

## Group 22 - Information Centre Asylum and Migration

# Briefing Notes

23 February 2015

### Afghanistan

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#### **Number of civilians killed reached its peak in 2014**

Last year, the war in Afghanistan claimed more civilian lives than in any other year since the UN began carrying out systematic surveys in 2009. A total of 3,699 civilians were killed and 6,849 were injured in 2014, the UNAMA said on the release of its 2014 Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Kabul on 18 February 2015. This means the number of persons killed rose by 25 percent and the number of persons wounded rose by 21 per cent increase compared to 2013. These increases were caused by a rise in the number of ground battles between armed groups and the Government which claimed the highest number of civilian casualties at 34 percent. The UNAMA report highlighted the fact that 'Anti-Government Elements' such as the Taliban remain responsible for 72 per cent of all civilian casualties in 2014. The report says 12 per cent of casualties were linked to the Afghan national security forces and two per cent to international military forces. The remaining casualties could not be allocated to any party involved in the conflict. Since systematic surveys were launched in 2009, the conflict in Afghanistan has claimed 17,74 civilian casualties. 29,971 civilians have been wounded.

#### **Taliban – interested in peace talks?**

The Taliban has reportedly indicated its interest in engaging in peace talks. However, the US is denying reports that initial talks with the US are due to take place in Doha on 19 February 2015. The US is supporting efforts made by the government of Afghanistan to engage in its own talks.

#### **Suicide attack on police compound and offensive against the Taliban in Helmand**

At least 20 persons were killed in a suicide bombing carried out by the Taliban in Logar province on 17 February 2015. Taliban suicide bombers dressed as police officers attacked a police station in Pul-i-Alam. At least 76 Taliban militants have been killed in a large-scale offensive launched by the Afghan security forces. This first large-scale offensive by the armed forces since the end of the International Security Assistance Force mission ended was aimed at substantially weakening the Taliban before they launch their spring offensive in April 2015.

### Pakistan

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#### **Polio vaccination workers killed**

Four members of a polio vaccination team were found murdered in Pakistan's southwestern province of Balochistan on 18 February 2015, according to official reports. The team comprising a physician, a driver and two local tribal policemen had been kidnapped in the Zhob district of the province on 14 February 2015. The authorities are blaming militants for the attack.

#### **Suicide bombings**

A fatal suicide bomb tore through crowds on the normally placid streets of Lahore on 17 February 2015, reportedly killing at least five persons and wounding 23 persons. On 18 February 2015, at least three persons were killed and two were wounded in a suicide bombing of a Shia mosque in Islamabad. A Taliban group has claimed responsibility for the blast. On 22 February 2015, an eight-year-old boy was killed and nine

others were injured after a bomb planted on a motor bike exploded in a much-frequented district with several Hindu temples in the border town of Chaman/Balochistan. It is not yet clear who was behind the attack.

## **Iraq** . . .

### **General situation**

Daily reports of armed clashes and suicide bombings continue unabated. According to Iraq Body Count, 958 civilians have been killed so far in the month of February 2015 (as at: 20 February 2015).

According to eye witness reports, ISIS militants burned to death between 30 and 45 civilians in Anbar province on 17 February 2015. They were accused of cooperating with the Iraqi security forces.

According to a press release issued by dpa on 20 February 2015, ISIS militants also killed 150 prisoners in Anbar province. Those killed are said to have been above all members of a tribe that fought against ISIS alongside the Iraqi army. Children were reportedly among the dead.

According to a press release issued by dpa on 20 February 2015, ISIS is selling the organs of slain people to finance itself. The bodies of Kurdish opponents have been offered "for sale" at between US\$ 10,000 and US\$ 20,000. So far there has been no official confirmation.

The jihadists' income streams are reported to have fallen significantly in recent times, among other things as a result of attacks carried out by the anti-ISIS coalition. The tight financial situation has reportedly already resulted in ISIS having to cut the wages it pays its fighters by up to two thirds.

### **Bahrain joins the fight against ISIS**

According to a press release published on 16 February 2015, Bahrain has now also joined the fight against ISIS by launching air strikes against ISIS forces.

## **Turkey** . . .

### **Agreement to train Syrian rebels**

On 19 February 2015, the Turkish foreign minister and the American Ambassador announced in Istanbul that the two countries had signed an agreement to jointly train and equip moderate Syrian opposition fighters. Under the agreement, in the next three years, about 5,000 fighters a year will reportedly be trained to fight against ISIS and, according to Turkish sources, also against the Syrian government under Assad. The Pentagon also announced that it would be sending 400 soldiers to the region as instructors in the fight against ISIS. In order to strengthen the front against ISIS, the rebels will reportedly also be equipped. The training is scheduled to commence in March 2015.

### **Row breaks out over homeland security bill**

Two brawls broke out in the Turkish parliament last week. MPs belonging to the ruling Justice and Development AKP party and the opposition engaged in fisticuffs over a controversial bill to boost police powers against protesters. The 132-article bill submitted by the AKP tightens criminal offences and grants greater power to security authorities. In cases of social unrest, the police will be able to keep suspects under custody for 48 hours without needing a prosecutor's instruction and the detention period will be able to be extended for up to four days on the prosecutor's instruction. The bill also contains a ban on covering faces meaning that persons who even cover their faces partially with a scarf may face prison sentences of up to five years if a rally is classified as an event supporting a terrorist organisation. Anyone carrying a slingshot may face more than two years in prison. Police officers are to be allowed to use firearms if protestors ignite incendiary devices. The opposition fears the bill will effectively create a police state

### **ECHR on religious lessons**

According to media reports issued on 19 February 2015, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg has ordered Turkey to abolish mandatory secondary school religious classes in Islam. Turkish Alevi, who follow a more liberal stream of Islam, called upon the European Court of Human Rights to demand the abolition of mandatory religious classes for Alevi pupils. Up to now, only Jewish and Christian pupils are exempt

from mandatory religious classes. Alevi lament repeatedly that they are being discriminated against by the Sunni majority.

The European Court of Human Rights had already ruled in September 2014 that the children of the over ten million Alevi should not be forced to take religious lessons. The Court urged the Turkish government to abolish mandatory secondary school religious classes for children whose parents do not disclose their own religious beliefs. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said basic religious knowledge is important even for atheists and appealed the decision. This appeal has been rejected by the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights. As a member of the Council of Europe, Turkey must abide by the decision. The Islamic-conservative government has so far refused to implement the decision.

### **Seized land returned**

According to a report published by the Armenian newspaper Ago on 10 February 2015, the authorities have returned around 1,000 confiscated properties to Christian and Jewish communities over the past seven years. The authorities began returning confiscated properties following the amendment to the Foundation Act of 2008. A decree issued in 2011 has accelerated the process. Many of the confiscations date back to the 1930s when non-Muslims were obliged to disclose their properties which were then confiscated by the state.

## **Syria/Turkey**

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### **Turkey evacuates its troops from Turkish exclave**

In the early hours of 22 February 2015, Turkey sent 527 Turkish troops, 39 armed tanks and 57 armoured vehicles into Syria to evacuate 38 Turkish troops who had been guarding the tomb of Suleyman Shah near the city of Kobane. Suleyman Shah is considered to be the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman empire. The remains of Suleyman Shah who reportedly drowned near Eephrat in 1236 had been brought to Turkey "temporarily" and are to be buried at a different mausoleum in Syria (Eschme, ca. 200 metres from the Turkish border). The original mausoleum was destroyed after the troops had been evacuated. At present, ISIS are controlling the territory around the mausoleum where fighting has intensified since January. The deteriorating situation prompted the Turkish parliament to order military intervention. The Syrian government which had been informed of the move, spoke of "flagrant aggression". It says the operation is in clear breach of a treaty signed between Turkey and France in 1921 that gave Turkey the right to station guards and fly its flag there.

## **Syria**

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### **Aleppo: Government willing to call ceasefire/fighting rages on in the city and province**

According to a statement issued by the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, on 17 February 2015, the government is willing to suspend bombardment of and artillery fighting in Aleppo in order to enable a local humanitarian ceasefire to be reached. An announcement will be made in Damascus when the six-week fighting freeze is to begin. Rebel groups have also been called upon to suspend grenade and missile attacks. In Aleppo province, government troops backed by the Hezbollah are fighting against numerous rebel groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. On 17 February 2015, government troops launched a new offensive on a district of the city controlled by rebels, killing around 100 persons. Aleppo has effectively been divided since July 2012, the rebels control the east and the government controls the west. In the past few days, fighting has been raging on in three villages north of Aleppo along a supply route used by rebels towards the border between Syria and Turkey. According to the rebels, the government has lost any territorial gains it had initially made. In total, 129 government troops and 116 rebels have reportedly been killed in the province in the most recent clashes. In Aleppo province, the east is under the control of the government, the west is under the control of the rebels.

### **Photo to highlight the situation in Duma**

Syrian activists want to highlight the situation in Duma (a suburb of Damascus which has been under the control of the "Free Syrian Army" for the past two years) by publishing a photo of children gathered and locked into a cage, and someone holding a lit torch. Since early February 2015, more than 200 people have allegedly been killed in Duma alone, more than 60 of whom were women and children. Thousands are said

to be suffering starvation as the regime has sealed off access roads and is preventing food supplies from reaching the city. It says: "ISIS kills one or two people and this is splashed all over the media. But when Assad and his army kills hundred of people before your eyes, you stand by and do nothing"

## **Iran**

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### **Date for next parliamentary elections and election of Council of Experts announced**

On 20 February 2015, the Iranian Assembly of Experts announced the date for the next parliamentary elections in Iran. Parliamentary elections will be held in Iran on 26 February 2016 to elect both the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the Assembly of Experts (Majlis-e Chobregan-e Rahbari). Pursuant to Article 111 of the Iranian Constitution, the 86 members of the Assembly elect the supreme leader. They are elected by the people every eight years.

## **Yemen**

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### **Conflicting parties agree to set up People's Transitional Congress**

In the view of the UN, a breakthrough has been achieved in efforts to resolve the conflict. The United Nations' envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar, said that rival political parties are getting closer to reaching a deal that could prevent the country from sliding into civil war.

### **Ex-President Hadi attempts to reclaim his position**

The political crisis escalated last weekend. Following the flight of former President Abd-Rabbo Mansour Hadi to Aden (south Yemen) after escaping house arrest by the Houthi militia in the capital Sanaa, the country is on the brink of collapse. Hadi claims he escaped house arrest on 21 February 2015. Aden is Hadi's native city, it is being controlled by government troops who continue to support him.

## **Libya**

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### **ISIS branch conquers the port of Sirte**

Supporters of the Lybian branch of ISIS are obviously taking control of the port Sirte. According to the Libyan news agency "Al-Wasat", the local administrative building and a local radio station were captured on 19 February 2015 and all activity at the the university of Sirte had been suspended. The fact that the port has been seized indicates that ISIS is gaining more ground as Sirte is a strategically important junction along the coastal road between Tripoli and crude oil terminals.

### **More than 40 killed in bomb blast in eastern Libya**

Several car bombs exploded in Al-Koba, which is located around 30 kilometres west of the city of Derna, killing at least 40 persons and wounding up to 70. The bombs exploded simultaneously at the local police headquarters, the home of the Chairperson of the internationally recognised government in Tobruk and at a petrol station. A Libyan branch of ISIS has claimed responsibility for the bombings. They say they were carried out in retaliation for the Egyptian and Libyan airstrikes carried out against ISIS positions in Derna on 16 February 2015.

### **Attack on Iranian Embassy in Tripoli**

Militants claiming loyalty to Islamic State said they were behind the twin bomb attacks on the residence of the Iranian ambassador in Tripoli on 22 February 2015. According to security forces, nobody was in the Embassy at the time. Minor damage was caused but there were no casualties.

## Tunisia

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### **Attack on the border region with Algeria**

Four National Guard officers were killed in a terrorist attack in the town of Boulaaba, in the governorate of Kasserine in the early hours of 18 February 2015, the Interior Ministry announced in a press release. The mountainous region of the Chaambi Mountains is considered to be a stronghold of the jihadist group Phalange Okba ibn Nafaa which has close ties with Al-Qaeda. Since 2012, the Tunisian army has repeatedly pounded the group with airstrikes and ground offensives.

## Somalia

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### **Politicians killed in suicide bombing in Mogadishu**

At least 25 people were killed at a meeting of top politicians at the Central Hotel close to the presidential palace on 20 February 2015. Two MPs, the deputy mayor of Mogadishu, the private secretary of the Prime Minister and the head of cabinet of the Deputy Prime Minister were reportedly among the dead. Several ministers were wounded. This has been the bloodiest attack to be carried out in two years. Al-Shabab has claimed responsibility for the attack. According to Somali intelligence sources, the suicide bombers, a man and a woman, held both a Somali and a Dutch passport.

## South Sudan:

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### **Pupils abducted**

According to UNICEF, 89 young boys were abducted by unknown militants in the city of Wau Shilluk in Upper Nile state on 21 February 2015. Armed militants went from door to door, singling out boys under the age of twelve. It is not clear which group the kidnappers belong to. The children are potentially to be used as child soldiers.

The region is under the control of Johnson Olony (Uliny), a militia leader who is supporting the government in Juba. According to estimates by UNICEF, the conflicting parties in South Sudan are using at least 12,000 child soldiers.

## Nigeria

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### **The cities of Baga, Monguno and Marte recaptured**

On 21 February 2015, Nigerian forces backed by air strikes recaptured the northeastern border town of Baga on Lake Chad from Boko Haram militants. Baga and the neighbouring town of Doron Baga had been captured by Boko Haram militants in January 2015. Several hundred persons were killed in the struggle.

On 16 February 2015, the army had managed to recapture the town of Monguno (which is around 140 km north of the capital of Maiduguri, Borno) from the grip of Boko Haram militants. Monguno, an important transport junction which means it is of strategic importance, had been seized by the terrorists in late January 2015. The army also recaptured the town of Marte, administrative seat of Marte Local Government Area. According to a statement issued by military sources on 18 February 2015, over 300 Boko Haram fighters have been killed in military operations since 16 February 2015.

### **Attacks and suicide attacks by Boko Haram**

A girl thought to be just seven years old blew herself up at a market for mobile phones in the city of Potiskum (north-eastern Yobe state) at 1.30 pm on 22 February 2015 after suspicious security guards and vigilantes had tried to prevent the girl from entering the market. Apart from the suicide bomber, at least five persons were killed in the blast. At around 5 pm on 17 February 2015, a suicide bomber had blown himself up in Potiskum in a restaurant belonging to the Al-Amir chain. Two employees of the restaurants were killed and 13 persons were wounded. Multiple bomb blasts were reported in Yamarkumi village (near Biu, the second-largest town in northeastern Borno state) when three suicide bombers in a motorised rickshaw blew themselves up at a police checkpoint. According to hospital sources, 36 persons were killed and 20 were wounded.

Following an offensive launched by the army on a Boko Haram training camp and Boko Haram hideouts in Sambisa forest (Borno state) on 19 February 2015, Boko Haram militants raided the villages of Gatamarwa, Makalama and Layhawul (near Chibok) on 20 February 2015, killing 21 villagers.

### **Boko-Haram leader AbuBakr Shekau threatens to prevent elections from going ahead**

In a video published on Twitter for the first time on 17 February 2015, the leader of Boko Haram, AbuBakr Shekau, threatened to disrupt the parliamentary and presidential elections postponed until 28 March 2015 on security grounds. He said "And finally we say that these elections that you are planning to do, will not happen in peace, even if that costs us our lives".

### **58 persons killed in the run-up to the elections**

The Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) announced on 13 February 2015 that since 2 December 2014, 58 persons have been killed in violence that erupted in association with the elections in the run-up to the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 28 March 2015.

## **Cameroon**

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On 16 February 2015, the army announced that around 1,000 persons had been arrested who reportedly have contacts with the Boko Haram Islamists. A series of armed clashes also took place in Waza in the Far North Region. Around 100 terrorists and five soldiers were reportedly killed.

## **Ghana**

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### **Muslims protest against discrimination**

Several hundred Muslims took to the streets of Sekondi-Takoradi (Western Region) on 20 February 2015 to protest against discrimination by the Christian majority. According to reports by Muslim leaders, for instance, in some places Muslim pupils at Christian schools are being forced to attend Christian religious ceremonies. Muslim MPs referred this practise to the National Peace Council on 18 February 2014, an institution that endeavours to find peaceful solutions to conflicts in the country.

Almost 71 percent of Ghana's 25 million population are Christians, 18 percent are Muslims.

## **Togo**

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### **Schools shut down temporarily following protests**

Togo temporarily shut all schools in the private and public sector in the country on 17 February 2015 after students took to the streets of the Capital Lomé to protest. However, Universities were not closed down. The students protested against repeated strikes by teachers and urged the authorities to meet the demands of educators for salary increases. The schools reopened on 23 February 2015.

## **West Africa/Ebola**

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

After an initial decrease, the WHO has once again recorded a noticeable increase in the number of new cases of Ebola reported in Guinea and Sierra Leone in the past two weeks.

All 12,000 schools have reopened in Guinea. Sierra Leone is planning to reopen schools by the end of March and has launched an investigation into misappropriated funds of around EUR 5 million (one-third of moneys received). Liberia reopened its schools on 16 February 2015, lifted the curfew that had been in place since August 2014 on 22 February 2015 and announced it would be opening the border crossings with neighbouring countries.

By the time the EU Ebola Conference is held on 3 March 2015, the three countries are planning to draw up a joint plan on economic recovery.

## **Mali**

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### **Negotiations continued**

Within the framework of the fifth round of negotiations between the Malian government, the Tuareg rebels and the Arab rebel group MAA held in Algiers on 16 February 2015 and brokered by the UN, the conflicting parties agreed to immediately cease all hostilities on 19 February 2015. The ultimate aim is to bring peace to northern Mali. All parties agree to maintain the territorial unity of Mali while granting local self-determination rights.

## **Chad/Senegal**

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### **Charges against ex-dictator Hissène Habré**

Chad's former President is to be put on trial accused of crimes against humanity, war crimes and torture. The Extraordinary African Chamber of Senegal and the AU have said the trial is due to begin in May/June 2015. Habré has been sentenced to death in Chad in absentia for planning a coup. Habré does not recognise the court's jurisdiction and has so far refused to participate in the proceedings. It will be the first international trial to be held in Africa.

## **FYROM Macedonia**

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### **Is the Head of the Opposition planning a coup?**

Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski who heads Macedonia's ruling party VMRO-DPMNE has accused the leader of the opposition and chairperson of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) Zoran Zaev of planning to overthrow the government. Zoran Zaev's passport has been confiscated and his five "accomplices" have been arrested.

Zaev denies all the allegations. He said the authorities were trying in vain to publish evidence of the government's involvement in criminal activities. Zaev is accusing Gruevski of being responsible for tapping phones and eavesdropping on the conversations of thousands of people.

The events created a major stir in Macedonia. In view of the deterioration in the political dialogue, the EU has expressed concern and has urged politicians to observe the principles governed by the rule of law. The former EU envoy for Yugoslavia, Carl Bildt, said the accusation of an attempted coup seems "far-fetched".

Gruevski has been Prime Minister since mid-2006. The Social Democrats have been boycotting parliament for almost a year owing to allegations of poll rigging at the last parliamentary elections. Prime Minister Gruevski whose style is becoming more and more authoritarian is coming increasingly under the fire of criticism.

## **Ukraine**

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### **Situation in the East**

Ukrainian troops and pro-Russian separatists resumed fighting in the traffic junction of Debaltseve despite the ceasefire which began at midnight on 15 February 2015. The Ukrainian government refused to give up Debaltseve on 16 February 2015 and rejected the offer by separatists to open a corridor for the withdrawal of troops, claiming that Debaltseve is under the control of the army. Furthermore, both parties refused to pull their heavy weaponry out of Debaltseve even though they had agreed to do so in the Minsk Agreement. The separatists explained their ongoing fighting in Debaltseve by saying it belongs to them and therefore does not come under the ceasefire agreement. The battle of the separatists for Debaltseve continued on 17 February 2015, with much of the city under its control. On 18 February 2015 the city was captured by the separatists. According to Ukrainian sources, six Ukrainian troops were killed, more than 100 were wounded, at least 90 troops were captured and another 82 soldiers have gone missing since Ukrainian troops pulled out of Debaltseve.

Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande together with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko have criticised the breach of the ceasefire agreement in east Ukraine and have urged that all measures agreed to in the Minsk Agreement on 12 February 2015 be implemented.

On 19 February 2015, a relief convoy comprising four trucks of the United Nations entered Ukraine for the first time. The relief agency UNHCR and the United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF were part of the convoy.

On 20 February 2015, according to a Ukrainian army spokesperson, more than 20 Russian tanks crossed the border to Ukraine and have pushed their way into the port of Novoazovsk southeast of Mariupol. Ten missile firing systems and several buses carrying militants reportedly crossed the border. The coastal city of Mariupol is of strategic importance as it is located between the border and the Crimea which has been annexed by Russia. Despite the ceasefire agreement, government troops and pro-Russian separatists continued to fight in the East of Ukraine on 20 February 2015.

On 21 February 2015, Ukrainian troops and the pro-Russian separatists exchanged around 190 prisoners. 139 Ukrainian troops and 52 pro-Russian separatists were exchanged at the front line in the region of Lugansk.

It was reported on 22 February 2015 that the pro-Russian separatists want to begin pulling out heavy weaponry and that this process could take two weeks.

### **Suicide bombing in Kharkov**

A bomb exploded on 22 February 2015 when around 500 activists and members of public movements gathered with Ukrainian flags near the Sports Palace in the East Ukrainian city of Kharkov to mark one year since the Maidan protests. At least two people were killed. The Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior confirmed that one person had been killed and ten wounded, one of whom was a police officer. According to eye witness reports, the explosive device had been planted around 100 metres from the Sports Palace. The explosion took place just as the participants had begun marching. The Ukrainian police have condemned the blast as an act of terrorism. Kharkov is located around 40 kilometres from the Russian border and is controlled by Ukraine's central government. Four suspects were arrested in Kharkov after the explosion. They were in possession of grenades.

## **Azerbaijan**

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### **Relatives of protestors arrested**

Relatives of several Azerbaijani nationals who took part in a protest against a visit by President Ilham Aliyev in Berlin on 21 January 2015 have been arrested in Azerbaijan. They are being held in pre-trial detention on charges of possessing drugs. Relatives who have since been released told the police that they had been arrested for the protests in Germany.

On 18 February 2015, the pre-trial detention of the human rights activist Leyla Yunus was extended by five months. The anti-regime activist and Director of the Institute for Freedom and Democracy Leyla Yunus was detained in July 2014. Her husband, the historian Arif Yunus was arrested in August 2014. They are accused of state treason, tax evasion and illegal business dealings.

## **China**

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### **Violence in Xinjiang**

A suicide bomber in the volatile Chinese region of Xinjiang killed as many as seven people on 16 February 2015 in Guma (Chinese: Pishan) Hotan (Hetian) (Prefecture) when clashes broke out between two Uighur and security forces. The young man, a member of the Uighur ethnic group, reportedly set off the device. The details of the bombing are now known.

Seventeen people have reportedly been hacked, stabbed or shot to death in the latest episode of deadly violence to hit China's far west. The outbreak of violence was reported on 17 February 2015 in Aksu Prefecture (Akesu in Chinese) including four police officers and nine militants. Police shot dead four passers-by who apparently got caught up in the crossfire. The incident occurred when police officers were searching homes in a town called Yaqaeriq (Yingairike) in Bay (Baicheng) district.



## **Thailand**

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### **Ex-Prime Minister faces corruption charges**

On 18 February 2015, former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra was charged with corruption. Thailand's Constitutional Court is accusing Shinawatra who was overthrown in May 2014 of negligence related to her government's rice subsidy scheme. According to investigators, EUR 3.5 billion is said to have disappeared. The politician has so far denied all the charges. If found guilty, she could be sentenced to ten years in prison.