



Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

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Afghanistan

Attacks, hostilities, civilian victims

According to New York Times research, at least 58 pro-government forces and 37 civilians died in October in security-related incidents in different provinces (as of 8 October 2020). According to the local governor, the Taliban intensified their attacks, especially in north-western Faryab province. Heavy fighting is also currently reported from the southern province of Helmand, where Taliban are attacking the capital Lashkargah. Hundreds of people are said to be fleeing while the Taliban advance.

Virginity tests continue despite ban

According to 129 women in 13 provinces who have responded to a survey by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), over 90 percent of the virginity tests carried out are made without both the consent of the victims and without a court order, although a ban was imposed on these tests. The tests are ordered by the police in cases of alleged rape, adultery, and extramarital or premarital sex.

Albania

New electoral law adopted

On 5 October 2020, the government majority of Prime Minister Edi Rama adopted a new electoral law in the Albanian Parliament. According to media reports, the main change is that several parties will no longer be allowed to stand for election as a party merger. The opposition parties, the Democratic Party (PD) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim, LSI) have criticized the law as a unilateral measure, saying that in previous electoral law reforms, political consensus had been reached, in contrast to this time. The next parliamentary elections will take place on 25 April 2021.

Armenia/Azerbaijan

Ceasefire agreed for Nagorno-Karabakh remains fragile

Apparently, the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh agreed on 9 October 2020 brokered by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov was broken shortly after its entry into force on 10 October around noon local time. Despite the ceasefire declared by the parties to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan claims that Armenia has attacked the country's second largest city of Ganja, saying that seven people have been killed and 33 injured in a rocket attack on a residential area there. However, Russian news agencies say that Armenia has denied the reports and spoken of disinformation and lies, and that the ceasefire was being observed both in Armenia and in Nagorno-Karabakh, whereas the opposing side would continue the shelling and continued to attack settlements in the Nagorno-

Karabakh region. It was not possible to confirm the information provided by the parties to the conflict by an independent information source.

The agreed ceasefire was intended to be used for an exchange of prisoners and other detainees and for the return of fallen soldiers to their home countries. Hundreds of people have been killed since the outbreak of fighting between Azerbaijani and Armenian troops on 27 September 2020. On the Armenian side alone, more than 400 soldiers, but also civilians have apparently been killed. Azerbaijan has not yet provided any information on its own losses, but speaks of around 30 dead civilians.

Belarus

Continuing protests against President Lukashenko

Last weekend, protest rallies were staged again in several cities against President Alexander Lukashenko. In Minsk, security forces violently disrupted the demonstration. The human rights organisation Vyasna says that at least 285 people were arrested during the protests. Journalists reported that demonstrators were attacked by masked police officers, by soldiers and by individuals without uniforms.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Exclusion of Serbian nationalist party from local elections

Media report that Bosnia and Herzegovina's electoral commission has barred the United Srpska party (US), described as being Serbian nationalist, from competing in the local elections scheduled for 15 November 2020. The reason given for this decision was an election video of the party which spread ethnic hatred, thus violating the electoral law of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The video features three young men who stereotypically represent Albanians, Croats and Bosnians, making aggressive remarks about Serbs. Despite warnings, United Srpska has not withdrawn the video. Party leader Nenda Stevandic has announced a lawsuit against the exclusion. Milorad Dodik, Serbian representative in the trio presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has also condemned the exclusion and accused the electoral commission of distortion.

Brazil/Colombia/Peru/Ecuador

Indigenous peoples particularly affected by COVID-19

Among the indigenous communities in the Amazon region, more than 63,000 people have been infected with COVID-19 and 1,896 have died so far. Almost 240 indigenous peoples are affected by the pandemic. Media reports to that effect cite information from the Coordination of Indigenous Organisations of the Amazon Basin (COICA) and the Amazonas Church Network (Repam). Apparently, most infections and deaths of indigenous people have been recorded in Brazil (24,866 infected, 667 deaths), followed by Colombia (16,135, 577), Peru (14,932, 394), Ecuador (11,849, 330), Bolivia (3,438, 131), Venezuela (693, 23), Guyana (95 infected), Suriname (76 infected) and French Guiana (1 death). As early as August 2020, local UN agencies had asked the international community for more solidarity with the indigenous communities of the Amazon region (see BN of 10 August 2020). It is feared that the pandemic will threaten the preservation of knowledge and culture of indigenous peoples.

Colombia

Defence minister apologises for police violence during protests in 2019

Media report that on 7 October 2020 Colombia's minister of defence Carlos Holmes Trujillo apologised for police violence during demonstrations in November 2019. In the protests against conservative president Iván Duque's government, which had started on 21 November 2019, several people were killed, among them an 18-year-old student (see BN of 2 December 2019). Colombian media reports of 7 October 2020 say that minister Holmes Trujillo made the apology during a debate on a motion of no confidence against him. He explicitly apologised for excesses of the security forces in connection with the protests in November 2019, in particular those of the Escuadrón Móvil

Antidisturbios (ESMAD) police unit. With this, the minister complied with a court order. In Colombia, the police force is subordinated to the ministry of defence and not to the interior ministry, which is in part due to experiences from previous conflicts.

DR Congo

UNICEF concerned about continuing violence against children

In a press release of 6 October 2020, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) expressed concern about the situation of children in the DRC. In particular, the conflict in the north-eastern province of Ituri is hitting children hard. Between January and June 2020, a total of 91 children were killed, 27 mutilated and 13 sexually abused in the province. An estimated 1.6 million people, mostly women and children, have been displaced from Ituri. There are also confirmed reports of destruction or looting of 18 health facilities and attacks on over 60 schools, affecting 45,000 children. In Ituri, 2.4 million people are dependent on humanitarian aid. UNICEF reports over 5 million internally displaced people (IDPs) throughout the country, most of whom are living in improvised tent shelters and slums. The situation of these IDPs is further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

India

COVID-19 pandemic

On 11 October 2020, the Indian health ministry stated that more than seven million corona infections have been registered since the beginning of the pandemic. Although the daily official case numbers have recently been rising less rapidly than in September, new infections are increasing faster in absolute numbers than in any other country in the world, the ministry said. The Indian medical association is concerned about the forthcoming elections in the state of Bihar with more than 70 million eligible voters and the upcoming Hindu celebrations which will last for several days and where large crowds will be gathering. Media report a lack of medical oxygen in hospitals in some parts of the country.

India/Afghanistan

Situation of Afghan refugees

A large part of the 11,000 Afghan refugees officially registered in India live in New Delhi's Lajpat Nagar district; they run shops, pharmacies and inns, among other things. The neighbourhood is also a contact point for Afghans who can afford medical treatment abroad. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation of Afghan refugees has deteriorated. Besides, many Afghans living in New Delhi are day labourers who, unlike Indian nationals, do not receive state support.

In India, refugees live in a state of legal limbo; even those with higher education have hardly access to formal employment and are socially disadvantaged. Fugitives report excessive rents and, as a result, very cramped housing conditions. An estimated 800 Afghan families have returned home from India since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Iran

Release of human rights activist Mohammadi

On 8 October 2020, a spokesperson of the judicial authority in Sanjan in northwest Iran confirmed the release of Nargess Mohammadi, 48-year-old Iranian human rights activist. She was infected with the Corona virus in August. She had been sentenced to ten years in prison for propaganda against the Islamic regime, but was released after eight and a half years, says Tasnim news agency (private sector news agency in Iran). Mohammadi is a renowned human rights activist in the Islamic Republic and an opponent of the death penalty.

Iraq

Security operations against IS fighters

On 7 October 2020, a military operation against IS fighters in the west of Anbar province left six IS fighters killed and another one arrested and two hiding places destroyed.

Also on 7 October, Iraqi security forces reported the arrest of a terrorist known as Al-Raqawi during a security operation in Nineveh province. He was on the Iraqi security forces' wanted list.

On 10 October, Iraqi counter-terrorism forces apparently captured a senior IS member in Kirkuk.

Anti-government protests

On 6 October 2020, demonstrators again stormed several offices of political parties and set fire to several buildings in southern Dhi Qar province, causing property damage. It was not disclosed to which party the offices concerned belonged.

On 10 October 2020, several dozens demonstrated in Karbala, blocking the road to Baghdad and demanding better public services, including more safety on the roads. No further details were released.

Kenya

Two men convicted of terrorist attack on shopping centre

Seven years after the terrorist attack on the Westgate shopping centre in Kenya's capital Nairobi, two defendants were found guilty of complicity in a terrorist act on 7 October 2020. The court said that it was proven that the two men had supported the four attackers in the assault. A third defendant was acquitted for lack of evidence. The sentence will be pronounced on 22 October. The trial had started in January 2014.

The al-Shabaab attack on a shopping centre on 21 September 2013 had left 67 people killed at least 200 injured. Heavy fighting followed, in which Kenyan security forces killed the assassins.

Kosovo

Correction: Arrest of police officers for various offences (BN of 5 October 2020)

In the Briefing Notes of 5 October 2020, it was reported that Albanian-language media apparently had reported on the arrest of at least 35 people in the course of a raid, citing only a BBC report of 19 September 2020. In actual fact, several Kosovar internet media published articles on this subject, in contrast to English-language portals, devoted specifically to news from the Western Balkans. At least ten border police officers had been arrested during the operation to combat illegal gambling, prostitution and human trafficking, arms and drugs offences (see BN of 5 October 2020). Media report of further raids following the operation. In the course of a larger operation conducted on 1 October, a further 22 individuals were arrested in connection with the above-mentioned accusations. Also, the security authorities confiscated numerous weapons and livestock.

Kyrgyzstan

Political crisis after parliamentary elections

The official announcement that two parties close to the government won the parliamentary elections held on 4 October 2020 triggered unrest and a political crisis. 11 other parties did not recognise the result. In Bishkek and other cities thousands of people took to the streets in protest against electoral fraud, demanding that the political elite be removed. On 6 October, demonstrators liberated several politicians from prison, including former President Almasbek Atambaev, and entered government buildings. Meanwhile the election commission has annulled the election results. The state committee for national security has informed that the former president was arrested again.

Lebanon

End of food subsidies may be imminent

On 9 October 2020, news spread that the Central Bank of Lebanon has only 1.8 billion dollars in reserves available before the lower limit of mandatory dollar reserves will be reached (17.5bn dollars). This would mean that subsidies on various goods can only be maintained for about one month in the usual framework. In the absence of a social security system, the Lebanese government subsidises some basic essentials of livelihood by guaranteeing very favourable exchange rates for their purchase on the world market. In contrast to a black market rate of 9,000:1 (Lebanese pound to US-Dollar), the rate is 1,500:1 for wheat, medicines and petrol, and 3,900:1 for several hundred other food items. It might be conceivable to maintain the exchange rate for wheat, petrol and medicines if other food items were no longer subsidized. The complex economic crisis has effectively halted the flow of dollars into the Lebanese economy; Lebanon has had to suspend interest payments on foreign currency debt and has introduced capital flow controls. An end to subsidies would lead to a significant increase in the cost of living.

Mali

ECOWAS lifts sanctions

On 6 October 2020, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) announced the lift of sanctions imposed on Mali after the military coup in August 2020. ECOWAS sees clear progress on the way back to democracy, saying that the demand for a civilian transitional government was met with the election of Moctar Ouané as the new transitional prime minister and the appointment of a cabinet of military and civilian representatives. On 9 October, also the African Union (AU) announced that it was lifting the suspension of Mali.

Abducted opposition politician released

On 8 October, the Malian interim government stated that opposition politician Soumaïla Cissé was released. He had been kidnapped by suspected jihadists in Niafouké in north-western Timbuktu region on 25 March (see BN of 30 March 2020) while campaigning for elections. He was released together with three other European hostages. The release of the hostages is believed to be linked to the previous release of up to 200 suspected jihadists from prison.

Montenegro

Journalist sentenced to prison for drug trafficking

On 8 October 2020, renowned journalist Jovo Martinovic was sentenced to one year in prison for drug trafficking in a second-instance verdict. He was acquitted of charges of membership in a criminal organisation, of which he had been found guilty of in the first-instance judgement in January 2019. Martinovic, who has worked, among others, for The Economist and The Financial Times, stated that he had only contacted suspected drug traffickers in connection with his journalistic work. He had been arrested in October 2015 along with 17 other individuals and spent 15 months in pre-trial custody before he was released. Hence, he has already served the prison term he was sentenced to. Reporters Without Borders describe the five-year trial and conviction of Martinovic as 'Kafkaesque'. In its latest progress report, the EU Commission calls on Montenegro in general terms to address political interference in the judiciary.

Nigeria

Priest kidnapped and released

According to media reports, a Catholic priest was kidnapped by unknown individuals from his farm in the Nigerian state of Delta on 26 September 2020 and was released three days later.

A spokesman for the diocese of Issele-Uku said that the victim was beaten at the time of his abduction but did not suffer serious injuries. It remained unclear whether a ransom was paid. Although the Nigerian bishops' conference has banned the payment of ransoms for the release of priests and religious, there have been reports of cases where

parishioners raised money for the release of priests. At least six priests have been reported abducted from the diocese of Issele-Uku since 2018. The victim who was kidnapped this time had already been abducted before in 2018 and was released after a few days.

Syria

Attack in Turkish occupied al-Bab

Both pro-opposition media and Turkish news agency Anadolu report that a truck loaded with explosives detonated near a bus stop in the village al-Bab on 6 October 2020, killing at least 18 people and injuring 75 others, among them women and children.

The Turkish authorities suspect the Kurdish People's Liberation Units (YPG) of being behind the attack; so far, no-one has claimed responsibility for the assault. The village of Al-Bab, located in the north of Aleppo province, has been under the control of the Turkish military and its allied Syrian-Arab militias since 2016.

SDF releases Syrian nationals from notorious al-Hol camp

On 5 October 2020, the administration of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced that it would allow all prisoners of Syrian nationality to leave the al-Hol camp in the north-east of the country. The camp for relatives of suspected IS fighters houses about 68,000 women and children. Of these, some 28,000 are apparently from Syria, 30,000 from Iraq and 10,000 from other countries. An estimated 15,000 of the 28,000 Syrians are from the provinces of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.

Tunisia

COVID-19 pandemic: curfew in the Tunis region

The authorities imposed a two-week night curfew from 8 October 2020 for the capital Tunis and its neighbouring region. On weekdays the curfew will last from 21h00 to 5h00, on weekends from 19h00 to 5h00. In the Tunis region, markets will be closed in the coming weeks and no Friday prayers will be held. Also, the two coastal regions of Sousse and Monastir as well as Sidi Bouzid in the interior of the country are affected by stricter corona measures.

Turkey

Progress report

On 6 October 2020, the EU Commission presented its latest progress reports on the preparedness for accession of the six (potential) EU membership candidates in the Western Balkans and Turkey. The report on Turkey states, among other things, that the country continues to move further away from the European Union and notes serious backsliding in democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights and independence of the judiciary. Other causes for concern are the continuing arrests of opposition leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, members of civil society and academics under the comprehensive anti-terrorism legislation. The report notes positively that Turkey sustained its outstanding efforts to provide humanitarian aid and support to nearly four million refugees from Syria (3.6 million) and other countries. At the same time, however, the report criticises that in March 2020, the Turkish government actively encouraged refugees to take the land route to Europe through Greece.

Venezuela

Roberto Marrero leaves Venezuela

Roberto Marrero, one of the 110 opposition politicians who have recently been pardoned by President Maduro, has managed to leave for Mexico. He was the chief of staff of Juan Guaidó, the opposition's interim president recognised by over 50 states. In the context of the crisis over the presidency, Marrero had been arrested on 21 March 2019 by SEBIN secret service members, which led the USA and other countries to impose new sanctions on Venezuela. Since his release on 31 August 2020, Marrero has tried to leave the country. His family lives in Florida.

Western Balkans

EU Commission presents progress report for membership candidates

On 6 October 2020, EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, presented the latest progress report on the preparedness for accession of the six (potential) EU membership candidates in the Western Balkans and Turkey. The report covers the period since the inauguration of the new EU Commission. With regard to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, a general lack of parliamentary involvement and scrutiny is noted in the Western Balkans.

Accession negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia could be opened before the end of the year. Media say that the Albania report provides a good overall assessment, including the fight against corruption, but notes a high degree of political polarisation. Northern Macedonia has also attained some level of preparation, but made limited progress in the area of freedom of expression; also, democratic and constitutional control mechanisms need to be strengthened further, such as the capacity for parliamentary oversight over the intelligence services.

The ongoing accession negotiations with Montenegro are, for the time being, focused on meeting the rule of law benchmarks. In this area, delays are noted. Also, Montenegro is urged to make better progress in the areas of freedom of expression and media, independence of the judiciary and the fight against corruption. Serbia is criticized for ambiguous communication about the EU and very limited progress in the area of rule of law. The political arena is dominated by the ruling coalition. The report also highlights a lack of transparency in the selection of senior positions in the public administration.

Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to show progress in all areas before accession negotiations can be opened. The report notes that those responsible have given more attention to party politics than to the implementation of reforms. A professional and depoliticised civil service needs to be ensured. Border and migration management and an effective asylum system fail due to shortcomings in the internal cooperation. Kosovo, at present a potential EU candidate, has made little progress due to a lack of political stability. The EU Commission's proposal on visa liberalisation for Kosovo citizens has been submitted to the Council of Ministers.

Yemen

Fights in Hodeida

On 8 October 2020, the UN called for an immediate end to the renewed fighting between Houthi rebels and pro-government forces over the cities of al-Durayhimi and Hais in Hodeida governorate. Apparently, 70 people were wounded and 52 killed, including dozens of civilians.

In December 2018, the parties to the conflict had agreed on a ceasefire which, however, was never fully implemented. Hence, fighting in Hodeida has continued sporadically.