

Group 22 - Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

16 March 2015

Afghanistan ...

Security situation

The security situation remains unchanged. Fighting and bombings continue in various parts of the country. The Taliban have targeted the Afghan security forces first and foremost (e.g. in the provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz and Parwan). Counter-attacks were carried out by the government and military operations were carried out last week in the provinces of Ghazni, Baghlan, Farah, Ghor, Faryab, Nangarhar, Helmand and Kandahar, claiming some civilian casualties. Civilians are being repeatedly killed and wounded in the clashes. Last week, according to official sources, foreign militants belonging to ISIS were regularly encountered. Several ISIS militants were killed in fighting in western Farah on 10 March 2015. Suicide bombings continue to claim the lives of civilians. Civil servants and persons who are accused of cooperating with the government are being abducted and/or murdered. Six government officials were abducted in the western Herat province and three persons who were accused of cooperating with the government were murdered in eastern Nuristan on 11 March 2015. On 14 March 2015 a former district governor was murdered in Ghazni.

80 lashes for drinking wine

A man was sentenced to 80 lashes in the eastern province of Kunar for drinking wine; he was flogged in public. The judge said sharia law applied to the consumption of wine under the Narcotics Act.

Pakistan ...

Death penalty

The government of Pakistan has ended death penalty suspension after seven years. More than 8,000 people are estimated to be on death row in Pakistan, 1,000 of them have lost their appeals and had clemency petitions rejected. The massacre on a school in Peshawar in December 2014 is the reason for the decision. Since then, 24 persons have been executed.

Christian Churches destroyed in suicide bombings

On 15 March 2015, two suicide bombers blew themselves up in two Christian Churches in Lahore (Punjab) during Sunday services, killing at least 17 people and injuring 78 persons. Police officers had attempted to prevent the suicide bombers from entering the churches but they immediately blew themselves up. After the bombings, enraged residents attacked two persons who were suspected of being involved in the bombings and burnt them alive. A splinter group of the Taliban, "Jamaat-ul-Ahrar", has claimed responsibility for the attacks and has announced it will be waging further attacks.

Turkey ...

Riots erupt at commemorative rallies

On 11 March 2015, protesters clashed with police officers at rallies commemorating the most recent victim of the Gezi Park protests, Berkin Elvan. Several persons were arrested. Berkin Elvan died on 11 March 2014 after spending several months in a coma after being struck on the head by a tear gas canister fired by police during the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in 2013. The police used tear gas and water canons in Istanbul to disperse the crowds, some protesters threw stones and molotov cocktails. Commemorative rallies, some of which were dispersed by security forces, were also held in Ankara, Izmir and in around twenty other cities.

Syria ...

4th anniversary of Syrian crisis

The fighting in Syria will enter its fifth year on 15 March 2015. At least 220,000 people have been killed since the crisis began. Around half the population (eleven million) are living as displaced persons in Syria or in neighbouring countries. The average life expectancy has fallen by twenty years (from 76 to 56).

Iran ...

Ultr-conservative chairperson of Assembly of Experts

The ultra-conservative cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mezbah Yazdi, will chair the influential Assembly of Experts in future. The Assembly is directly elected by the Iranian public to choose and supervise the revolution leader as the supreme leader of Iran. He has the last word in important political and religious matters. Yazdi is over 80 years of age. His nomination is a clear defeat of the moderate candidate Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Yazdi will succeed Ayatollah Mohammed Reza Mahdawi Kani who died five months ago.

Son of Iran's former president gets 15 years in jail

Mehdi Hashemi has been handed down three jail sentences amounting to 15 years in jail. According to a statement issued by a judicial spokesperson on 15 March 2015, the 45-year-old was charged and found guilty of "national security" issues and on corruption charges. Hashemi was also handed down a fine, ordered to return unspecified assets, and barred from holding political office. Hashemi's lawyer said he will appeal the conviction. Mehdi Hashemi was one of the supporters of the "Green movement" surrounding the reform-oriented candidates of the controversial 2009 presidential elections, Mir-Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karubi.

Eritrea ...

Opposition group claims responsibility for attack on state depot

The Eritrean National Salvation Front (ENSF), claimed in a statement that it destroyed "several lorries and other machinery owned by the government" in an attack launched on a garage in Asmara on 11 March 2015. The statement said the rebels had retreated to their positions safely and had suffered only minor injuries. The government did not comment on the incident - as usual. As there are hardly any international organisations working in Eritrea, it is basically difficult to check the veracity of the information.

Côte d'Ivoire ...

Jail for wife of ex-President

The wife of the former President, Laurent Gbagbo, was sentenced to 20 years in jail by a court in Abidjan on 10 March 2015, ten years more than the public prosecutor had demanded. Along with Simone Gbagbo, 77

other defendants, including her son, Michel Gbagbo, were sentenced to prison terms. The charges against her included undermining state security, taking part in an insurrection movement, setting up armed groups and disturbing the peace during the months of violence that followed the presidential elections in 2010. Laurent Gbagbo's refusal to accept defeat to Alassane Ouattara in the election that year led to the violence. Fighting subsequently broke out between supporters of the opposing camps and more than 3,000 people were killed. The former first lady was considered to be the power behind the throne during her husband Laurent Gbagbo's regime. She was repeatedly accused of misusing power and her name was repeatedly mentioned in connection with death squads that targeted supporters of Alassane Ouattara.

Her husband, Laurent Gbagbo, has been ordered to stand trial by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for his role in the violence. The trial is due to begin in July 2015.

Allegations of "victor's justice"

Human rights organisations have cautioned against "victor's justice". Of a total of 150 people currently detained in connection with the unrest only two are supporters of President Ouattara, even though his supporters were jointly responsible for the escalation of violence. Human Rights Watch has accused both sides of killing, rape and burning villages. The fact that these human rights abuses are not being reviewed and dealt with is preventing reconciliation in the politically divided country.

Nigeria . . .

Over 90 people killed in Boko-Haram bombings

Early in the morning of 15 March 2015, armed men attacked the village of Egba (Agatu Local Government Area) in the central Nigerian state of Benue, killing over 90 people and destroying food barns and farmland. The attack is said to have been carried out by semi-nomadic Fulani herdsmen. In the last few years, violent attacks and reprisals between farmers and Fulani herdsmen have killed several hundred people in Benue.

ISIS accepts pledge of allegiance by Boko Haram

On 12 March 2015, the ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani announced in an audio message that the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had accepted a pledge of allegiance offered by the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram on 7 March 2015. He said that Muslims who were unable to join ISIS in Syria or Iraq now had a "new door ... to migrate to the land of Islam and fight".

Suicide bombing in Maiduguri

On 10 March 2015, a young female suicide bomber blew herself up in Maiduguri (capital of Borno state) close to the Monday market. At least 34 persons were killed.

Further progress made in the fight against Boko Haram

Nigerian and Chadian troops crossed the border from Niger to Nigeria on 8 March 2015 as part of a joint offensive against Boko Haram. They seized the town of Damasak (which is located around 10 km from the border and is the administrative seat of Mobbar Local Government Area, LGA) in Borno state on 9 March 2015. Ten Chadian soldiers and around 200 Boko Haram militants were killed.

According to Nigerian military sources, it had been possible on 11 March 2015, after two days of fighting, to recapture Borno's second largest city, Bama (administrative seat of the LGA of the same name), from Boko Haram. Bama had been under Islamist control since September 2014. On 11 March 2015, it was announced that the city of Bara (administrative seat of Gulani LGA in Yobe state) had been recaptured.

Government sources say this means only four LGAs are still under the control of Boko Haram. According to press reports, the Nigerian troops are being supported by several hundred mercenaries from South Africa and the former Soviet Union.

Democratic Republic of Congo . . .

Democracy activists arrested

Around 40 pro-democracy activists, journalists, musicians and a US diplomat were arrested after a press conference was held in Kinshasa during the evening hours of 15 May 2015. The conference was intended to facilitate networking of initiatives in order to prevent President Joseph Kabila from standing for a third term

in office which would be in breach of the constitution. Activists from Senegal and Burkina Faso, which have experienced similar developments, wanted to engage in a dialogue with the Congolese at the event.

West Balkans . . .

EU monitoring for visa-free entry

On 25 February, the EU Commission presented its fifth report on the visa-free regime for nationals from the West Balkan countries (Serbia, FYROM Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania). It says that further measures are necessary to uphold visa-free entry, in order to respond to the possible abuse of the EU system regarding asylum which is a cause for concern. The European Commission points out that the number of the asylum applications coming from citizens of the Western Balkan countries has increased with the introduction of the visa-free regime. At the same time, the percentage of approved asylum requests in the EU marks a fall in relation to the citizens of the Western Balkan countries.

In addition to the reports, the EU introduced a mechanism that facilitates a temporary reintroduction of the visa requirement. None of the Member States has applied for it so far. The EU Commission would like to preserve visa-free travel but the causes of flight and abuse need to be eliminated in the countries of origin.

Kosovo is the only country in the West Balkans that has not yet applied for visa exemption. The EU Commission is currently engaged in a dialogue with Kosovo.

FYROM Macedonia . . .

Wire-tapping scandal

Thousands of representatives of the media, politics and diplomacy have been under illegal surveillance for many years. The opposition released wire-tapped conversations in a bid to discredit the government. It considers this to be an attempt to overthrow the government (cf. BN of 23 February 2015). Opposition leader Zoran Zaev (SDSM) is now calling for the formation of an interim government that is to organise re-elections.

Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (VMRO DPMNE party) has been in power since 2006. International organisations confirm that the country has since witnessed a rapid decline in democratic standards. Nationalism and intimidation of government opponents determine the picture. Members of opposition parties have been detained and critical media have been ostracised or closed down.

The wire-tapping scandal has caused a massive decline in the already tense relations between the government and the opposition. EU Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations Commissioner Johannes Hahn has expressed "serious concern" over the political developments.

Ukraine . . .

Situation in the East

The situation remains unclear. The ceasefire agreement has led to a decrease in the number of clashes, but fighting has not stopped completely. Both sides have pulled their heavy weapons back from the front. The Ukrainian President has said the Agreement of Minsk has basically failed as the insurgents are shooting every day, up to sixty times a day.

The US wants to supply Ukraine with additional armaments, unarmed drones, mortar defence systems, radio equipment and military ambulances worth US\$ 75 million. It also has plans to supply Ukraine with twenty armed SUVs and non-armed SUVs. So far, the US have supplied the war-torn country with armaments worth around US\$ 120 million.

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) decided on 12 March 2015 to expand the mandate to up to 1,000 observers. As both sides are rendering access for the OSCE difficult, if not impossible, the organisation is also demanding unrestricted access for observers to regions from which heavy weapons have been withdrawn.

Russian Federation . . .

Russia condemned for humiliating a recruit

The European Court of Human Rights condemned Russia on 12 March 2015 for the inhumane treatment of a recruit. The 27-year-old had been forced by his own account in 2007, to walk naked in front of other soldiers on the parade ground after he had made two attempts to escape. The public exposure was intended to prevent him from leaving the troops again without permission.. The Court considered this penalty to be a violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights which prohibits torture, inhumane and degrading treatment. Russia can appeal the decision.

Russia has come repeatedly under the fire of criticism for the inhumane treatment particularly of young troops and older conscripts meted out by officers.

China

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Increase in the number of trials in Xinjiang

The Dui Hua human rights journal, which reports on current issues in China's criminal justice system, analysed official court statistics that showed the number of criminal trials held in Xinjiang rose more than 40 percent to more than 29,500 last year compared to the number of criminal trials in 2013. It said one of the reasons is probably the anti-terrorist campaign launched by President Xi Jinping in May 2014.