

## Group 22 - Information Centre Asylum and Migration

# Briefing Notes

12 January 2015

### Afghanistan

...

#### Security situation

According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 9,617 civilians were either killed or injured during the conflict during the first eleven months of 2014 (3,188 persons were killed, 6,429 civilians were wounded). This means the number of civilian casualties has increased by 19 percent compared to 2013, making this the highest figure since 2009, when statistics first began being recorded. The Mission said the number of children among the casualties had risen by 33 percent, while the number of women casualties was 12 percent higher than the previous year. The expectation was that the total number of civilian casualties in 2014 was likely to exceed 10,000. The main cause, according to the Mission, was ground combat where civilians had become embroiled in the cross-fire. Other causes were improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide attacks and so-called complex attacks, involving the use of several types of tactics simultaneously. The Mission said that insurgents had been responsible for at least 75 percent of the civilian casualties. In addition, US sources stated that more than 4,600 Afghan soldiers and police officers had been killed in 2014.

#### ISAF Mission ends

The end of 2014 also saw the end of the ISAF's mission after 13 years and the withdrawal of most foreign troops. Around 13,000 foreign troops, including almost 850 German troops, have remained in the country within the framework of the "Resolute Support" follow-up mission. They will provide Afghan security forces with training and advice. However, the US troops have permission to implement anti-terror missions against insurgents/the Taliban for at least two more years and to support the Afghan security forces, if necessary.

### Iraq

...

#### Security situation

According to Iraq Body Count (IBC), 17,073 civilians were killed in 2014.

According to the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), there were at least 35,408 civilian casualties between 1 January and 31 December 2014 (12,282 of whom were killed and 23,126 of whom were wounded). This is reportedly the highest number of casualties recorded since 2008 when the number of civilian casualties totalled 26,965 (6,787 of whom were killed and 20,178 of whom were wounded).

According to UNAMI, 680 civilians were killed and 1,360 were wounded in the month of December 2014. Another 421 members of the security forces were killed and 508 were wounded. Baghdad was the hardest hit with 1,051 civilian casualties (320 of whom were killed and 731 of whom were wounded). According to information which UNAMI received from the "Health Directorate" in Anbar, there were 669 civilian casualties in Anbar province (up to and including 30 December 2014) (164 of whom were killed, 505 of whom were wounded), with 66 persons killed and 361 civilians wounded in Ramadi and 98 civilians killed and 144 wounded in Fallujah. 74 persons were killed and 29 were wounded in Salahaddin province and 48 persons were killed and 33 were wounded in Diyala province.

The highest number of casualties, 4,126 civilians, was recorded in June 2014 (1,775 of whom were killed and 2,351 of whom were wounded – including Anbar province).

The violence claimed 22,292 civilian casualties (of whom 8,481 were killed and 13,811 were wounded) – including police officers and casualties from Anbar province between 1 June 2014 and 31 December 2014. UNAMI has pointed out that these figures merely reflect the minimum number of casualties as the number of casualties could not be verified in the conflict-ridden areas.

At least 17 persons were killed and another 16 were wounded, inter alia, in mortar-fire and booby traps in Baqubah (Diyala province) on 11 January 2015. According to press reports, Baqubah is currently witnessing the heaviest guerrilla activity in the vicinity of Baghdad.

The US-led air forces flew missions against IS strongholds near Erbil (Erbil province), Ramadi (Anbar province) and Mosul (Ninive province) on 9 January 2015.

## **Pakistan**

...

### **Terrorist attack at a school in Peshawar**

At least six armed Taliban insurgents ambushed a school in Peshawar on 16 December 2015. 152 people, including 136 schoolchildren lost their lives in the attack and clashes with security forces. The rebel movement Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan has claimed responsibility for the attack. They said the attack was an act of revenge for Pakistan's military's offensive in North Waziristan that started in the summer of 2014 following unsuccessful peace talks with the extremists. The TTP spokesman said that they had targeted the school because the school is run by the Army and is attended by the children of military personnel. Pakistani security forces have stepped up their offensive against the Taliban in the wake of the school massacre. 57 militants were killed in an ambush against positions held by extremists when ground troops advanced into in the Khyber Agency's Tirah Valley. Schools in Peshawar reopened on 12 January 2015 following the massacre of December 2014, with safety precautions tightened up.

### **Reintroduction of the death penalty and military courts for terrorist suspects**

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced an end to the death penalty ban in the aftermath of the massacre of Peshawar. Pakistan banned the death penalty in 2008. Seven condemned terrorists have been hung since the massacre. Parliament also resolved to reintroduce military courts for terrorist suspects which is to lead to faster sentencing for terrorists,

### **Suicide bombing in Rawalpindi**

On 9 January 2015, at least nine persons were killed and at least 16 were wounded in a suicide bombing of a Shia mosque in Rawalpindi. The group Jamat-ul-Ahrar, which is part of the organisation Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has claimed responsibility for the attack.

## **Turkey**

...

### **Suicide attack**

A female suicide bomber blew herself up with a hand grenade outside the police station in the popular tourist district of Sultanahmet in Istanbul on 6 January 2015. Two police officers were wounded in the blast, one of whom died later in hospital. The banned left-wing extremist organisation DHKP-C ("Revolutionary People's Liberation Front") initially claimed responsibility for the attack but later withdrew this statement on 9 January 2015, claiming it did not carry out the attack, however, conceding that it was indeed planning an attack in the area. According to media reports, the female suicide bomber was a woman from the Russian Caucasus region of Dagestan who had contacts with Islamist groups.

On 1 January 2015, a man threw two hand grenades at police officers in front of the former Sultan's Dolmabahce Palace in Istanbul. However they failed to detonate. DHKP-C also claimed responsibility for this attack.

Another attack was successfully foiled on 10 January 2015. According to police reports, a bomb was discovered in a bin in front of a shopping centre in the west of Istanbul and was subsequently defused.

### **Paying to be exempted from military service**

Turkey's Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu announced in December 2014 that Turkish men over the age of 27 would be able to pay 18,000 Turkish Lira (approx. EUR 6,500) to be exempted from military service as and from 1 January 2015. Instead they will be required to undergo several weeks' basic training. In January 2014, military service for all men between the age of 18 and 41 was reduced from 15 to twelve months.

### **Fire water cannons and tear gas used to disperse protesters at teachers' rally**

Turkish police officers used fire water cannons and tear gas to break up a rally of teachers protesting against a move away from secular education in Ankara on 20 December 2014. More than 100 people were detained according to a report published in the newspaper Hürriyet, including the head of the teachers' trade union Egitim-Is. The members of the teachers' trade union had taken to the streets to demonstrate for labour rights and secular education. The authorities declared the rally illegal.

### **Arrest warrant issued for Fethullah Gülen and others**

On 19 December 2014, a Turkish court issued an arrest warrant for the Islamic cleric and government critic Fethullah Gülen who is living in exile in the USA. He refutes all allegations. Gülen and his "Hizmet" movement are accused of leading a "criminal organisation". President Tayyip Erdoğan has accused his foe of establishing a "parallel structure" within the state by placing his followers in institutions such as the judiciary and the police in Turkey in a bid to overthrow him.

The editor-in-chief of the newspaper Zaman detained with Gülen on 14 December 2014 was released pending trial, but forbidden from travelling abroad before the completion of the criminal investigation. An arrest warrant was issued against four persons detained in the raid, including the head of the Samanyolu Broadcasting Group, a media organisation known to have close ties to the Gülen movement, Hidayet Karaca. The public prosecutor is accusing them of being members of a terrorist organisation.

According to media reports, over 30 staff members of the security forces were arrested in raids carried out mainly in cities in eastern and south-east Turkey on 5 January 2015 who are under suspicion of engaging in illegal eavesdropping. They are accused of eavesdropping on politicians, businessmen and government employees.

### **Approval given for Church to be built**

The Turkish government issued approval on 3 January 2015 for the first time since the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 for a Christian church to be built. The new church will be for the country's small Syriac Christian community and will be built in the Istanbul suburb of Yesilko. Churches have been restored and reopened to the public, but no new church has been built until now.

## **Iran**

...

### **Censorship authority bans popular messaging and telephone services**

Iranian censorship authority has banned two popular messaging and telephone services at the bidding of the judiciary. Access to the apps Line and Tango has been blocked. By contrast, President Hassan Rohani who was considered to be moderate had repeatedly said he was against access to communication services and social networks being blocked. It is therefore assumed he was overruled by ultra-conservative forces. Access to YouTube, Twitter and Facebook has already been blocked. Young Iranians especially have managed to bypass blocks via proxy servers or using other methods.

## **Palestinian Autonomous Territories**

...

### **Palestine to become a member of the International Criminal Court**

According to UN sources, Palestine will officially become a member of the International Criminal Court on 1 April 2015. From this day forward, documents allowing countries to join the Rome Statute of the ICC will also apply to a state of Palestine, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon announced on 6 January 2015. To date, 122 countries are States Parties to the Rome Statute. The Palestinians had refrained from making the move which is important in terms of international law in order to avoid jeopardising peace talks with Israel which floundered in April 2014. The Palestinian Autonomous Territories has acknowledged the jurisdiction

of the International Criminal Court over war crimes committed by anyone on Palestinian territory. In theory, this clears the way for preliminary proceedings to be launched against Israel according to a statement issued by a judicial spokesperson in The Hague on 6 January 2015.

## **Saudi Arabia** . . .

### **1,000 lashes, prison sentences and fines for Saudi blogger**

According to a report issued by Amnesty International on 8 January 2015 The blogger Raif Badawi is to be punished with 1,000 lashes after starting a website for social and political debate critical of Islam and is to be flogged in public in front of a mosque in the port of Jeddah in the West of Saudi Arabia. In May 2014, Badawi had been sentenced to harsh corporal punishment, ten years' in prison and a fine of one million rial (around €191,000). Badawi has been detained since mid-2012. His website "Free Saudi Liberals" has been closed down.

## **Yemen** . . .

### **Bomb blast in the capital of Sanaa**

At least 40 people were killed and dozens injured in a bomb blast outside a police academy in Yemen's capital of Sanaa on 7 January 2015, according to a report issued by the Yemeni news agency "Al-Masdar Online". It says a car bomb exploded in front of the gates of a police academy. Most of the persons killed were police cadets. Nobody has claimed responsibility for the attack. Yemen has been wracked by violence and political unrest since President Ali Abdullah Saleh who ruled for many years was overthrown in 2012.

## **Syria** . . .

### **Death toll 2014**

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2014 has been the bloodiest year yet in the war. In 2014, 76,021 persons were reportedly killed (2013: 73,447), including 17,790 civilians and 3,501 children. Among those killed in 2014 were reportedly at least 22,625 regime troops or militiamen as well as 32,000 rebels.

### **Rumour of plans to build new nuclear facility**

According to media reports issued on 10 January 2015, the Syrian government is pressing ahead with plans to build an underground nuclear facility in Kusair (an inaccessible mountainous region in the border region with Lebanon). It is suspected that the project with the alias "Zamzam" involves a nuclear reactor or an enrichment plant containing 8,000 fuel rods from a former nuclear project. Experts from Iran and North Korea are said to be involved in the project; the Hezbollah are allegedly guarding the facility. Israel destroyed the nuclear complex "Kibar" in the Syrian desert with air strikes in 2007.

### **Islamic State (IS) slayings**

Activists say at least 100 "wayward" jihadists were killed by IS in Raqqa (north Syria) in late December 2014 who had battled Islamic State militants and wanted to flee Raqqa.

The bodies of more than 230 persons were found in a mass grave in eastern Syria on 17 December 2014, most of whom belonged to the Sheitat tribe. Thousand of persons are still missing since ISIS militants carried out the massacre in several communities in the Deir ez-Zor province in August 2014. The jihadists killed 700 people because Sheitat tribespeople had refused to swear allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Bagdadi. Those who survived the massacre speak of mass executions. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, most of those killed were civilians. The massacre on the Sheitat tribespeople was allegedly carried out because they refused to hand over oilfields to the ISIS militants.

## **Lebanon**

...

### **Suicide attack in Tripoli**

A suicide bomb attack on a cafe in the predominantly Alawite district of the Lebanese city of Tripoli killed at least nine people and wounded 35 others on 10 January 2015. The Nusra Front said it carried out the double suicide attack in revenge for the Sunnis in Syria and Lebanon.

### **Visa requirement for Syrians**

Since a rule was introduced in October 2014 to only allow Syrians to enter Lebanon in exceptional cases "on humanitarian grounds" in a move to curb the huge influx of refugees from Syria (more than 1.1 million have fled to Lebanon so far), a new rule was introduced on 5 January 2015 requiring Syrians to hold a visa. There are six categories for entry visas, for instance, there are visas for business people, tourists, patients and students.

## **Tunisia**

...

### **Final result of parliamentary elections**

Beji Caid Essebsi (Nidaa Tounis) won 55.68 percent of the votes at the parliamentary elections held on 21 December 2014, defeating the incumbent, the former human rights activist Moncef Marzouki who garnered (44.32 percent of the votes). Turnout was 60.11 percent. The day before the elections, troops were attacked at a polling station in Kairouan Governorate, Central Tunisia. One rebel and one soldier were killed in the gunfire that ensued. Around 100,000 troops and police officers were on duty on the day of the elections against the backdrop of the risk of terrorist attacks by Islamist groups. Unrest broke out after the elections in several cities on 23 December 2014. Marzouki supporters raided police stations and an office in Nidaa Tounis. Hundreds of youths took to the streets in the city of Hamma (southern Tunisia), setting fire to tyres and blocking roads. Marzouki has urged his supporters to respect the democratic process.

Essebsi was officially declared President on 29 December 2014. He is the first Tunisian President to be elected in free democratic elections.

## **Libya**

...

### **Most international flights suspended**

Turkish Airlines, the last remaining foreign carrier offering flights to Libya, said Tuesday it was suspending all flights to the conflict-wracked country amid the worsening security situation. This means Libya's airline Afrikija is the only airline offering flights to the country.

## **Burundi**

....

### **Several people killed during rebel attacks**

Up to 200 assailants were killed during a confrontation between the Burundian army and armed rebels who entered the country from Democratic Republic of Congo which took place in Cibitoke Province between 30 December 2014 and 4 January 2015. Two soldiers and two civilians were also killed. The human rights organisation Association Burundaise pour la Protection des Droits Humains et des Personnes Détenues (APRODH) is accusing the army of 37 cases of extra-judicial killings. According to army sources, members of an unnamed rebel organisation are trying to disrupt the forthcoming elections in Burundi planned for 2015 by committing acts of violence. Parliamentary and local elections are scheduled to take place on 26 May 2015, presidential elections are to be held on 26 June 2015 and elections to the Senate are to be held on 17 July 2015.

## **Kenya**

....

## **Controversial Security Law**

A Security Law ((Security Laws (Amendment) Bill 2014) adopted by Parliament on 18 December 2014 and signed by President Uhuru Kenyatta entered into force on 19 December 2014, inter alia, giving authorities more surveillance rights, making it easier to detain people without an arrest warrant and limiting broadcasting on terrorism. Critics say the law is limiting human rights unlawfully. On 2 January 2015, Kenya's High Court approved a motion filed by Kenya National Human Rights Commission (KNHRC) and the opposition Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD), suspending parts of the law for 30 days. The court will examine whether the legislation is constitutional.

## **Uganda/Central African Republic** . . . .

### **Leading member of LRA detained**

Dominic Ongwen, who according to Joseph Kony is one of the most important leaders of Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), was handed over to the Central African Republic on the first weekend of 2015. He is being detained by African Union troops fighting the LRA. Ongwen and two other leading members of the LRA (Joseph Kony and Okot Odhiambo) have been wanted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The LRA is active in the territory between the Central African Republic, South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo.

## **Nigeria** . . .

### **Suicide attacks by Boko Haram**

Two female suicide bombers aged 15 and 23 blew themselves up at around 3 pm in the town of Potiskum (in Yobe State, north-eastern Nigeria) at Kasuwar Jagwal market where mobile phones are sold. At least six persons, and according to some reports over twenty, were killed.

According to police reports, at least 19 people were killed and at least 27 people were wounded in a bomb blast at a crowded market in the north-eastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri at around noon on 10 January 2015 when explosives detonated as the young girl aged about 10 was searched at the market's entrance.

### **Boko Haram kills at least several hundred people in the town of Baga**

On 6 and 7 January 2015, Boko Haram militants killed dozens of people in town of Baga town on the edge of Lake Chad in a second killing spree within a few days. At least several hundred of the around 10,000 inhabitants, and according to some reports up to 2,000, were killed and many homes were burnt down. The terrorists also raided around 15 villages in the vicinity of the town. The population of Baga had faced attacks by Boko Haram on 3 January 2015 when Boko Haram militants seized the military base in the northern suburb of the town following gunfire with Nigerian government troops. Baga has notionally been the headquarters of a multinational task force comprising troops trained in Nigeria, Niger, and Chad since 1998. The multinational task force has been used to fight Boko Haram since 2012.

### **Boko Haram abducts more than 200 persons**

On New Year's Eve, suspected Boko Haram gunmen raided the village of Malari (Damboa Local Government Area) in the north-east of Nigeria. They abducted around 40 young boys and men between the age of ten and 23. On 14 December 2014, suspected Boko Haram extremists plundered the village of Gumsuri in the same area. They killed over 30 villagers and kidnapped around 180 women and children.

### **Boko Haram bombings in Gombe und Bauchi**

Around 20 people were killed in a bomb blast at the Dukku bus park at around 11 am on 22 December 2014 in the city of Gombe (Local Government area of the same name). Six people were killed in a bomb explosion at a central market in Bauchi the same evening (capital of Bauchi State in the north-east of Nigeria). Boko Haram is being blamed for the attacks.

### **54 troops sentenced to death**

On 17 December 2014, a military court in Abuja sentenced 54 troops to death who had refused to fight against the terrorist organisation Boko Haram in August 2014. Another five were acquitted and discharged.

## **Cameroon** ...

### **Boko Haram: Clashes with the military in the Far North region**

On January 2015, suspected Boko Haram militants attacked a bus in northern Cameroon that was travelling from Kousseri to Maroua. At least 15 passengers were killed.

According to Cameroon's Defence Ministry sources, more than 1,000 Boko Haram militants who had come to Cameroon from Nigeria raided the military base in Achigachia (Achigashiya) close to the border in the early hours of 28 December 2014. The Cameroon forces managed to clamp down on the terrorists.

On 27/28 December 2014, Boko Haram militants raided the villages of Makari, Amchide, Limani, Waza, Chogori and Achigachia which are located close to the border. At least 34 terrorists were killed by the troops in Chogori according to official sources.

Cameroon's army dismantled a training camp for the Boko Haram Islamist group in Guirvidig locality on 20 December 2014, arresting or killing dozens of militants and seizing 84 children aged between seven and fifteen who were being trained there, the army said on Monday.

According to army sources, Boko Haram carried out a bombing on a military convoy in Amchide region on 17 December 2014. 116 Boko Haram militants are said to have been killed in the clashes that subsequently broke out.

## **Democratic Republic of Congo** ...

### **Ultimatum expires for FDLR militants**

On 8 January 2015, the UN Security Council backed plans for common military action to be taken by the Democratic Republic of Congo and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to "neutralise" the RDLR rebel group operating in eastern Congo. The FDLR had let a six-month ultimatum run out (which expired on 2 January 2015) what had been imposed by the African countries of the region to lay down their arms without any conditions, handing just 337 of their estimated 1,300 to 1,500 fighters to MONUSCO before the deadline expired.

## **Mali** ...

### **Attack on UN**

Six UN troops from Niger were wounded on 4 January 2015 in the North of Mali (Gao region) when their vehicle rolled over an explosive device east of the town of Gao while they were travelling from Asongo to Menaka.

### **Prime Minister resigns/successor appointed**

Malian Prime Minister Moussa Mara who has been in office since April 2014 resigned on 8 January 2015 along with all the members of his cabinet. Modibo Keita, who has been leading peace negotiations with rebel groups and had been Prime Minister for three months in 2002, was appointed by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, according to a presidential decree.

## **The Gambia** ...

### **Attempted coup against the President**

A coup plot against The Gambia's President Yahya Jammeh was thwarted in the capital of Banjul on 30 December 2014. Supporters of the Sidi Moro Sanneh a former commander of the country's elite presidential guard, had stormed the presidential palace and an army base on 29 December 2014 with the cooperation of members of the presidential guard. Four people were killed in the gunfire that broke out between the conspirators led by Sanneh and the army. Sanneh fell out with the President in 2013 and subsequently fled to

Senegal. Jammeh, who seized power in a coup in 1994, was not actually in the country when the coup took place. He returned on 31 December 2014. Government troops searched the homes and offices of the conspirators on 1 January 2015. Several army officers and civilians were arrested and documents on the coup plots and a ship container with arms and explosives were seized in the port of Banjul. President Jammeh said the coup had not been launched by the army but by a group of terrorists supported by dissidents in the USA, Germany and Great Britain. Two Gambians who had emigrated to the USA were subsequently arrested in the US and Senegal.

## **West Africa/Ebola** . . .

### **Situation report on Ebola virus disease (EVD)**

According to statistics published by the WHO, the number of persons who have contracted the deadly ebola virus (EVD) in West Africa had soared to 20,747 by 7 January 2015 (with 8,235 deaths). Sierra Leone and Liberia have been the worst affected where there have been 9,780 confirmed cases of EVD (with 2,943 deaths) and 8,157 cases of EVD (3,496 deaths) respectively. Guinea has 2,775 confirmed and probable cases of EVD (with 1,781 deaths). Owing to the decline in the number of Ebola infections reported, the government of Liberia is planning to reopen schools in February 2015. Schools had been closed nationwide on 30 July 2014 in a bid to contain the spread of the virus. On 7 January 2015, steps were launched to treat the disease with Ebola medication on a voluntary basis in Monrovia.

## **Azerbaijan** . . .

### **Radio station "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty" closed down and employees arrested-**

On 26 December 2014, police officers searched the premises of the "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty" station. Employees were arrested, documents and computers were seized and the station was closed down. The explanation given was that the police needed to check whether the broadcaster was observing the laws on financing of non-governmental agencies. The international broadcasting organisation provides news, information, and analysis in 28 languages, above all from and about former Communist states of Eastern and Central Europe and is financed by the US. Representatives of the broadcasting organisation in the US are accusing the Azerbaijani Government of aggressively and systematically attacking the freedom of the press. Azerbaijan comes 160th out of 180 in a global press freedom ranking.

## **Russian Federation** . . .

### **Russia to hire more foreign troops in forces shake-up**

According to a report issued by the British broadcasting organisation BBC, Russia is to hire more foreign career soldiers. President Vladimir Putin issued a decree at the beginning of 2015 enabling foreigners to serve in the Russian military. The decree will allow foreigners to serve for at least five years in the Russian military - provided they speak Russian. Defence experts say the move is not linked to the conflict in Ukraine. Russian defence experts say there are already about 300 foreigners in the Russian forces – conceding, however, that the legal requirements had been difficult up to now. Mr Putin's decree on foreign soldiers is part of moves to simplify the regulations and to professionalise the Russian armed force. According to the report, recruits from the southern Caucasus and above all from ex-Soviet republics in Central Asia are to be hired. Russian defence experts say the possible threats are growing in Central Asia and in Afghanistan's neighbouring countries (such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) as Nato winds down in Afghanistan. Russia still maintains around 25 military bases in nine former Soviet republics, including Turkmenistan and Armenia. The new decree will make it easier and more practical for Russia to hire soldiers. For some the typical monthly wage would be an incentive to join the Russian army, in tough economic times. And the new decree will help President Putin to expand Russia's military presence in Central Asia.

## **China** . . . .



### **Killings in Xinjiang**

According to official reports, security forces killed six persons who were trying to detonate one or several explosive devices in Shule county in Xinjiang's Prefecture Kashgar on 12 January 2015.

### **China detains the highest number of journalists worldwide**

According to a report issued by the Organisation Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) on 17 December 2014, 44 journalists are being detained in China, most of them in jails around the world. Almost half of them belong to ethnic minorities of the Uyghur and Tibetans. The annual report published by Reporters without Borders also on 16 December 2014 says that China is the country with the highest number of detained journalists worldwide. The organisation bases its assumption on a figure of 29 and says that 73 civilian journalists are being detained.

### **Tibet: Self-immolations**

Following the self-immolations of three Tibetans on 16, 22 and 23 December 2014 in Tibetan towns in Gansu and Sichuan, the number of self-immolations has risen to 136 since 2009; eleven in 2014.

### **Myanmar**

...  
...

### **Political prisoners**

According to a report issued by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) on 9 January 2015, 160 political prisoners are currently being detained. It says at least 212 persons are being held on grounds of political activities.

### **India/Pakistan**

...

### **Kashmir: Heavy fighting continues**

Heavy fighting continues in the hotly contested region of Kashmir between India and Pakistan. At least ten Indian and Pakistani troops and numerous civilians were reportedly killed. Thousands of inhabitants of the Indian part of Kashmir have been displaced since fighting reportedly spread to inhabited areas. Tension between the two countries has increased since India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi called off peace talks in August 2014. The first artillery gunfire broke out along the demarcation line in October 2014.

Kashmir where Muslims are in the majority has been the spark for two of the three India-Pakistan wars. When British India was divided in 1947, the Maharaja, of Kashmir who was a Hindu decided to accede to India most of whose population was Hindu. The Muslim population rebelled against this decision. Troops on both sides intervened. A referendum which the United Nations called for was never held.

### **Violence in Assam**

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced following a string of violent attacks carried out by tribal militia belonging to the National Democratic Front of Bodoland on villages in Kokrajhar District and Sonitpur District in Assam State in 2014, which claimed the lives of at least 65 people.

Bodo groups have been fighting for more autonomy for decades and have repeatedly attacked members of other tribes and religions which they considered to be outsiders. The fighting is usually about territorial rights. Bodo account for around ten percent of Assam's estimated 33 million population.

### **Sri Lanka**

...

### **Unexpected change in power/peaceful elections**

Contrary to all expectations, President Mahinda Rajapaksa lost the presidential elections on 8 January 2015. Maithripala Sirisena emerged as the winner. According to official election results, the 63-year-old garnered 51.3 percent of the votes. 69-year-old Mahinda Rajapaksa who has been in power for the past ten years won 47.6 percent of the votes. Around 15 million people were called to vote the elections contested by a total of

19 candidates. Authorities estimate turnout at around 75 percent. Although there have been reports of attacks on supporters of the opposition in the run-up to the elections, the elections were held correctly and peacefully for the most part even though voters were refused entry to polling stations in some Tamil regions. However, this did not affect the elections. It was specifically in these regions that Sirisena secured the most votes which contributed in no small measure to him emerging as the winner in the elections.

Rajapaksa's decision taken in November 2014 to call early elections in the hope of an easy victory over a fragmented opposition led to his defeat. Several ministers and MPs had changed sides with Mr Sirisena. Above all Buddhist, Muslim and Marxist parties supported Sirisena.

### **Information about Maithripala Sirisena**

Sirisena was born in a village to the north of the capital Colombo on 3 September 1951. Like most of the population, he is Sinhalese and a Buddhist. Having completed degrees in agriculture and political science in the 1970s, he entered local politics and was elected to the national parliament in 1989. He is considered to be unassuming, he does not speak English and nearly always wears traditional costume.

### **Cuba/USA**

....

#### **Diplomatic relations resumed**

In a deal brokered by the Vatican and Canada, observers say the USA and Cuba have achieved an historic breakthrough in relations. It was announced on 17 December 2014 that diplomatic relations suspended more than 50 years ago are to be restored. US President Barack Obama intends to ease the embargo from trade, economic and financial sanctions against Cuba as well as travel restrictions. Cuba has agreed to release 53 political prisoners. The first prisoners, including supporters of the outlawed opposition Unión Patriótica de Cuba (UNPACU) are to be released from 7 January 2015.