for years, is said to have escalated when authorities attempted to erect a perimeter fence around the land. Land confiscations have actually come to be a flashpoint as citizens implicate the federal government of pressing tiny landholders apart in support of rewarding property jobs, as well as of paying insufficient in settlement to those whose land is taken.

## **Yemen**

### **Civilians killed in market attack**

On 24.12.19, an attack took place on the al-Raqw market in the district of Monabbih, Saadah Governorate. It is reported that seventeen civilians, including twelve Ethiopian migrants, were killed and at least twelve others injured. This was the third deadly assault on the same location in just over a month. A total of about 90 people have been killed or injured.

### **Houthi rebels release prisoners of war**

Houthi rebels released six Saudi Arabian prisoners of war on 08.01.20. Saudi Arabia, which supports the Yemeni government in its fight against the Houthi rebels, released more than 100 rebels two months ago. According to the Associated Press news agency, the release signals that both sides are pushing for a UN-brokered agreement to end the war.

### **Attack on military parade**

Several soldiers and civilians were reportedly killed or injured in a missile attack on the military parade of a southern separatist group in the capital of the al-Dhali Governorate. The Security Belt Forces, part of the Southern Transitional Council and supported by the UAE, are blaming the Houthi rebels for the attack.