



# Briefing Notes

## Group 62 - Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

10 August 2020

### Afghanistan

#### **COVID-19 pandemic**

It is still assumed that the pandemic has not yet reached its peak. Infections, including serious cases and deaths, are expected to continue to rise over the next four weeks even if current preventive measures are maintained. Should these be relaxed, a significant increase in severe cases (possibly up to 5 times the current number) can be expected. Kabul is still most affected, followed by Herat, Balkh, Nangarhar and Kandahar (as on 05 August 2020).

#### **Loya Jirga on peace negotiations with the Taliban; release of prisoners**

On 07 August 2020 the fourth Loya Jirga (Grand Council Assembly) met in Kabul, bringing together over 3,000 political and religious representatives of Afghan society, including at least 700 women. The consultations concerned the management of the peace negotiations with the Taliban, including the issue of the release of around 400 prisoners named by the Taliban who are accused of serious crimes by the government. The list of prisoners to be released, for example, includes Anas Haqqani, brother of the head of the Haqqani network and one of the organization's main fundraisers, as well as a man who is said to have organized the attack near the German embassy in Kabul in May 2017. At the closing event, the delegates agreed to recommend the release of these prisoners, thereby fulfilling one of the Taliban's main demands. The decision met with opposition from some parliamentarians but also from lawyers who doubted its constitutionality. The Taliban said they would be ready for talks within a week after the prisoners' release.

#### **Attacks, fighting, civilian victims**

According to information from the New York Times, at least 42 pro-government workers and 41 civilians were killed in August (as of 06 August 2020). During the three-day ceasefire for the Islamic Festival of Sacrifice from 31 July 2020 to 02 August 2020, the Taliban staged 38 attacks, in which 20 civilians were killed and 40 injured, the Afghan Interior Ministry said.

On 09 August 2020, at least ten civilians died in two bomb attacks in Arghistan district of Kandahar province. Also on 09 August 2020 two civilians were killed in an attack in the 5th police district of Kabul (Company Bazaar), five security forces were injured.

On 10 August 2020 at least two people were injured in an explosion in the 9th Police District of Kabul (Makroryan). So far, no group has declared itself responsible for the above the attacks.

### Belarus

#### **Lukashenko wins presidential election according to state media**

Referring to official interim results Belarusian state media reported that incumbent Alexander Lukashenko was leading in the presidential election, which ended on 09 August 2020, by winning 80% of the votes, while opposition

candidate Svetlana Tichanovskaya received 9.9% of the votes. In Minsk and other cities, numerous people gathered until the early hours of the morning of 10 August 2020 to protest against the incumbent and alleged election fraud. Violent clashes between the police and protesters resulted. Tichanovskaya declared that she would not recognize an election defeat. Tens of thousands of people had attended her campaign rallies.

## **Bolivia**

### **Postponement of presidential elections triggers general strike**

Because of the renewed postponement of the presidential elections the trade union umbrella organization (Central Obrera Boliviana, COB) and the Pacto Unidad, an association of indigenous and smallholder organizations, have called for a nationwide general strike. They accuse the transitional government under Jeanine Áñez of abusing the pandemic to stay on in power. Several of the country's main connecting routes have been blocked since 03 August 2020. The UN urged to allow the transport of humanitarian aid and called on the political camps to enter into a dialogue.

The Supreme Electoral Court (Tribunal Supremo Electoral, TSE) had postponed the balloting from 06 September 2020 to 18 October 2020 due to the high number of corona infections and the lack of protection for the population (see BN of 27 July 2020).

## **Bosnia and Herzegovina**

### **Imam posts homophobic statements**

According to current media reports, the imam of the Ferhadija mosque in Sarajevo, Muhamed ef. Velic, posted on Facebook on 09 August 2020, "...in every misfortune and tragedy there is a grain of happiness, goodness and beauty" after the organizers cancelled the second Pride Parade in Sarajevo planned for the end of August 2020. In the post, which was viewed by 73,000 people and answered in the affirmative in 35 comments, the Imam asked Allah "that Corona and the gay parade never return to our city and our state". According to media reports, a spokesperson for the official Islamic Community (IZ BiH), the largest religious community in Bosnia, declined to comment on the post and instead referred to the imam's superior. The spokesperson added that the community's position was that homosexuality violated Islamic belief and teaching, but that believers should also refrain from any violence against such sinners. While the religious community declined to intervene in the dispute, various prominent figures in Bosnia, including lawyer and former journalist Senad Pecanin, unreservedly condemned the post, the media said.

## **Brazil / Colombia / Peru**

### **Demand for stronger support for indigenous peoples**

In a joint declaration, the local UN representations in Brazil, Colombia and Peru urgently called for international solidarity with the indigenous communities in the Amazon region. Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are demanding better protection measures and more financial support. Infection and death rates among the indigenous peoples in states that are part of the Amazon region are well above the respective national averages. Media citing official data report that about 170,000 indigenous people are living in isolation in the region and about 28,000 of them had become infected with SARS-CoV-2 by the end of July 2020. Over 1,100 people died as a result of the virus infection. In addition to the health risks, the disease also has severe socio-economic consequences. This includes the risk to supplies of staple foods and it will probably exacerbate gender inequalities.

## **Burkina Faso**

### **Casualties in attack on village in the east of the country**

According to the governor of the Est region, a group of armed gunmen attacked the cattle market in the village of Namoungou ( Fada N'Gourma area) on 07 August 2020. According to preliminary counts, the attackers presumably killed 20 people and injured many more. Nobody has claimed the attack yet. Jihadist groups linked to al-Qaeda or IS have killed hundreds of people in Burkina Faso and displaced over half a million over the past year.

## Chad

### **Civilians killed in Boko Haram attack**

On 31 July 2020 Boko Haram fighters killed at least ten people, including two women, in an attack on the village of Tenana in the Lake Chad region. The army said seven more had been kidnapped and Boko Haram pillaged and burned the village.

Lake Chad near the border between Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon is a frequent target for Boko Haram. Boko Haram is also said to be responsible for an attack on an army vehicle in early July 2020 in which eight Chadian soldiers were killed.

## The Gambia

### **COVID-19 pandemic: Closure of borders and air space**

President Adama Barrow declared a state of emergency on 06 August 2020 and closed his country's borders and airspace. Relief shipments are excluded. In addition, a curfew from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. was imposed, initially for a limited period until 26 August 2020. The measures were justified by the increase in coronavirus cases. COVID-19 cases in The Gambia are said to have soared by over 60 % within a week.

## Iran

### **Kin liability: Reporters Without Borders calls for end to political persecution of relatives**

The organization Reporters Without Borders has urged the authorities to end the political persecution of the family of the imprisoned journalist Soheil Arabi. Since his arrest, the authorities have repeatedly arrested members of the journalist's family. Arabi himself has been imprisoned in Iran since 2013 for "insulting the Supreme Leader" and "propaganda against the state" because he repeatedly criticized the government on a private blog and on social media.

### **Plans for a "Halal" internet**

According to a report by the Iranian radio supervisory authority from the end of June 2020, 94% of Iranians have access to the Internet. This means that 69 million mobile internet connections and nine million fixed-line connections are active. The report said that the number of mobile connections has hardly changed against the previous year. The number of DSL connections has increased slightly. Iran has been working on its own "Halal " internet for years with the objective to make it religiously "pure". The country is also programming generic search engines and messenger services. Critics fear that in this network there will be no room for content critical of the regime, opposition views and independent reports.

### **Heavy metal band members arrested**

Another heavy metal band has been targeted by the religious-conservative government in Iran. According to media reports, the members of the band "Arsames" were arrested in July 2020. They are accused of playing satanic music and of being against the Islamic government. The band members could face up to 15 years imprisonment. They posted bail after their arrest and were allowed to leave the prison for the time being. Already in 2016 the Pasdaran had arrested the band "Confess". Its members are currently in Norway, where they were granted asylum. A court sentenced the members of Confess to 14 years in prison last year; the front man Nikan Siyanor Khosravi was sentenced to 74 lashes in addition.

## Ivory Coast

### **President Ouattara is seeking third term**

President Alassane Ado Dramane Ouattara wants to run for a third term in the presidential election on 31 October 2020. He announced this on 06 August 2020, just before the 60th Anniversary of Independence in a televised

address and on Twitter. The 78-year-old is the candidate of the ruling Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix (RHDP).

The Ivorian constitution actually allows only for two terms of office. However, this provision has only been in effect since a 2016 constitutional amendment. It does not affect the mandates that pre-dated the amendment - according to the interpretation of the government. Originally, Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly was supposed to stand for the RHDP, but he died unexpectedly of a heart attack in early July 2020.

The opposition around Pascal Affi N'Guessan, candidate of the Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI), however, considers the candidacy a "flagrant breach of the Ivorian constitution". The FPI is the party of Laurent Gbagbo, Ouattara's rival candidate in the 2010 presidential elections, which had caused unrest that left more than 3,000 dead. Ouattara became president, Gbagbo was charged by the International Criminal Court in The Hague; in the first instance he was acquitted, though.

## **Kyrgyzstan / Tajikistan**

### **Fatal exchange of fire in the border area**

A Tajik villager was killed in an exchange of fire across the Kyrgyz-Tajik border on 06 August 2020. Representatives from both countries reported that also a Kyrgyz border guard was wounded in the firefight. For years there have been repeated tensions and violent clashes in the border area of these two states. In May 2020, several people were wounded in cross-border clashes.

## **Lebanon**

### **Explosion in Beirut**

On 04 August 2020 an explosion rocked the port of Beirut that is estimated to have had the explosive force of about one tenth of the Hiroshima bomb. It tore a crater that runs 43 meters deep and is 120 meters wide. The explosion destroyed window panes as far as 20 km away and was demonstrably heard 50 km away in Israel and 240 km away in Cyprus. Investigations are still ongoing, but the two-phase explosion was probably triggered in a fireworks storage and subsequently ignited a basically unsecured large amount of ammonium nitrate stored nearby. Currently it is difficult to quantify the damage. At least 158 people have died so far, over 6,000 have been injured and some people are still missing.

Initial estimates put the economic damage at around three billion US dollars in material damage, but the impact on Lebanese economy and society is likely to be significantly higher.

Lebanon's only fully functional port was that of Beirut. The explosion destroyed, among other things, the port's grain silos, which played a significant role for food supplies. Their nominal capacity was 120,000 tons of grain; 15,000 tons were stored there and must be considered lost. The loss of wheat supplies is particularly serious, as wheat flour is sold at a heavily subsidized price which is the main form of social transfer that is essential to the survival of the poorer half of the population. Even before the explosion, the World Bank estimated that more than half of Lebanese would be living at or below the poverty line this year, referring the subsistence level and not relative poverty.

A total of six to seven million people live in Lebanon. According to various estimates, between 250,000 and 300,000 people have been homeless since the explosion. Since then, there have been daily protests and clashes with the security forces, with numerous injuries and the first deaths.

## **Libya**

### **COVID-19 pandemic**

Due to the sharp rise in the number of corona infections in recent weeks, the government of national unity (GNA) has extended the night-time curfew (from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m.) in the areas under its control. Furthermore, schools and mosques were closed as well as mass events and meetings prohibited.

According to the National Centre for Disease Control, Tripoli, Misrata and Sabha are particularly badly affected by corona outbreaks. International aid organizations find it increasingly difficult to provide humanitarian assistance due to the violent clashes and the restrictions of the freedom of movement.

## **Morocco**

### **COVID-19 pandemic**

The Health Ministry has recalled all health care employees from vacation. The number of new infections has spiked recently, most of all the number of patients requiring hospital treatment. A field hospital built by the military in Casablanca, which treats mild to moderate cases, is said to have reached more than 70% of its capacity. It is said that the intensive care facilities in the hospitals still have some capacity.

## **Niger**

### **Dead in attack in the west of the country**

According to Governor Ibrahim Katiela, 20 gunmen on motorbikes killed eight people who were travelling in a car on a tourist outing in a giraffe reserve six kilometers east of the city of Kouré in the Tillabéri region in the west of the country in the late morning of 09 August 2020. Those killed are six French nationals who worked for the French humanitarian aid organization Agency For Technical Cooperation And Development (ACTED), as well as a driver and tourist guide, both from Niger. Nobody has claimed responsibility for the attack so far. The Tillabéri region is considered a refuge for several jihadist groups active in the Sahel zone, such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

## **Pakistan**

### **Growing pressure on the media**

According to the non-governmental organization Reporters Without Borders, pressure on the media and journalists has increased since Prime Minister Imran Khan's election victory in 2018. The examples cited are not only self-censorship as a result of threats and intimidation, but also the instigation of smear campaigns against critical journalists or threats to publishing houses to withdraw advertising spending. Furthermore, the distribution of newspapers was interrupted and the signal from TV stations that provided airtime for opposition politicians was disrupted. Four journalists and a blogger were killed because of their reporting in 2019, Reporters Without Borders reports. The most dangerous provinces for media workers are Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

On 23 July 2020 a reporter covering corruption was shot dead in Barkhan, Balochistan Province. On 20 June 2020 two television journalists were tortured allegedly by security forces in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. On 23 April 2020 the body of the editor-in-chief of the Balochistan Times was found in a river near Uppsala in Sweden, where he had been considered missing since March (see BN of 06 April 2020).

### **Karachi : Attack on rally**

On 05 August 2020, a solidarity march organized by the religious party Jamaat-i-Islami on the occasion of the first anniversary of the lifting of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir in India was attacked in the metropolis of Karachi, injuring dozens of people. The Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army, a separatist movement active in Sindh province, claimed responsibility for the attack.

## **Russian Federation**

### **Prison sentences for opposition activists**

On 06 August 2020 a Moscow district court sentenced three members of the opposition group New Greatness to prison terms of between six and seven years. Four other members received prison sentences of between four and six and a half years, which were suspended. The court found the defendants guilty of organizing a group to commit

extremist crimes. The defendants were arrested in 2018 on charges of plotting to commit a political revolution. The human rights organization Memorial described the convicts as political prisoners.

## **Serbia**

### **Belgrade: Footage shows police violence at demonstrations**

According to current media reports from 10 August 2020 numerous incidents of police violence marked the protests last week. Also journalists and women were affected. The media network Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), that is run by various non-governmental organizations, reports that more than 26 cases of police brutality during clashes with demonstrators on the streets of Belgrade could be documented in TV footage and posts on social media. These included incidents involving people posing no apparent threat. The material reviewed by BIRN shows that most incidents of police brutality occurred far from the entrance to the parliament, as police chased down protesters following clashes that broke out when protesters tried to storm the assembly. The TV footage showed that police officers also beat bystanders running away.

## **Somalia**

### **Explosions in Mogadishu**

On 08 August 2020, a car bomb explosion on a military base in Mogadishu left at least eight soldiers dead and 14 wounded. Al-Shabaab took responsibility for the attack.

On 03 August 2020 two security guards at a restaurant were killed when a suicide bomber blew himself up. Several guests were injured. No group has yet taken responsibility for the attack.

## **Sri Lanka**

### **Elections**

According to official information of 07 August 2020, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's party Podujana (SLPP) won 145 of the 225 parliamentary seats in the elections on 05 August 2020. His brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, had won the presidential election in November 2019. Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa are held in high esteem by the Sinhalese majority in Sri Lanka, because they were instrumental in the military offensive against the rebel organisation Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, that helped to end the civil war. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the parliamentary elections were postponed twice. According to official information, Sri Lanka was largely spared the pandemic.

## **Syria**

### **Air raids in Latakia**

According to several pro-opposition media, several Russian fighter planes flew air strikes on rebels in the Jabal al-Akrad mountain range on 03 August 2020. It is said that rebel fighters and the Syrian army clashed on the ground. Neither Russian nor Syrian media reported the incidents.

### **COVID-19 pandemic**

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in areas under government control officially is 1,188 (as of 9 August 2020). Most of them were registered in July 2020. Recently rumours about undocumented cases and a rising number of deaths from respiratory diseases of people that had not been tested for the infection increased.

In areas outside the control of Damascus the numbers of infections were 36 in the region of Idlib and six in the Kurdish-run areas in the north-east (as of 03 August 2020). Since 13 July 2020 the Kurdish-led SDF administration has repeatedly closed all border crossings to other parts of the country in order to prevent the virus from spreading.

## Togo

### Hacker attack on government critics

According to newspaper reports from early August 2020, six Togolese government critics were informed in 2019 that they had been the target of eavesdropping by strangers. The reports said that their smartphones had been attacked by a spyware called Pegasus. This software, developed by the Israeli company NSO Group, is used by governments to fight terrorism and serious crime. In Togo it was used against the Catholic clergy, civil society activists and opposition politicians. Among those affected were the President of the Togolese Bishops' Conference, Benoît Alowonou, and the opposition politician and former minister Elliot Ohin.

## Turkey

### Protests against misogynist violence

Last week women protested against misogynist violence in several Turkish cities. The protesters held up signs with the names of women who were killed or wore tops with the names of the victims. According to media reports, several protesters were arrested in Izmir. The women specifically protested against the government's plans to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women. The agreement was drawn up by the Council of Europe in 2011 and aims to create a pan-European legal framework to protect women from violence.

### COVID-19 pandemic

Since the number of new infections in Turkey has recently risen above the 1,000 mark per day, the Ministry of the Interior intends to tighten the measures against the corona virus again. This means, for example, that violations of the compulsory wearing of masks and keeping of distance will not be accepted anymore, such as at weddings and circumcision ceremonies. Post-funeral gatherings will be restricted and the tracking of contacts by officials will be enhanced.

The German federal government partially lifted its travel warning for Turkey on 04 August 2020. The warning no longer applies to the four Turkish coastal provinces of Antalya, Izmir, Aydın and Mugla. However, all travellers to Turkey must be tested there for possible corona infections at their own expense within 48 hours before their return, they also must comply with other safety requirements. The reasons given for the decision were that in the aforementioned provinces the risk of infection was relatively low at around five new infections per 100,000 inhabitants in seven days and that Turkey had developed a special tourism and hygiene concept.

## Yemen

### Civilians killed in air strike

According to the UN, at least nine children were killed in air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition on 06 August 2020. Another seven children and two women were injured. However, the Houthi rebels said more than 20 people were killed. The victims were on a road in the Haraad area, Khabb wa-ash Sha'af district, al-Jawf governorate, when the air strike hit.

### Flooding leads to hundreds of deaths

On 09 August 2020 the Houthi rebels informed that more than 130 people had died in floods in the northern parts of Houthi-controlled Yemen since mid-July 2020. 124 people were injured and more than 260 houses were badly damaged.

In July 2020 the Red Cross announced that at least 33,000 internally displaced persons had lost their homes (tents) in floods in southern Yemen.

The spreading of diseases such as cholera, dengue fever and malaria is accelerated by the floods.

### Journalists threatened

The UN reported on 06 August 2020 that journalists are attacked by all warring parties in Yemen. Since April 2020 the UN has documented one assassination, one kidnapping, three cases of arbitrary arrests and detention, four

death sentences and six prison sentences in violation of international human rights as well as three physical assaults and threats of physical violence. Imprisoned journalists were tortured in custody, the UN said.

## **Zimbabwe**

### **Arrest of a large number of opposition members**

Since the opposition called for protests against state corruption and economic and health policy on 31 July 2020 in July 2020, a wave of arrests swept Zimbabwe and continued even after the planned protests had been largely thwarted by the security forces (see BN v. 03 August 2020). On 04 August 2020, President Emmerson Mnangagwa had warned: “The bad apples that have tried to divide our people and weaken our system will be sorted out”. According to the organization Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, over 60 people have been arrested so far. Zimbabwe's main opposition party Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC Alliance) reported that dozens of its functionaries had been arrested or had gone into hiding.

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