

Information Centre on Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

25 February 2013

Afghanistan

New UNAMA report on civilian victims

Last week the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released its 2012 Annual Report on civilian victims. Overall, 7,559 civilian casualties were recorded, with 2,754 of the total number being killed and 4,805 wounded. In 2011, 7,837 civilian victims were counted (3,131 deaths and 4,706 injuries). The number of deaths fell 12% year-on-year, whereas that of injuries rose slightly. The overall decline is the result of a drop in the number of civilian casualties in the first half of 2012. In the second half of the year, the figure was up 13% year-on-year.

As in the years before, anti-government fighters caused most of the casualties (2012: 81%). The number of civilian deaths and injuries attributed to them rose about 9% from 2011, to 6,131. About 40% of these victims were killed or injured by explosives traps. In particular, the number of targeted attacks jumped by 107%; such attacks killed 698 people and injured 397. In fact, the number of victims of targeted attacks on government employees skyrocketed; it was up by 700%. 107 persons were killed and 148 wounded in 47 attacks.

Security situation

On 24 February 2013, there were three suicide attacks in eastern Afghanistan: In the city of Jalalabad (province of Nangarhar), a car laden with explosives blew up in front of a security forces facility. Two guards were killed and three injured. In the province of Logar, another explosives-laden car hit a police base. Three policemen were killed. Also in Logar, a man wearing an explosives vest blew himself up in front of a police building. A policeman was injured. The police claim to have prevented a suicide attack on an intelligence service building in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital.

Iraq

Security situation

The attacks continue. On 19 February 2013, attacks in the provinces of Niniveh, Salahaddin and Baghdad killed at least 19 people and injured 21.

On 20 February 2013, three people died in attacks in the provinces of Diyala and Niniveh.

On 21 February 2013, series of attacks in the provinces of Niniveh, Diyala, Salahaddin and Baghdad killed at least 26 people and injured more than 50.

In the night between 21 and 22 February 2013, seven members of the Sahwa militia died in an attack on a checkpoint in the village of Halaiwat near Tuz Khurmato (province of Salahaddin).

On 23 February 2013, at least 16 people were killed and more than ten injured by attacks. The provinces of Diyala, Niniveh, Salahaddin and Anbar were hit hardest. The governor of Diyala was among the wounded.

On 24 February 2013, at least five people were killed in attacks in Mosul and Baghdad.

Syria

Violence continues

Missile attacks on Aleppo killed at least 30 people and injured 150 on 22 February 2013. On 21 February 2013, at least 53 people were killed and about 250 injured by a bomb attack in Damascus. A car bomb exploded in front of the headquarters of the governing Baath party, and there were at least two other coordinated attacks on security forces offices in the northern quarter of Barse. Several other attacks had taken place in Damascus before; for example, a command centre of a rebel group was hit on 20 February 2013.

UNO denounces increase in war crimes

The the UN Human Rights Council commission on Syria believes that “large parts of Syria are scenes of continuous combat, involving more brutal tactics and new military capabilities on all sides” and called once again for “holding the perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity accountable”. Both the army of President Assad and the anti-government groups are accused of serious war crimes, such as murder, torture, rape and attacks on civilians. A confidential list of individuals and military units believed to be responsible for serious crimes is to be submitted to UN High Commissioner Navi Pillay in March 2013.

National Coalition plans to form government in exile in March 2013

According to reports dated 22 February 2013, the National Coalition plans to form a government in exile in Istanbul in March 2013. This government in exile is to support people near Syria’s northern and north-western border to Turkey. The relevant areas are controlled by anti-government forces (“liberated areas”). Assad Mustafa, a former minister of agriculture under Hafiz al-Assad, reportedly has a chance of becoming Prime Minister.

Opposition to boycott international negotiations

The Syrian National Coalition, which has been holding a meeting in Cairo since 21 February 2013, announced on 23 February 2013 that it plans to boycott international negotiations on Syria’s future. It justified this decision with the “international silence” on the violence in Syria, which has claimed about 70,000 lives so far. The boycott applies to the meeting of the Friends of Syria scheduled for 28 February 2013, in which a number of European foreign ministers and new US Secretary of State John Kerry will participate, to talks with representatives of the Russian government planned for March and to a meeting in the US. The decision suggests that disputes within the opposition camp have flared up again. Liberal and Islamist Coalition members had criticised National Coalition leader Moaz al-Khatib, who had agreed to talks with representatives of the Assad regime three weeks ago.

EU decides on extension of arms embargo

The EU foreign ministers agreed on 18 February 2013 to extend the weapons embargo against Syria by another three months, but also promised more support for the opposition forces and civilians.

Israel/Palestinians

UN Secretary-General calls for respecting the rights of detained Palestinians

Against the background of a hunger strike by Palestinians detained in Israel, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon called on Israel to respect prisoners’ rights and to contribute to an end of the conflict. Ban said the detainees should be charged and tried in accordance with international standards or released. He explained that he had received letters by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the Arab League which pointed out that the hunger strikers’ health was rapidly deteriorating.

Israel planning to build 346 additional settlers’ homes

The Israeli ministry of defence agreed to the construction of 346 new homes in two Jewish settlements in the occupied part of the West Bank. 200 homes are to be built in Tekoa and 146 in neighbouring Nokdim, about 10 km south of Bethlehem. Shalom Achshav (“Peace Now”), an anti-settlement NGO, said that the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had approved a larger number of settlements than in more than ten years before. Shalom Achshav pointed out that in 2012 alone, construction of more than 1,700 settlers’ homes had started and permits for almost 6,700 homes had been granted. At the moment, roughly 340,000 Israeli settlers are living in the West Bank. This figure does not include 200,000 inhabitants of settlers’ blocks in the annexed eastern part of Jerusalem, where 270,000 Palestinians live, too.

Gaza Strip blockade eased

According to a report by TV station Channel 2, Israel and the radical Islamist Hamas have been negotiating indirectly about a potential easing of the Israeli blockade of Gaza for some weeks now. Egypt is reportedly acting as a mediator. The talks focus on opening the checkpoint Rafah between Egypt and the Gaza Strip for supplies of construction materials from Qatar. The emirate plans to invest millions in infrastructure projects in the Gaza Strip. According to the report, there are also discussions on permits to export agricultural products from the Gaza Strip to Israel.

Turkey

Crackdown on DHKP-C

On 19 February 2013, the Turkish police arrested 167 suspected members of the extreme-left DHKP-C (Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front) in a nationwide crackdown. According to reports in Turkish media, the suspects were arrested in several cities in 28 provinces. Most raids hit the "Revolutionary Employees' Movement" (DMH), which is regarded as a cover organisation of the DHKP-C. Teachers, nurses and public-sector employees were among the arrested. The EU and the US categorise the DHKP-C as a terrorist organisation. The DHKP-C had recently claimed responsibility for the suicide attack on the US embassy in Ankara on 1 February 2013, in which the attacker and a guard were killed.

Öcalan promises PKK armistice from March

According to reports in Turkish newspapers, detained PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan plans to call on the fighters of his banned party to agree to an armistice from March. This is what Turkish newspapers reported on 25 February 2013. They referred to talks between Öcalan and three Kurdish members of parliament on the prison island Imrali on 23 February 2013. The armistice is to start on 21 March, the date of the traditional Kurdish spring festival Nevroz.

Armenia

President re-elected

Incumbent Serge Sarkisyan was re-elected with just about 59% of the vote in the presidential elections on 18 February 2013. Raffi Hovhannesian, the candidate of the opposition "Heritage" party, came second with about 37% of the vote. The remaining five candidates got between 0.24% and 2% of the vote each. Armenia's three most important opposition parties had refused to participate and not entered any candidates. Hovhannesian accused the president of having manipulated the poll. On 20 February 2013, thousands of protesters demonstrated peacefully in Yerevan (the country's capital) against President Sarkisyan's re-election.

OSCE and USA deplore irregularities in the presidential elections

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) said that Armenia had made progress in that peaceful elections were held, but noted that there was a lack of genuine competition. It criticised that, just like in earlier elections, the government had put pressure on civil servants to vote for the incumbent.

Tunisia

Prime Minister Jebali steps down

When Prime Minister Jebali, who is perceived as a moderate, failed to push through his proposal of a temporary, technocratic government, he resigned on 19 February 2013. Jebali's own Ennahda party opposed the concept of a technocratic cabinet, which should not include any politicians. Leading representatives of several parties optimistically said a new government might be installed soon after Jebali's resignation. In fact, on 22 February 2013, Minister of the Interior Ali Larayedh was asked to form a new coalition government. He will have two weeks to select his cabinet, which will then have to be approved by the National Constituent Assembly.

Egypt

Date for parliamentary elections set

On 21 February 2013, President Mursi released a decree which calls parliamentary elections from the end of April. The elections are to take three months overall. Voters in 26 provinces and the capital will vote in four stages. At the end of April, elections will be held in four provinces and Cairo.

Mohamed ElBaradei, an opposition politician and former head of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), called for an election boycott on 24 February 2013. He said he did not want to “participate in a sham poll”.

After protests by the Coptic church, President Mursi brought forward the electoral dates by five days. The Copts had complained that the first stage of the elections coincided with Easter.

Eritrea/Egypt/Israel

Kidnappings and organ trafficking on Sinai

Once again, there are reports of kidnappings and organ trafficking in the Sinai. Allegedly, organs of refugees whose relatives cannot pay ransom are removed and sold; the organs are then transplanted to patients in Cairo. According to the reports, organs can effectively be ordered from Bedouin tribes in the Sinai. The victims are mainly refugees from Eritrea, Ethiopia or Sudan, most of whom from the refugee camps Mai Aini in Ethiopia or Shagarab in Sudan. These two camps are the most important shelters for refugees from Eritrea, too.

Israeli authorities put pressure on Eritrean refugees

The Jerusalem Post reports that Eritrean refugees were told they would be released from prison if they agreed to return to their home country. Alternatively, they were offered a flight to Uganda. Uganda recently granted asylum seeker status to several Eritrean football players, who had fled their home country during a tournament in Kampala.

Ivory Coast

ICC procedure against former President Gbagbo

On 20 February 2013, the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague started preliminary proceedings against former Ivory Coast President Laurent Gbagbo. Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda accused Gbagbo of crimes against humanity after the presidential elections at the end of 2010. She said the matter concerned “a president who sacrificed the political electoral democratic processes and preferred to resort to violence and crime in a bid to stay in power.” Bensouda said the 67-year-old former president was responsible for the murder, rape and persecution of hundreds of political opponents. She hopes to prove that Gbagbo controlled the security forces and the military and ordered violent acts. Unrest erupted after Gbagbo refused to recognise his defeat in the elections of November 2010 and transfer the power to his elected successor Alassane Ouattara. Gbagbo was arrested by mid-April 2011 and transferred to The Hague in November. This is the first time that a former head of state is being tried in front of the ICC.

In the preliminary hearings, which will run until 28 February, the court will decide whether the evidence is sufficient to open a main trial. Gbagbo himself will not be allowed to speak until the end of the hearing.

Criticism of victors’ justice

In the meantime, the Ivory Coast government is accused of one-sided justice. The organisation Human Rights Watch writes in a report that, while more than 120 people have been tried for crimes during the fight for power, but none of them belonged to the pro-Ouattara camp. While human rights groups mainly accuse the Gbagbo supporters of serious crimes, Ouattara’s soldiers are charged with crimes, too.

Tanzania

Renewed attacks on albinos

Mutilations of albinos are occurring repeatedly. For example, a seven-year-old boy had his hand cut off right in the street. A similar attack on a woman was registered as well. In January, an albino boy died after his arm had been cut off. Since 2007, more than 60 albinos have been brutally mutilated or murdered, many of them children. In parts of Africa, albinos are believed to bring good luck and wealth. Traditional healers use their body parts in rituals; in fact, high sums of money are paid for albino body parts.

Albinism occurs unusually often in Tanzania. The government is trying to prevent attacks on albinos. For example, in 2009 all healers' licences were revoked and people were asked to be more vigilant. In a symbolic act, President Jakaya Kikwete appointed an albino woman as member of parliament and Prime Minister Mizengo Pinda adopted an albino girl. Nevertheless, the roughly 200,000 albinos still feel they are in considerable danger. They rarely dare to go out in the dark and barricade their homes.

Mali

116 killed in fights in the north of the country

The Chadian army announced on 24 February 2013 that 93 rebels and 23 Chadian soldiers were killed in heavy fights in the Ifoghas mountains. The extremists were reported to have belonged to a branch of the terrorist network al-Qaeda and the Islamist group Ansar dine. The rebels use the Ifoghas mountains near the border to Algeria as a retreat.

French president Hollande said that a paratrooper of the French Foreign Legion was killed in the fights in the Ifoghas mountains on 19 February 2013.

On 20 and 21 February 2013, the extremists and the army clashed in Gao. According to reports by Malian media, at least 16 rebels were killed. Six Malian soldiers were wounded in the fights.

France has declared that it will start to withdraw its troops from Mali in March as planned, despite the recent attacks.

Another suicide attack

A car bomb attack killed the two suicide bombers and at least three others in the north-east of Mali on 22 February 2013. Tuareg rebels said that the attack in Inhalil, near the city of Tessalit, targeted Tuareg rebels and civilians. Two explosives-laden cars blew up. Several people were injured, among them fighters of the Tuareg group "National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad" (MNLA).

Somalia

Eleven killed in Kismayo

On 23 February 2013, eleven people reportedly lost their lives in a clash between militia of the Marehan and Ogaden clans in the south Somalian port of Kismayo. Both clans are allies of the Somalian government. Three of the dead were uninvolved civilians. The clash was reportedly triggered by the death of a clan leader in the police arrest and an attempt by his clan militia to storm the police building.

Demonstration against al-Shabaab in Puntland

One week after the murder of a well-known religious scholar at a mosque in Garowe, about 20,000 people demonstrated against the radical Islamist al-Shabaab. Puntland President Abdirahman Mohamed Farole and Vice-President Abdisamad Ali Shire participated in the protests, too.

A press release of the Puntland government dated 23 February 2013 said that security forces had destroyed several terrorist cells and arrested more than 50 suspects, some of them foreigners.

Sudan

50 civilians killed in Darfur

According to the governor of North Darfur, members of an Arab militia killed 51 civilians and injured 62 by machine gun and missile attacks on the city of el-Sireaf on 23 February 2013. The attack is reported to be

part of a dispute between the Arab tribes Rizeigat and Beni Hussein about the exploitation of a gold mine in the area of Jebel Amir (see BN of 14 and 21 January 2013). Thousands of refugees who had to leave their homes in January due to the tribal clashes are currently living in el-Sireaf.

Nigeria

Ansaru takes responsibility for attack

On 17 February 2013, four Lebanese and three European employees of the construction company Setraco were kidnapped in the town of Jama'are in the state of Bauchi in northern Nigeria. The Islamist group Ansaru ("Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa") claimed responsibility for the incident on 18 February 2013. In an e-mail signed by the group's perceived leader Abu Usamatal Ansary, the group wrote that its action had been triggered by European countries' transgressions and cruel acts against Islam in many regions, for example Afghanistan and Mali.

Ten killed in attack in the federal state of Plateau

In the night between 20 and 21 February 2013, men armed with machetes and guns attacked the village of Kogom (district of Vwang, Jos South Local Government Area) in the central Nigerian federal state of Plateau. Some of the attackers reportedly wore army uniforms. They killed six adults and four children. Members of the Fulani ethnic group are suspected to be behind the attack.

DR of the Congo

Peace agreement for the DR of the Congo signed

On 24 February 2013, representatives of eleven African countries in the Great Lakes Region – among them the DR of the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda – signed a framework agreement on peace, security and co-operation for the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Addis Abeba, the seat of the African Union, in the presence of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon. The countries commit themselves to co-operate to resolve the crisis in Congo, not to intervene in conflicts in the neighbouring countries and not to support rebel groups. The Congolese government promised to reform its security forces and to make progress towards decentralisation and democratisation.

UN experts have repeatedly accused Congo's eastern neighbours Rwanda and Uganda of having supported the rebel movement M23 (March 23 Movement) in eastern Congo. Both countries deny the accusation. The agreement is regarded as a basis on which the UN Security Council may decide on the deployment of a new regional reaction force to Congo by the end of February. Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa have said they were willing to deploy 4,000 soldiers to eastern Congo to fight the rebel movements in the framework of the SADC (Southern African Development Community). So far, it has not been decided whether the SADC troops will be stationed in Congo in the framework of the existing MONUSCO mission of the UN. Neither the MONUSCO troops nor the Congolese army had been able to prevent an eleven-day occupation of Goma, the capital of the eastern Congolese province of North Kivu, at the end of November 2012.

Cameroon

French tourists kidnapped by armed men

In the north of Cameroon, seven French tourists, among them four children, were kidnapped by armed men on 19 February 2013. The French government believes that the abducted family were brought to Nigeria. Boko Haram denies having been involved in this kidnapping.

Sri Lanka

Army said to have executed prisoners

A British TV documentation accuses the Sri Lankan army of serious crimes. According to the report, the army executed prisoners during the civilian war, which ended in May 2009 with the capitulation of the Tamil

liberation organisation LTTE. Several photos allegedly prove that soldiers shot Balanchandran, the twelve-year-old son of rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. The photos show the imprisoned boy in a shelter and his body with five gunshot wounds, with the latter photo allegedly taken two hours later.

India

Many killed by attacks

The police announced that bomb attacks in Hyderabad, a city in central India with several million inhabitants, killed at least 18 people and injured more than 50, many of them seriously, on 21 February 2013. The police spoke of a terrorist attack. Investigators are looking for links between this attack and the execution of Mohammed Afzal Gul two weeks ago. Gul had been sentenced to death for an attack on the Indian parliament in 2001, which claimed 14 lives. The quarter in which the attacks took place is mainly inhabited by Hindus. At the beginning of February, the execution of Mohammed Afzal Gul triggered protests in the rest- less area of Kashmir, which is mainly inhabited by Muslims.

Cuba

Raúl Castro re-elected as head of state

At its inaugural meeting on 24 February 2013, the National Assembly, which had been elected on 3 February 2013, confirmed current head of state Raúl Castro in office for another five years. Castro announced a constitutional reform for the coming years. After the amendments, holders of senior government positions are to be limited to two terms of office and an age limit is to be introduced. Moreover, a gradual and orderly transfer of power to younger generations is to take place. These measures will not lead to a fundamental change in the socialist system. 81-year-old Castro declared he would retire in 2018.