

Group 22 – Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

24 April 2017

Egypt

Shootout in Sinai near monastery

On 18 April 2017, gunmen attacked security forces at a road checkpoint near the Greek Orthodox St. Catherine's Monastery in the south of the Sinai peninsula, killing at least one police officer and wounding another three, the Egyptian interior ministry said. IS insurgents have claimed responsibility for the attack. A spokesman of the monastery said that security measures were to be stepped up, but there were no indications of immediate danger to the monks. The search for the perpetrator, conducted with the help of local Bedouins, had led to a suspect, he added. When he threatened to detonate an explosive belt, he was killed by police, the report went on. Since its foundation in the 6th century, the monastery has been protected by local Bedouins upon an order of Byzantine emperor Justinian.

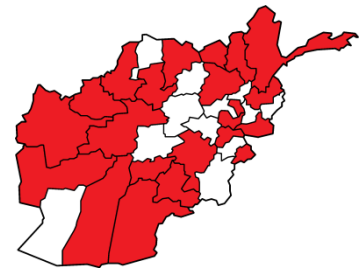
Egypt: Oasis of security

Ahead of next week's visit to Egypt by Roman Catholic Pope Francis, Pope Tawadros II, head of the Orthodox Coptic Church and Patriarch of Alexandria, said on 20 April that this journey was important "for sending a message to the whole world: Egypt is still an oasis of security and peace".

Afghanistan

Armed clashes

Fights are continuing, with cleansing campaigns and raids carried out by the security forces as well as attacks and assaults by the insurgents, in which civilians are killed or wounded. According to press reports, the following provinces were affected last week: Sar-i-Pul, Faryab, Balkh (north), Baghlan, Kunduz, Takhar (northeast), Ghazni, Nangarhar, Khost (southeast), Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Zabul (south), Badghis, Farah, Herat (west), Nuristan (east), Kabul and Kapisa (centre).



Attacks and assaults

On 17 April 2017, a bomb attack in Kabul claimed the life of a security guard.

On 19 April, the police chief of Shenkai district (southern Zabul province) was killed together with his body guard in a bomb attack.

On 20 April, three Afghan soldiers and one civilian were killed in a bomb attack in Baharak district (northeastern Badakhshan province).

On 21 April, Taliban insurgents attacked an army base near the airport of Mazar-e Sharif (Balkh province). They entered the premises and killed more than 140 soldiers; more than 160 others were wounded.

IS spreads threatening letters in Khost

Last week, letters in support of IS (Daesh) were distributed in several parts of Sabari district (eastern Khost province). These so-called 'night letters', which were fixed to the doors of mosques and shops, announced IS operations against Afghan and US security forces in the district, demanding support from the local population and warning of punishment for disobedience.

Stoning for adultery

On 16 April 2017, a couple was stoned to death for adultery by Taliban militants in Mohammad Agha district (central Logar province).

IS supporters arrested for recruiting militants

On 18 April 2017, at least two Afghan IS supporters (from Nimroz and Herat provinces) were arrested in western Ghor province when they tried to recruit fighters for the IS insurgents.

Number of returners from Pakistan still on the increase

At least 128 families of registered Afghan refugees have left for their home country in the time period 1-15 April, the UN stated. The number of unregistered refugees was at 33,026. In 2016 a total of 620,000 Afghan nationals had returned home from Pakistan.

Albania

Fight against cultivation of illicit drug crops

Albania is considered to be the largest producer of illegal cannabis in Europe. Apparently, billions of euros are made producing and distributing illegal cannabis with the collaboration of corrupt local civil servants, policemen and judges.

The opposition DP is accusing both government and administration to be deeply caught up in the mafia business, with drug revenues being used to buy votes for the parliamentary elections scheduled to be held in June. The government, in turn, has underlined that last year alone, about two million cannabis plants had been seized and destroyed. It is also true, however, that the cannabis cultivation in Albania has considerably extended despite government intervention. Corruption, poverty and weak government institutions play a vital role in undermining the fight against the mafia.

China

Capital punishment

On 11 April 2017, Amnesty International published the annual statistics of executions worldwide. As before, China carries out the most state executions in the world. While the true number of executions in China is a state secret, AI estimates that the figure goes into the thousands for 2016. China is followed by Iran (567 executions) and Saudi Arabia (154).

Tibet: Self-immolation

On 15 April 2017, a Tibetan man set himself on fire in Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (in Chinese: Ganzi; Sichuan province). This is the second case of self-immolation in Tibet in 2017. On 18 March, also in Kardze, another Tibetan man had set himself on fire. According to information provided by Radio Free Asia, this brought to 148 the number of such cases in China.

DR Congo

Kasai region: Government returns the body of militia leader Kamwina Nsapu to his family

On 15 April 2017, Congo's government stated that the body of Jean-Pierre Mpandi, controversial traditional chief bearing the title Kamwina Nsapu and leader of the same-named militia, was returned to his family for burial. The government also said that it would recognise his successor Jacques Kabeya Ntumba as the new traditional chief. Mpandi's family, in turn, declared the state of war to be over. With this, the original conflict is officially resolved; however, observers doubt whether violence will stop in the troubled Kasai region, since the conflict has long since developed into a profound crisis.

The conflict started in 2016, when the Congolese authorities refused to recognise Jean-Pierre Mpandi as the newly appointed head of a group of villages in Dibaya (Dibataie) district (Kasai-Central province). In April 2016, violent clashes occurred for the first time between the security forces and Mpandi's followers. In August 2016, Congolese security forces killed Mpandi, sparking a violent backlash, with the Kamwina Nsapu militia (whose leader Mpandi had been) trying to revenge his death and increasing their attacks on

government targets, churches and hospitals alike. What had been initially a local conflict in Kasai-Central province spread out to four neighbouring provinces. So far, more than 400 people have been killed in the conflict. On 12 April 2017, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs OCHA said that more than a million people have been displaced by the conflict so far, with 60 percent in Kasai-Central province. On 19 April, the UN stated that since August 2016, a total of 40 mass graves sites have been documented in Kasai-Central and Kasai-Oriental provinces, where security forces had buried the bodies of (suspected) militia members, among them many children.

Cameroon

Internet access restored in Anglophone regions

As of 20 April 2017, President Paul Biya ordered the restoration of the internet access in Cameroon's English-speaking regions in the southwestern and northwestern parts of the country. They had been cut off by government decree in mid-January 2017. The ban had been imposed in connection with a strike initiated by English-speaking teachers and lawyers in October/November 2016 in protest against the increasing marginalization of the English language in school and before the courts. Violence erupted in a series of protest rallies against the government. At least six protesters were killed and hundreds arrested.

Mali

Interim authorities return to northern Mali cities

Islamists and rebel militias have returned the northern cities of Timbuktu and Menaka to the government. According to the 'Studio Tamani' radio station, they had been the last major cities under the control of Islamists and local militias. This step marks the implementation of parts of the peace agreement negotiated in 2015. In the last months, interim authorities have been installed in several towns and cities. Yet, the region is still the scene of violent clashes. For example, five Malian soldiers were killed last week in an attack launched by suspected jihadists.

Montenegro

Protest against cuts in state aid for mothers

The month of April has seen new protests of several hundred women who are taking to the streets in protest against economy measures of the government amounting to a 25-percent cut in state aid for mothers. The aid had been introduced in the beginning of 2016. Mothers with three children who initially got 336 euros have found the sum reduced to 264.

The gap between the rich and the poor is huge in Montenegro. The average income is around 490 euros, with an unemployment rate of roughly 20 percent. The national poverty rate is at around 40 percent.

Nigeria

Boko Haram fighters attack military base in Borno State

On 16 April at around 6pm, Boko Haram insurgents attacked a military base in Sabon Gari community (Damboa local government area). During more than an hour of gun battle, at least three soldiers were killed (other sources put the number of fatalities at eight); dozens were wounded. After subduing the soldiers, the terrorists looted the military base and set it on fire.

Nigeria/Niger/Chad/Cameroon

Boko Haram is increasingly using children in suicide attacks

A UNICEF report released on 12 April 2017 says that the Nigerian terror organisation Boko Haram is increasingly abusing children, mostly girls, in suicide attacks. In the first three months of 2017 alone, 27 children carried out bomb attacks in public places across northeastern Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon

(compared to 9 in the same period last year). In 2016, UNICEF recorded a total of 30 children abused in suicide attacks (2015: 56; 2014:4).

Pakistan

University student lynched

On 13 April 2017, students lynched a classmate at the Abdul-Wali-Khan University in Mardan (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province) for being Ahmadi and for blaspheming against Islam. Neither assumption proved to be true; rather, it has been suggested that the student was murdered for criticising the university's management. It is not uncommon in Pakistan that clerics incite violence by resorting to accusations of blasphemy or similar reproaches.

500 Baloch rebels surrender to government

The Pakistani news bulletin Dawn has reported that on 21 April 2017, around 500 armed Baloch militants surrendered to Pakistani security forces. They belonged to the Baloch Republican Army (BRA), Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), Lashkar-i-Balochistan and other rebel groups. The government has offered compensation, work, education and security to those who lay down their arms.

Philippines

Gun battle with terrorist group claims several lives

On 11 April 2017, fights between the security forces and the Islamist Abu Sayyaf terror group claimed the lives of at least nine individuals, among them four security officers, on the tourist island of Bohol. Apparently, the terrorists wanted to abduct several tourists. Among the killed was Muamar Askali, one of the group's leaders. He is believed to be responsible for the abduction and murder of a German tourist by Abu Sayyaf (see BN of 7 November 2016) who was beheaded in February 2017 after their demands for a ransom were not met. On 22 April, security forces killed several terrorists who had escaped from the fights, among them Joselito Melloria, another leading figure of Abu Sayyaf.

On 13 April, the Islamists killed a Filipino fishermen on Jolo island who had been taken hostage last December.

Russian Federation/North Caucasus

Mass arrests of homosexuals in Chechnya

Since the end of March 2017, reports have arrived in Russia saying that harassment and abuse of homosexual men has intensified in Chechnya and that the police forces of the authoritarian head of the Republic Ramzan Kadyrov have arrested at least 100 men considered to be homosexual. The reports state cases of torture and at least two fatalities. Russian human rights activist Svetlana Gannushkina said that Kadyrov's system, based on fear and violence, has now found a new enemy image. In the last weeks, many homosexual Chechens have left their home country seeking refuge in major Russian cities like Moscow and Saint Petersburg. While the situation of gay people in central Russia is less threatening than currently in Chechnya, it has deteriorated also in this part of the Federation.

Russian Federation

Nationwide ban of Jehovah's Witnesses

Already since 2009, Russia's judiciary has been targeting Jehovah's Witnesses. Several regional groups have already been banned as an 'extremist organisation', and on 20 April 2017 Russia's Supreme Court accepted the government's request to designate Jehovah's Witnesses as an outlawed religious group. The group's national headquarter and its 395 regional associations will now be closed and its property confiscated. According to the ministry of justice, Jehovah's Witnesses are threatening civil rights as well as the public order and security; they also violate the country's health law since they reject blood transfusions. The denomination states to have more than 170,000 members in Russia. It announced to take their case to the

European Court of Human Rights. Human Rights Watch considers the court's decision a heavy blow to freedom of religion and association in Russia. If the decision were to enter into force, Jehovah's Witnesses would be subject to criminal persecution, penalties and even imprisonment.

Serbia

Daily anti-government protests

Since Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić' won the presidential elections on 2 April 2017 gaining 55 percent of the votes (see BN of 10 April 2017), every day up to 15,000 people are staging protests in various cities. The rallies initiated via the social media are held under the motto 'protestprotivdiktature 2017' (against dictatorship). Neither is there an official organizer, nor do the participants support any specific party. What at first was a student protest has been meanwhile joined by trade unions, workers and pensioners, making up the largest protest wave the country has seen since 2000. Protesters demand Vučić's resignation for alleged electoral manipulation, corruption, autocratic expansion of power and social grievances.

At first, pro-government media ignored the protests. Meanwhile, the movement is accused of being controlled by foreign powers.

Somalia

Attacks

On 18 April 2017, suspected al-Shabaab fighters shelled a residential area in Mogadishu's Howlwadaag district, hitting a school building. At least five individuals died, and at least seven more were injured, among them four pupils. The area is located less than 1.5 kilometres from the president's residency Villa Somalia, where just at the time of the attack Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire met with representatives of the Somali National Army and of AMISOM.

A booby trap attack targeting a convoy of aid workers (from Red Crescent Dubai and the Somali government, among others) has injured several individuals west of Mogadishu. The United Arab Emirates have condemned the attack. Rejecting the presence of aid organisations in the country, al-Shabaab tries to position itself as aid provider for the Somali population.

On 20 April, al-Shabaab fighters attacked AMISOM units near Afgoye (Lower Shabelle region) placing two booby traps. According to the extremists, several people died or were injured in the incident.

On 21 April, at least six civilians were injured when a booby trap exploded in a Café in Qoryoley town (Lower Shabelle region). Qoryoley is the scene of intense fighting between al-Shabaab insurgents and the Somali National Army. Al-Shabaab says that they captured a local National Army barracks on 18 April. Local officials show support for the extremists. For example, a police commander released five al-Shabaab fighters from prison on 17 April. In response, Meanwhile, Somali security forces have captured Qoryoley police station to prevent the release of more prisoners.

On 20 April, al-Shabaab-fighters shot dead at least two Somali soldiers near Mogadishu's Bakara market. Media linked to the extremists say that a third soldier was killed in Mogadishu's Yaqshid district.

On 23 April, a roadside bomb targeting a military convoy killed six soldiers (other sources put the number at eight) and injured several others in Galgala (Bari region, Puntland). Although al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility, it is unclear who committed the attack, since a group linked to Islamic State is operating in the region as well (see below).

Fighting

On 15 April 2017, a grouping allied with IS captured the village of Dasan (Bari region, Puntland) for several hours and withdrew a day later. Local security forces took no action. Dasan is located some 25 km south of Qandala, a town that had been under control of this group from October to December 2016, when it was reconquered by security forces. The group led by Abdiqadir Mumin consists of 100 to 200 fighters who are based in the remote Galgala hills in Bari region.

On 21 April, Kenyan AMISOM troops attacked an al-Shabaab camp near Badhadhe (Lower Juba region), killing 52 extremists and destroying the camp.

On 19 April, Kenyan units accidentally killed at least three civilians when shelling the villages of Darulsalam and Giriley (Gedo region) in an attempt to eliminate al-Shabaab insurgents.

Drought crisis

In April 2017, report of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) said that due to the current drought, 6.2 million Somalis (total population:12m) are in need of humanitarian aid. Since November 2016, the drought has forced approx. 440,000 people to leave their villages. In 2017, more than a million children will suffer from acute malnutrition. An increased incidence of cholera has been reported, with 18,000 cases registered between January and March 2017 (compared to 16,000 throughout 2016). Twelve of the country's 18 regions are affected by the cholera outbreak. The regions worst affected by the drought are Somaliland, Puntland and parts of Central and Southern Somalia.

Syria

Attack on evacuation convoy

On 15 April 2017, one of the worst attacks of the civil war was committed in northern Syria. In the rebel-held locality of Al-Rashidin west of Aleppo, a car bomb destroyed buses carrying civilians who were to be evacuated to a safe place. Among the victims were nearly 70 children. The attack hit mostly civilians from the towns of Fuaa and Kafraya who had been waiting in the busses for hours expecting departure. Responsibility for the attack is not yet clear. The official news agency Sana said it was a terroristic attack. However, both the IS and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Fatah al-Sham have targeted civilians in government areas in the past. Opposition activists, on their part, have blamed government supporters.

Meanwhile, evacuation measures are continuing in several towns besieged by the rebels. On 19 April, a convoy of about 60 buses carrying 3,000 people from Fuaa and Kafraya reached Rashidin checkpoint. The evacuation of civilians is not supervised by the United Nations. In total, 30,000 people are to be brought to safe places. According to the UN, around 600,000 Syrians are living under siege, mostly by government troops, but also by rebels or IS fighters.

Tunisia

Deported asylum seekers arrested after arrival

Apparently, several Tunisian nationals who were returned to Tunisia have been charged with connection to terrorist organisation upon arrival. Sofiane Sliti, spokesman for Tunisia's anti-terrorism judicial court told the German Press Agency DPA on Saturday that criminal investigations were initiated against roughly ten individuals.

Vietnam

Villagers hold officials hostage

On 15 April 2017, clashes erupted between farmers and security forces in the village of Dong Tam in Hanoi's My Duc district. The farmers were demanding compensation for the expropriation of land that had been given to a company run by the military forces. After the arrest of several protesters, the farmers held 38 security officials and other individuals hostage, of whom lastly 19 remained in their hands. The farmers threatened to kill the hostages should the security forces take new actions against them. The hostages were released on 22 April after negotiations led by Hanoi's mayor Nguyen Duc Chung. The farmers' concern will be taken into account, and they will not be prosecuted, it was reported.

Formally, all land belongs to the state. However, local authorities often decide to reallocate plots for economic development projects, which regularly results in conflicts with the affected population, not least because the amount of compensation is below market value.

Western Balkan countries

Rising tensions in the region

25 years after the war broke out in the former Yugoslavia, the international community is still struggling to foster democracy and stabilisation in the Western Balkan states of Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Albania. Many observers are deeply concerned about the present situation. The EU is losing

much of its appeal, while Russia, China and Turkey are taking more and more influence. None of the countries is free of crises. Nearly everywhere, both economic and democratic progress are in danger. With unemployment among young people around up to 70 percent, many are considering emigration. Poverty, corruption, nepotism, nationalism and increasingly also Islamist fundamentalism are posing a threat to social peace.

Most of the countries are struggling with political instability. Macedonia has been in permanent crisis for three years now, with tensions between the ethnic Macedonian majority and the ethnic Albanian minority reaching a new high following the December elections (see BN of 10 April 2017). Bosnia-Herzegovina is deeply divided and closer to collapse than to developing into a functioning state. In Serbia, thousands have regularly been taking to the streets in protest against autocracy and dictatorship after the electoral victory of President Vučić (see information on Serbia).

Tensions between Serbia and Kosovo have increased since the beginning of the year.

The Albanian Prime Minister does not rule out a possible union of Albania and Kosovo should the EU accession perspective lose ground. Moreover, opposition forces have been blocking parliament for some time now in Albania. The same holds for Montenegro, where the (pro-Russian) opposition has been boycotting parliament for months now.

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