



# Briefing Notes

## Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

20 February 2023

### Afghanistan

#### **Security situation: Taliban fight against ISKP, support for Pakistan's TTP**

The Taliban arrested one of their district governors in Badghis province on 14.02.23. He was accused of collaborating with the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP). Other sources, however, refer to ethnic conflicts. On 13.02.23, the Taliban claim they attacked an ISKP hideout in Kabul, killing several insurgents.

According to a report issued by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) on 14.02.23, the Taliban are supporting the Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)) (many of whose leaders operate from Afghanistan) and are endorsing their agenda in Pakistan. In particular, Emir Haibatullah Akhunzada agrees with the TTP that the current Pakistani political system is "un-Islamic". Some members of the Taliban, on the other hand, accuse the Pakistani government of supporting the ISKP in Afghanistan.

#### **Persecution events and government leadership**

A year and a half after the Taliban seized power, research conducted by the press medium Aamaj News shows that four-fifths of the cabinet members are Pashtuns; almost all of whom belong to the Taliban. According to the survey, three-quarters of the governors are of Pashtun ethnicity and are members of the Taliban. The Taliban flogged 11 people in Badakhshan province on 17.02.23 for a range of offences.

#### **Humanitarian situation: Taliban impose ban on contraceptives**

In some provinces, the Taliban have banned pharmacies and midwives from selling contraceptives. According to a press article released on 17.02.23, the Taliban consider women's use of contraceptives to be "a Western conspiracy to control the Muslim population". As a result, the price of contraceptives bought secretly from private sellers has skyrocketed. In 2022, the maternal mortality rate was about 30% higher than before the Taliban swept into power. Without easy access to contraceptives, the maternal mortality rate is expected to rise even further.

At least eight people died due to heavy snowfall in Badakhshan province on 15.02.23.

### Algeria

#### **Relatives of the journalist Amira Bouraoui arrested**

According to media reports, security forces arrested the mother and sister of Amira Bouraoui, a dissident journalist and activist after she left for France, on 11.02.23 and searched their homes. Bouraoui's sister was released a short time later, but her mother remained in custody and was taken to Annaba, where a judge will decide on her detention.

The French-Algerian activist was arrested by the Tunisian authorities on 03.02.23 while trying to leave for France. Algeria had demanded her extradition. However, following French intervention, Bouraoui was able to travel to France from Tunisia on 06.02.23. Bouraoui, who is considered to be a prominent supporter of the Hirak movement

and hosted a weekly programme on the regime-critical radio station Radio M, was sentenced to two years in prison in May 2021 on charges of allegedly insulting Islam and the president. She appealed the sentence, which is still pending.

## **Bangladesh**

### **WFP cuts aid for Rohingya refugees**

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) will cut aid for the 750,000 Rohingya living in refugee camps by 17% to USD 10 per person from March 2023 because of a USD 125 million shortfall in funding. Without new funding, further cuts will be necessary from April 2023 onwards. The Rohingya living in the refugee camps are already in a food insecure situation. In addition, the conditions in the overcrowded camps have led, inter alia, to crime, child labour and marriages. Boats carrying Rohingya who are seeking a better life, for instance in Malaysia and Indonesia, regularly cross the Andaman Sea. Most recently, a boat carrying 69 Rohingya reached the Indonesian province of Aceh on 16.02.23.

### **Report on criminal organisations at Rohingya refugee camps**

On 15.02.23, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Defence published a report on activities of criminal organisations at Rohingya refugee camps. According to the report, three major criminal groups, including the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (Arsa) and seven smaller gangs, are active in the Rohingya camps. Regular patrolling and surveillance could not be strengthened at the Konapara camp. Arsa controls this camp and the Balukhali, Hwaikwang, Palangkhali and Ukhiya camps. The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) and Master Munna Dal are concentrated in Ukhiya and Palangkhali camps. Islami Mahaz and Zabu Dakat Dal operate in Hwaikwang camp, and Chakma Dakat Dal, Nabi Hossen Dakat Dal, Putiya Dakat Dal, Salman Shah Dakat Dal and Khalek Dakat Dal gangs are active in Nayapara camp. Turf wars between the Arsa and Nabi Hossen Dakat Dal often lead to casualties.

## **Belarus**

### **More convictions for acts of sabotage**

According to state agency reports and information provided by the Belarusian human rights organisation Viasna, a court in the town of Mahilyou (Mahilyow) sentenced three men to prison on 10.02.23 for their alleged involvement in acts of sabotage on railway tracks in a bid to slow down the movement of logistics equipment through the country in the context of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Two of the men were sentenced to prison terms of 22 years respectively based on charges that included treason and involvement in organised terrorist activities. The third defendant was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment, but was released due to being deemed to have already spent enough time in detention and an amnesty law. Last summer, several people had been sentenced to prison terms, some of them for many years, in connection with acts of sabotage to railway infrastructure (cf. BN of 15.08.22).

## **Benin**

### **Driving ban for motorbikes**

Security concerns prompted the authorities to impose a night-time driving ban on parts of the country bordering the neighbouring states of Togo and Burkina Faso, including the communal area of Matéri and parts of the commune of Coby. Matéri and Coby are both located in the department of Atakora. According to media reports, the measure has been in force since mid-February 2023 and will apply indefinitely for the hours between 09:00 pm to 06:00 am. Affected locations in the municipal area of Coby include Pentenga, Goure-Potal, Tokidi, Datori, Anakade and Ouyerioun. Security forces will likely maintain a presence to enforce the measure. This move was prompted by the elevated threat posed by militant and criminal groups in northern Benin (cf. BN of 28.11.22) who often use motorbikes. Islamists are said to have claimed responsibility for two attacks carried out in the summer of

2022 in the north-eastern department of Alibori. On 10.02.23, an attack was carried out on the Togolese prefecture of Kpendjal, bordering the north-west of the country (see article on Togo).

## **Brazil**

### **At least 36 killed after heavy rainfall**

According to a statement released by São Paulo state government on 19.02.23, at least 36 people were killed after heavy rainfall caused flooding and landslides. A state of emergency has been declared in six cities, many people remain trapped, and over 330 people have become homeless.

## **Burundi**

### **Four members of human rights organisations arrested at Bujumbura airport before leaving the country**

According to local press reports, four members of human rights organisations were arrested on 14.02.23 while trying to travel to Uganda for a conference with civil society organisations. Witnesses at Bujumbura airport and members of the national human rights commission, Ligue Iteka, told international media that members of the national intelligence service carried out the arrests on 14.02.23. There was no immediate comment from the Burundian law enforcement authorities. Human rights activists are frequently targeted in the East African country and have accused the current and previous governments of persecuting critics.

## **Cambodia**

### **Government shuts down independent news agency**

On 12.02.23, Prime Minister Hun Sen announced the closure of the Voice of Democracy (VOD), one of the country's last remaining and most important independent news agencies. The reason for this step was an article published in VOD on 09.02.23. It mentioned that Sen's son, Lieutenant General Hun Manet, had signed an agreement on aid deliveries to the areas struck by the earthquake in Türkiye, which was obviously an overstep of his authority. He accused the outlet of hurting the "dignity and reputation" of the Cambodian government. The closure was carried out on 13.02.23 and represents a further intensification of Hun Sen's years-long crackdown on independent media and the political opposition. Amnesty International sees this as a clear warning to critical voices in view of the parliamentary elections scheduled for July 2023.

## **Chad**

### **Mass trial of members of rebel group FACT begins**

On 13.02.23, the trial of at least 150 members of the rebel group Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad (Front for Change and Concord in Chad) (FACT) is reported to have begun at a high security prison in Kléssoum. The defendants are accused, inter alia, of terrorism, recruitment of child soldiers, undermining national security and the assassination of former President Idriss Déby. Déby was assassinated in April 2021 during a visit to the frontline in the north of the country after FACT had launched an offensive to overthrow the government from its base in southern Libya (cf. BN of 26.04.21). At the beginning of May 2021, fighting between military troops and FACT ended; 156 combatants were reportedly arrested.

## **China**

### **Protests against healthcare reforms**

On 14.02.23 and 15.02.23 thousands of people of retirement age took to the streets in the cities of Wuhan and Dalian to protest against cuts in health insurance benefits. According to media reports, clashes erupted with the police and several retirees were arrested, some even in the run-up to the protests. On 08.02.23, several thousand people had gathered in front of the offices of Wuhan city government, demanding an explanation for the reforms

that entered into force in several provinces at the beginning of February 2023. Instead of receiving 260 RMB per month (approx. EUR 35; as of 20.02.23), most people now only receive around 80 RMB (approx. EUR 11) in medical allowances.

## Colombia

### **WFP: More than 15 million people affected by moderate and severe food insecurity**

According to a statement issued by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) on 15.02.2023, more than 13 million people in Colombia face moderate food insecurity and more than 2 million face severe food insecurity. These figures are based on surveys conducted in the country between June and November 2022. In addition to unemployment and poverty, the ongoing conflict in the country is also responsible for food insecurity. The situation has also worsened due to the pandemic, climate change and supply shortages in the wake of the Ukraine war. Particularly affected by food insecurity are reportedly states on the coast, such as Córdoba (70 %), Sucre (63 %), Cesar (55 %), Bolívar (51 %) y La Guajira (50 %), but also Arauca (62 %) on the border with Venezuela. In addition, Afro-Colombian and indigenous households, those headed by women or by victims of the armed conflict, are also said to be particularly hard hit.

## Côte d'Ivoire

### **Most sentences against supporters of Guillaume Soro upheld**

On 13.02.23, the Appeals Chamber of the competent court in Abidjan confirmed the sentences against 9 out of 11 persons who had been sentenced to varying lengths of imprisonment on 23.06.21 for an attempt to attack the security of the state. At the time of the court's ruling, former Prime Minister and Speaker of Parliament Guillaume Soro, who is living in exile, and 18 of his supporters were convicted (cf. BN of 02.08.21). As reported by the media, the Appeals Chamber overturned the sentence against a former Soro advisor and former minister Alain Lobognon, both of whom had been given the most lenient sentence of 17 months in prison at the time. By contrast, the verdict also includes the ratification of the 20-year prison sentences against 9 other persons. The dissolution of Soro's political movement Générations et peuples solidaires (GPS) is also said to have been confirmed by the verdict. Reports vary as to whether the sentencing of Soro himself to life imprisonment was also confirmed. A lawyer for the defence announced he will file an appeal with the court of cassation against the upheld sentences.

### **Land borders reopened**

After almost three years of closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic, on 16.02.2023 Côte d'Ivoire reopened its land borders which had been closed on 22.03.20. The sea and air borders reopened in 2020 after just a few months. This was reported in the media which say that cross-border trade is very important for the border regions. The decision to reopen the border is also expected to lead to a reduction in the number of unofficial border crossings. Most recently, around 8,700 refugees from Burkina Faso crossed the border into Côte d'Ivoire.

## Egypt

### **Inhumane conditions at the new Badr prison complex**

Local and international human rights organisations have described how inmates at the new prison complex "Badr Correctional and Rehabilitation Centre" located around 60 km northeast of the capital which opened at the end of 2021, continue to be subjected to inhumane conditions, such as a lack of food and clothing, solitary confinement, sleep deprivation and a lack of vital medical care. The state authorities have not yet commented on the accusations made but claim that the prison complex, which also houses numerous political prisoners, is equipped with modern workplaces, sports facilities and a hospital and was built to counteract overcrowding in other prisons.

## El Salvador

### **Article on the gang violence situation within the framework of the ongoing state of emergency**

An article recently published in the online digital newspaper El Faro gives an anecdotal account of some of the results of the 10-month state of emergency and the so-called war against the gangs, which began at the end of March 2022. It says that fundamental improvements have been made in relation to gang violence, and that gang structures no longer exist to the same extent as they did in the past. The article is based on visits to formerly gang-dominated neighbourhoods and areas, and interviews conducted with residents, NGOs, community leaders, trade union representatives, gang members and police officers. The presence of gangs has reportedly decreased considerably, they have virtually disappeared. The number of extortion offences has fallen significantly in the perception of the population, it is now possible to cross invisible borders based on former spheres of influence of different gangs and common areas are being used once again. Various trade unions also support the theory that there has been a drop in the number of extortion offences, although there are no concrete figures available to independently verify this. Nevertheless, some people quoted in the article question the sustainability of these measures; there is also a fear that the status quo may be just temporary. Other voices draw attention to the alleged contrast between the reduction in extortion crimes in the districts of the capital and the more persistent problems afflicting rural areas. During the interviews, it was reported that civilians with no gang involvement have been arrested arbitrarily and various NGOs have documented numerous such cases in connection with the state of emergency, as well as the disproportionate use of force and the death of persons in custody. According to government figures, more than 63,000 people had been arrested by January 2023, and a new prison capable of housing up to 40,000 prisoners was recently completed. Security Minister Gustavo Villatoro announced that the state of emergency will be maintained until all gang members have been arrested and that the country will cooperate with neighbouring countries until the last gang member is captured.

## Ethiopia

### **At least 50 persons killed in camp for IDPs**

According to a report issued by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), at least 50 people, including children and young people, were killed in an attack carried out on a camp for internally displaced persons in East Wollega zone in Oromia Regional State. The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA/Shene) is being blamed for the incident in the town of Ano, about 380 km west of the capital Addis Ababa, which occurred between 02.02.23 and 04.02.23. A representative of the OLA confirmed the attack, but said it was aimed at Amharic militia who were training at the camp. Eight more people were killed in the counter-attack carried out by the security forces, who, according to officials, were collaborating with the OLA.

## Iran

### **Protests in several cities**

According to media reports, on the evening of 16.02.23, for the first time since January 2023, people took to the streets once again in several cities, including Tehran and its surroundings, Ahvaz, Izeh (both Khuzestan), Shiraz (Fars) and Isfahan (Isfahan province) to protest against the leadership of the Islamic Republic. Protesters in Sanandaj (Kordestan province) reportedly started fires and blocked roads. Isolated clashes are said to have erupted between law enforcement officers and protesters. Calls for further protests had been made as the 40th day since two death sentences were carried out approaches. However, according to observers, the rallies drew fewer protesters than in the period between September 2022 and December 2022.

### **Nine-year prison sentence confirmed for prominent sociologist**

According to media reports, the first-instance prison sentence against a prominent sociologist critical of the regime has been confirmed by the appeals court in Tehran. The academic was sentenced to a total of nine years in prison on charges of forming and managing anti-establishment groups and spreading propaganda against the regime. He had been prevented from leaving the country to begin a research programme in the United States on 28.12.21 and

was banned from leaving the country until his arrest on 16.05.22. He has been held in Tehran's Evin Prison since then. His provisional detention in Tehran's Evin prison had since been repeatedly extended (cf. BN of 23.05.22 and 15.08.22). In his writings, the social scientist tackled among other things, the situation of prisoners in Iran and protest events. He had already been sentenced to several years in prison in the past.

## **Iraq**

### **Anti-ISIS operation: two soldiers killed**

Two soldiers were killed in an anti-terrorist operation carried out by the Iraqi army in Tarmiyah (Salah al-Din Governorate) north of Baghdad on 16.02.23; three suspected ISIS members were also killed. The attack occurred as thousands of Shia Muslims were making their way to a pilgrimage. According to reports, Iraqi security forces had previously received tip-offs about ISIS' plans to attack Shia pilgrims.

## **Lebanon**

### **Economic situation**

Since the official exchange rate, which is only used for a few goods, was raised from 1:1507 to the US dollar to 1:15,000, the Lebanese lira has entered a phase of rapid decline. In the week from 13.02.23 to 19.02.23, the black market exchange rate, which plays the key role in everyday life, fell from about 1:66,000 to 1:80,000 and is showing no signs of stabilising. In addition to a system in which prices are increasingly tendered in dollars and then paid for in lira based on the current exchange rate, shops are moving to accepting US dollars only, greatly accelerating what has been a gradual but significant process of dollarisation. Around 13% of the Lebanese labour force is paid in foreign currency.

Several of Lebanon's major banks remain closed indefinitely, further paralysing economic life. The needs of Lebanon's 14 largest banks are estimated to be USD 67 billion, a sum believed to be realistically unattainable. Several banks announced they would open briefly at the end of the month to disburse payroll funds. During protest rallies, tyres were set on fire in front of some bank branches.

In parallel, the increase in the exchange rate made it necessary to further adjust the price of bread. The massively subsidised official exchange rate only applies to a few goods such as certain medicines. The package sizes for the widely used Arabic bread have been reduced once again and the prices have increased. The original 2019 packs of bread (500, 1,000 and 1,500 grams) have been reduced to 343, 832 and 1,052 grams. The price per kg of bread has thus almost doubled since it was set in May of last year.

## **Libya / Egypt**

### **Egyptian Christians released after kidnapping**

It has been reported in the media that in the week of 06.02.23 to 12.02.23, six Coptic Christian workers from Egypt were kidnapped by an armed group at a Libyan checkpoint in order to extort a ransom. According to the Egyptian embassy, they were released on 18.02.23.

Time and again, armed groups kidnap people in Libya to extort money, intimidate opposition members and put pressure on political decision-makers.

## **Nicaragua**

### **More than 90 persons have their Nicaraguan citizenship revoked**

According to information provided by the judiciary on 15.02.23, a further 94 government critics, most of whom are already living in exile, have been found guilty in absentia of high treason and classified as fugitives. They have also been stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship (cf. BN of 13.02.23). An order has been issued to confiscate their assets in the country. In this context, according to concurring media reports, the first confiscations of properties took place as early as 17.02.23. The persons affected include journalists, human rights defenders, political activists and

the Catholic bishop Silvio Báez. Spain has offered citizenship to these persons and to the more than 200 expatriated persons deported to the USA on 09.02.23 (cf. BN of 13.02.23).

## **Nigeria**

### **Attacks on police stations in the South**

According to media reports, men dressed in Nigerian army uniforms attacked a police station in the town of Ogiyo in the south-western state of Ogun on 15.02.23, injuring several people. The attack was allegedly triggered by a violent altercation between a policeman and a soldier. However, there is no official confirmation for the details of the incident. Recently, there have been increased reports of attacks against security forces and state institutions in Nigeria's southeast, often from Imo and Anambra states. In the most recent incident which occurred on 19.02.23, unknown persons attacked a police station in Ogidi in Idemili North Local Government Area (LGA) of Anambra State, killing three policemen.

### **Warning of election-related violence**

Observers fear outbreaks of violence during the general elections scheduled for 25.02.23, in which around 93.5 million registered voters will go to the polls to vote for the next president of Nigeria, among other things. Massive security measures are planned for election day. All universities will be closed from 22.02.23 to 14.03.23 (cf. BN of 13.02.23). Support for the three promising presidential candidates Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) (cf. BN of 30.05.22), Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) party (cf. BN of 20.06.22) and Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) (cf. BN of 23.01.23) can also be attributed, at least in part, to the origin and ethnic and religious affiliation of the candidates and their supporters.

## **Pakistan**

### **Attack on security forces in Karachi**

Three security personnel and one civilian lost their lives, and several persons were injured on 17.02.23 in an attack carried out at a police compound in Karachi. Two armed suicide bombers allegedly entered one of the police buildings and temporarily took hostages. Shots were heard afterwards and at least one of the assailants allegedly blew himself up. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have claimed responsibility for the attack.

## **Russian Federation**

### **Journalist receives lengthy prison sentence for reporting on Ukraine war**

On 15.02.23, Maria Ponomarenko, a journalist working for the independent newspaper RusNews, was sentenced by a district court in the city of Barnaul to six years in a penal colony for spreading false information about the Russian armed forces (Article 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code). At the same time, she was banned from practising journalism and from engaging in any online activities for five years after serving her sentence. In April 2022, the journalist had reported in a post on Telegram about the attack by the Russian air force on the theatre in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol, where around 1,000 people had sought shelter. Between 300 and 600 people were killed in the bombing on 16.03.22, according to reports by the Ukrainian authorities and the Associated Press. Since the law on the dissemination of false information about the armed forces was passed on 04.03.22, around 150 people have been sentenced by Russian courts for allegedly spreading fake news. According to the civil rights portal OWD-Info, Ponomarenko is the first woman to be sentenced to prison in this context.

## **Senegal**

### **Banned PASTEF protest: several dozen arrests and indictments**

According to media reports, 69 people were arrested in Mbacké and Touba on 10.02.23 after rioting, looting and damage to property occurred following a planned demonstration by the opposition party Patriotes africains du

Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité (PASTEF) (African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity) (cf. BN of 13.02.23) was officially banned. Some minors and schoolchildren were among those arrested. On 16.02.23, a court ordered the provisional release of 13 persons, most of them minors, and transferred the remaining detainees to a prison based on a judicial remand order ("mandat de depot"). The detention of the persons taken into pre-trial detention had previously been prolonged by the public prosecutor's office using the practice of "retour de parquet", which has been criticised for years by the UN Committee against Torture (CAT). Charges had been brought against all 69 people for various criminal offences and misdemeanours - including violations of the right to demonstrate as well as damage to property and property offences.

### **Events and protests around the adjournment of the defamation trial against opposition leader Sonko**

The defamation trial of PASTEF party leader Ousmane Sonko (cf. BN of 06.02.23), scheduled for 16.02.23 and attended by a large police contingent, was again adjourned - to 16.03.23. According to the Reuters news agency, tear gas was used against hundreds of Sonko supporters who tried to escort his vehicle along one of Dakar's main streets. According to other media reports, a tear gas deployment by the police was related to an attempt by his supporters to gain access to the court building. Video footage posted on social media reportedly showed Sonko's vehicle being stopped by police after the court case, him being ordered to get out of the vehicle and then being dragged out of the vehicle by police officers when he refused to do so. Sonko had not wanted to follow a route given by the police. Subsequent footage showed Sonko being taken home by police. Later in the day, Sonko was prevented from holding a press conference at the PASTEF party headquarters, security forces prevented him from attending the press conference by using tear gas against him and his supporters, according to a media report. Three journalists who wanted to report on the aforementioned incidents were temporarily arrested and there are reports that their working materials were confiscated and some of their footage was deleted. In Bignona (Ziguinchor region) as well as in some districts of the city of Ziguinchor, protests by young people led to violent clashes between security forces and protestors, which resulted in numerous arrests. Protesters said they were demonstrating against police violence and the prevention of Sonko's scheduled press conference.

## **Somalia**

### **Forces kill more than 200 al-Shabaab fighters**

According to government sources, over 200 al-Shabaab militia have been killed in fighting in Iji in the Hiran region. The casualties reportedly included Yusuf Ali Sheikh, the commander in charge of the region, as well as Salad Mohamud Siyad and his deputy Hussein Dhere, al-Shabaab leaders in the Middle Shabelle region. It was reportedly a coordinated attack involving foreign forces and clan militias in which dozens of militants were also captured. In another operation, at least 12 more al-Shabaab fighters were killed when the Somali army repelled an attack in Sunguni village, 50 km north of Kismayo (Jubaland region).

### **Release of journalist Abdalle Ahmed Mumin**

On 13.02.23, the journalist and Somali Journalists Syndicate (SJS) Secretary General Abdalle Ahmed Mumin was released by a court in Mogadishu a few hours after being sentenced to two months in prison on security-related charges. He explained that prison officials released him on the grounds he had already served his sentence despite the verdict with previous arrests and court appearances. Mumin was arrested in October 2022 during an intensified government crackdown on media outlets accused of publishing what it deems propaganda for the Islamist militant group al-Shabab (cf. BN of 24.10.22 and 31.10.22).

## **South Africa**

### **State of disaster due to flooding**

On 13.02.23, President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national state of disaster in response to widespread flooding in seven of the nine provinces. Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape have been hit hardest by the floods, which were triggered by above-average rainfall following a cold snap. The state of emergency gives the government additional powers, including the procurement and supply of goods and services. At least 12 people are reported to have died in the floods. There are reports of damage to buildings, including a hospital, roads and bridges.



As recently as 09.02.23, a national state of emergency had been declared because of the energy crisis (cf. BN of 13.02.23).

## Sudan

### **Security situation in West-Darfur and South Darfur**

Reports are rife in the media that the security situation in the Darfur regions is steadily deteriorating. They say there have been renewed outbreaks of violence in West Darfur (cf. BN of 13.02.23), during which two soldiers were killed and three were injured. On 12.02.23, a unit of the joint forces of the army, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the police, which had previously been deployed to the region, was attacked by unknown persons in the region around the village of Kerenik.

In addition, women living in refugee camps, in particular, are increasingly susceptible to violent sexual assaults. According to media reports, two women were attacked and raped by unknown armed persons near the town of Tabit in North Darfur on 15.02.23. A woman was assaulted and shot near the town of El Fasher.

Media reports say that on 14.02.23, violent attacks occurred in South Darfur near a refugee camp in the village of Mershing. Three women were reportedly attacked and raped by armed persons while they were collecting firewood. In addition, seven people were reportedly attacked, beaten up and robbed by armed assailants.

### **Corporal punishment imposed for the first time in ten years**

According to media reports, just a fortnight ago (CW5), three men in Omdurman were each sentenced to amputation of a hand for theft. They were reportedly also fined and sentenced to imprisonment. The sentence was announced only recently and is the first of its kind to be handed down in almost ten years. The lawyer for the three convicted men criticised the fact that the sentence violated the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Sudan signed in August 2021. He accused the transitional military government of lacking the will to reform the relevant jurisprudence. The human rights organisation African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies also accused the Sudanese authorities of conducting an unfair trial.

## Syria

### **Border openings after earthquake disaster; death toll rises to approximately 6,000**

On 14.02.23, UN Secretary-General António Guterres announced that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had agreed, after negotiations, to temporarily open two more border crossings for international aid deliveries in addition to Bab al-Hawa. The crossings at Bab al-Salama and al-Rai are both located in rebel-controlled parts of Aleppo governorate and are to remain open for international aid deliveries to the earthquake region for an initial period of three months. Although the areas are not under government control, UN aid relies on the consent of the sovereign under international law.

The Turkish government also announced on 14.02.23 stated that it intended to allow Syrian earthquake victims in Türkiye to return to Syria temporarily without having to lose their protection or residence status in Türkiye. Normally, Syrian refugees in Türkiye have to fear losing their special status and being barred from entering Türkiye for five years if they return to Syria without special permission.

According to estimates, at the time of the earthquakes on 06.02.23 (cf. BN of 06.02.23 and 13.02.23), around 1.7 million Syrians were residing in the affected Turkish areas.

A spokesperson for the Syrian rebel group which controls the border crossing at Bab al-Hawa stated that on 15.02.23 about 1,800 people had already crossed the border into north-western Syria. On 19.02.23, according to the UN, 175 trucks transporting aid supplies had already entered Syria from Türkiye via the Bab al-Hawa border crossing and 22 via the Bab al-Salama border crossing. More than 1,700 bodies of Syrians who had died in Türkiye were reportedly also returned to Syria.

According to an international press agency, since the earthquake disaster, all aid deliveries from Damascus to the rebel-held areas have been rejected by the extremist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is in control of large parts of the region.

Meanwhile, the UN puts the death toll in Syria at around 6,000, including 4,400 in rebel-controlled areas and 1,600 in government-controlled areas (as of 17.02.23).

#### **Damascus: five killed in airstrike presumably carried out by Israel**

According to Syrian state media, five persons, including one soldier, were killed in an Israeli airstrike carried out on a residential area in Damascus in the morning hours of 19.02.23. Fifteen other civilians were reportedly wounded. The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), however, reported that the airstrikes had claimed 15 lives, including that of a woman. Airstrikes had reportedly been carried out on a target in the rural area of Damascus and on other targets in the Damascus district of Kafr Sousa, including an Iranian school. Israeli airstrikes usually target Iranian-backed militias. The Israeli government, in line with its current practice, did not comment.

#### **Homs: at least 53 killed in ISIS attack**

According to Syrian state media, at least 53 people were killed in an attack carried out by so-called Islamic State near the town of Sukhna on 17.02.23. The attackers approached a Syrian army checkpoint on motorcycles and opened fire on military personnel as well as civilians in the vicinity. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), more than 68 people were killed in the attack, most of them civilians.

Since being largely pushed back in March 2019, the group has operated primarily through sleeper cells. The raid in Homs governorate represents the biggest attack carried out by ISIS so far this year.

Also on 17.02.23, the US military announced the killing of a high-ranking ISIS member named Hamza al-Homsi in north-eastern Syria.

## **Togo**

#### **Deadly attack in the north**

According to media reports, unidentified assailants killed around 30 civilians in the northern prefecture of Kpendjal on 10.02.23. The crime scene is in the Savanes region bordering Burkina Faso, where a security emergency has been in effect since June 2022 (cf. BN of 20.06.22). No official information is available on the details of the violence. According to a media report, members of the Togolese armed forces managed to track down and kill about 10 of the assailants. Against the background of the threat situation in the north (cf. BN of 06.12.22), President Faure Gnassingbé undertook a restructuring of the security authorities at the end of 2022 (cf. BN of 02.01.23).

## **Tunisia**

#### **Nationwide demonstrations against poor economic conditions and recent arrests**

On 18.02.23, according to media reports, several thousand people demonstrated across the country against deteriorating living conditions and the recent arrests of political opponents (cf. BN of 13.02.23). In eight cities, including Sfax, Monastir, Kasserine and Kairouan, the protesters had responded to a call by the trade union federation Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) (Tunisian General Labour Union).

## **Türkiye**

#### **Consequences of the earthquakes**

On 20.02.23, it was reported that more than 46,000 people had been killed in the earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria on 06.02.23. According to media reports, the death toll in Türkiye is 40,642, while neighbouring Syria has reported more than 5,800 fatalities. It is expected that the death toll will continue to rise. Many people are still missing. Approximately 345,000 homes have been destroyed in Türkiye. Almost two weeks after the earthquake, Türkiye is ending its rescue efforts. Rescue operations were suspended in nine of the total of eleven affected provinces in Türkiye on 19.02.23.

### **Arrests in connection with the earthquakes**

On 19.02.23, Turkish media reported that the authorities had arrested 131 suspects following investigations into the collapse of buildings destroyed by the deadly earthquakes. It was reported that 430 suspects were responsible for the buildings collapsing due to poor construction.

### **Voluntary return of Syrian refugees**

On 19.02.23, Minister of National Defence Hulusi Akar stated that 10,633 Syrian refugees had voluntarily returned across the border to Syria after the recent earthquakes in southern Türkiye, thus rejecting reports that Türkiye was facing a new wave of migration.

## **Ukraine**

### **War and humanitarian situation**

It has been reported in the media that on 16.02.23, Russian forces carried out renewed airstrikes on critical infrastructure facilities in different parts of Ukraine, hitting targets in the Lviv, Poltava, Dnipropetrovsk and Kirovohrad oblasts, among others. Heavy fighting and airstrikes continue unabated along the frontline in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, media reports say. According to Ukrainian sources, Russian attacks are expected to intensify in view of the approaching anniversary of the Russian invasion. On 17.02.23, the Ukrainian government urged the remaining civilian population in the heavily contested town of Bakhmut, estimated at around 5,000 to 6,000 people, to flee immediately. On 19.02.23, the military administration of the Donetsk region reported that three civilians had been killed and one injured as a result of the war. According to the Kherson regional military administration, at least six civilians were killed in Russian artillery attacks in Kherson Oblast on 17.02.23 and 19.02.23. Regional authorities reported that on 19.02.23, airstrikes in Kharkiv oblast killed one civilian and injured four others.

### **War damage to residential buildings**

The Ukrainian government announced on 17.02.23 that, to date, approximately 325,000 reports had been received from Ukrainian civilians about damaged or destroyed residences due to the war. As early as January, the government announced that around 2.4 million people were affected by war-damaged or destroyed housing. According to media reports, a draft law on the establishment of a compensation mechanism for those affected is currently being discussed in the Ukrainian parliament. According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Infrastructure, more than 316,000 applications for compensation have already been received. If the law is implemented, priority is to be given, among others, to members of the Ukrainian armed forces, people with disabilities or persons who have become disabled due to the war, and families of fallen war veterans.

## **Venezuela**

### **Annual report published by the NGO Foro Penal (Penal Forum): review of arrests for political reasons in 2022**

According to the 2022 annual report published by the NGO Foro Penal (Penal Forum), a total of 26 people were arrested for political reasons last year, bringing the total number of people held in politically motivated arbitrary detention at the end of the year to 274. The report said that 87 of those detained for political reasons had already been detained for more than three years without a verdict. It stated that the number of arrests for political reasons in 2022 was highest in June (11), followed by July (six); Caracas (13) was the place with the most arrests during the year. Of the 26 persons arrested, 13 were accused of conspiracy and nine were arrested in connection with demonstrations.

### **Report published by the NGO FundaRedes: review of violence in six border states in January 2023**

According to the NGO FundaRedes, a total of 57 persons were killed in six border states (Zulia, Bolívar, Táchira, Amazonas, Falcón and Apure) in January 2023. Most of the cases occurred in the state of Zulia on the border with Colombia, where 30 people have been killed and 13 armed clashes have erupted. The state of Bolívar on the border with Brazil came second with 16 homicides and four armed confrontations.

## Yemen

### **Significant increase in the number of migrants from the Horn of Africa**

According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the number of persons travelling from the Horn of Africa to Yemen increased significantly in 2022, including many women who were travelling alone with children. Most use Yemen as a transit country on their way to wealthier Gulf states, but are often unaware of the situation in Yemen and of the impermeable borders. African migrants in Yemen are regularly the victims of serious human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests and forced recruitment. This is reportedly particularly true of the areas under Houthi control.

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