

Group 22 – Information Centre Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

15 December 2014

Afghanistan

Security situation

Taliban extremists and other insurgent groups continued attacks on Afghan security forces, state representatives and foreign institutions.

On 13.12.14, twelve Afghan civilians who were clearing mines in southern Helmand province died in an attack. On the same day, an attack launched on a bus carrying Afghan soldiers near Kabul killed seven people and wounded another 18, among them several civilians. Also in Kabul, a high-rank judicial official was shot dead. On 12.12.14, a bomb explosion hit a NATO-led convoy near the US military airbase of Bagram north of Kabul. A suicide attack on a French cultural centre in Kabul killed one German national and wounded 15 people on 11.12.14. In another attack in Kabul, six Afghan soldiers lost their lives.

Iraq

Latest developments

On 08.12.14, offensives carried out by the international coalition killed 38 IS militants, military circles reported. The air strikes were targeted at IS bases and at a bridge under IS control.

Since 10.12.14, the international alliance has targeted 20 sites of the extremists, the US authorities reported.

On 12.12.14, fierce fighting erupted between IS insurgents and Iraqi security forces near Samarra (110 km north of Baghdad, Salahuddin province). In the last weeks, IS militants have reinforced attacks in the area. Samarra is home to the 'Golden Mosque', one of the most important Shiite holy sites. Near the city, IS fighters have shot down an Iraqi military helicopter.

Turkey

Police make arrests in raids

In a sweeping operation launched on 14.12.14 in 13 cities across the country, police arrested dozens of journalists, TV producers and also former high-rank police officers, among them the former head of the Istanbul police department's anti-terror branch and the editor in chief of Zaman newspaper. They are all accused of being supporters of the 'Gülen movement' seeking to topple the government. Broadcaster CNN Turk reported that 32 arrest warrants were issued and 24 people detained. They are accused by the prosecution of having set up a terrorist organisation trying to seize state sovereignty. Before, Turkey's President Erdogan had announced to 'hunt down' Gülen's supporters whom he called 'pawns of evil forces at home and abroad'. Dozens of journalists took to the streets in protest against the raids. Both EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini and EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn said the arrests were 'incompatible with the freedom of media' and called to mind the presumption of innocence and other guaranteed procedural rights.

Iran

Plans for total surveillance of the internet

Iran not only wants to filter critical or undesired internet content, but also to identify anyone who logs on to the internet in Iran, telecommunications minister Mahmoud Vaezi said. Already some weeks ago, he had announced a control system that would enable the authorities to filter out certain content from social networks.

Human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh arrested again

Nasrin Sotoudeh was arrested again by the Iranian secret service on Human Rights day (10.12.14) without giving a reason for the detention, her husband reported. Ms Sotoudeh has always striven to defend victims of the regime such as minors sentenced to death, human rights activists and prisoners of conscience. In 2011, she had been sentenced to six years imprisonment and was banned from practicing law for ten years for 'acting against national security' and 'propaganda against the government' (a frequently used accusation against dissidents) as well as for her membership of the 'Centre for the Defenders of Human Rights' founded and led by Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi. She was released from prison in September 2013, a few weeks after Iran's new President Hassan Rouhani took office.

Charges against Washington Post correspondent

Iranian American correspondent Jason Rezaian has been charged by a Tehran judge, as was reported by US authorities. The details of the charges are unknown outside the courtroom. US Secretary of State John Kerry said that Jason Rezaian has been denied access to a lawyer as well as bail. Jason Rezaian and his wife Yeganeh Salehi, who is a correspondent for the Abu-Dhabi-based newspaper 'The National', had been arrested at the end of July on allegations of espionage. In October, Ms Salehi was released on bail.

Airstrikes against IS confirmed

After initially denying airstrikes against IS in Iraq, the Iranian government has now confirmed the operation, as was reported by the Guardian newspaper. In this matter, Iran did not have any coordination with the Americans but with the Iraqi government, deputy foreign minister Ebrahim Rahimpour said. Iran would not allow conditions in Iraq to descend to the level of Syria, he added.

Israel

Amnesty International accuses Israel of Gaza war crimes

In a recent report, Amnesty International has accused the Israeli army of war crimes. The report released on 09.12.14 refers to military attacks during the last four days of the Gaza conflict in summer 2014, when four multi-storey buildings were destroyed 'deliberately and with no military justification', in violation of international law, the report says. The Israeli military offensive in retaliation for rocket launches by Hamas was ended after seven weeks at the end of August. More than 2,100 Palestinians lost their lives in the attacks, most of them were civilians, the UN said. Also 73 Israelis were killed, 67 of them soldiers.

Israel/West Bank

Palestinian minister dies after clashes with Israeli forces

Video footage shows an Israeli soldier holding 55-year old Palestinian minister without portfolio Ziad Abu Ain by the throat during clashes in a village north of Ramallah. The director of the local hospital said that the minister had inhaled large amounts of tear gas, leading to attacks of suffocation; he then died of a heart attack in hospital. The spokeswoman for the Israeli NGO Yesh Din ('there is law'), Reut Mor, stressed that the protest rally of the Palestinians had been peaceful. The incident has raised fears in Israel about new tensions between Israelis and Palestinians or even a new Intifada. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas condemned the 'brutal assault', calling it a 'barbaric act'.

Syria

Beheadings and stonings carried out by IS

On 13.12.14, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that four men were beheaded for blasphemy by IS members east of the city of Homs. The Observatory also reported that on 12.12.14, IS had stoned a man and a woman to death for adultery in Manbij town in northern Syria.

Syrian army recaptures important rebel territory

The Syrian army has recaptured a strategically important area north of the embattled city of Aleppo, as was reported by state media and confirmed by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on 14.12.14. Apparently, 34 fighters from Islamist groups were killed in the fights. Pro-government forces are now aiming to capture positions in the west to cut off insurgent supply lines into the city, the Observatory said. Fighting is also continuing south and east of Aleppo. Presently, the city is the major combat zone between government forces and insurgents. At the same time, UN mediator Staffan de Mistura is seeking a ceasefire so that the civilian population can be supplied with relief items. However, some diplomats fear that the pro-government forces might use a ceasefire to seize complete control of Aleppo, as was the case in the city of Homs.

Around 50 airstrikes per day by Syrian government forces

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that the Syrian regime has launched nearly 2,500 airstrikes over the last 50 days, targeting 1,304 locations mainly in the regions of Damascus, Aleppo, Idlib and Homs. In the same period, helicopters have dropped 1,125 barrel bombs across the country.

Egypt

Suspected homosexuals arrested

On 07.12.14, police arrested 33 men on a night-time raid on a bathhouse in Cairo on allegations of 'debauchery'.

Although homosexuality is not illegal under Egyptian law, charges of fornication or debauchery are frequently used against gay people to put them on trial.

Man killed in protest rally

On 12.12.14, a protester lost his life in a rally of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Kafr al-Sheikh province (around 150 km north of Cairo) when clashes erupted between protesters and security forces. During a rally staged in Cairo's Matariya district, police arrested 13 protesters for organising the rally and for possession of weapons. Other anti-government protests took place in several districts of Cairo, in the industrial city of Helwan (roughly 25 km south of Cairo) and in northern Al-Sharqeya province.

Tunisia

Runoff vote

On 08.12.14, the electoral commission set the date for the second round of presidential vote to December 21. In the first round held on 23.11.14, secular candidate Essebsi (Nidaa Tounes) had gained 39.5 percent of the votes (followed by incumbent president Moncef Marzouki (CPR) with 33.4 percent), but he was well short of the absolute majority.

Nigeria

Double bombings in Jos and Kano

On 10.12.14 around 2.30pm, two suspected female Boko Haram bombers blew themselves up in northern Kano city (capital of Kano State) on a parking lot at the Kantin Kwari textile market. Apart from the perpetrators, four people died and seven were wounded.

On 11.12.14 around 6pm, two bombs set off by two female Boko Haram bombers at a makeshift market in the central city of Jos (capital of Plateau State) left at least 31 people dead. The site is only roughly 200 meters off a bus station where Boko Haram members had killed more than 130 people in a double blast last May.

Presidential elections: Muhammadu Buhari to challenge Goodluck Jonathan

On 11.12.14, Nigeria's largest opposition party APC (All Progressives Congress) nominated 71-year old former military dictator Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the north, as candidate in the polls scheduled to be held in February 2015. As in Nigeria's last general elections held in 2011, Buhari challenges incumbent Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south. Jonathan had been nominated in a no-contest vote by Nigeria's dominant party PDP (People's Democratic Party), which has been ruling since 1999.

Cameroon

Boko Haram attacks

In an interview with Voice of America radio on 13.14.14, Cameroon's minister of communication said that Boko Haram attackers had crossed Lake Chad from Nigeria and ransacked the villages of Ngouma, Sagme, Ardebe, Dambore and Soueram. Following fights with the army, several insurgents were killed and 25 of them were arrested. Hundreds of other Islamists were swallowed by the waters of Lake Chad after their boats capsized or sank when they tried to escape, the minister went on. At the same time, suspected Boko Haram insurgents also attacked the towns of Bankim, Amchide and Limani (further south at the border to Nigeria).

Mali

French hostage released

On 09.12.14, the release of Serge Lazarevic was confirmed, who had been taken hostage on 24.11.13 in Timbuktu by AQIM (al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb). The Malian authorities confirmed that some Islamist prisoners were freed in exchange for the release. Lazarevic's fellow Frenchman Philippe Verdon, who accompanied him on the business trip, had been killed in 2013.

French army kills jihadist MUJAO leader

Ahmed al-Tilemsi, senior commander of MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa) was killed by French soldiers in the night of 11.12.14 near the city of Gao.

West Africa/Ebola

Latest developments

Mali: The government authorities stated that the last known Ebola patient left hospital on 11.12.14. According to figures published by WHO on 08.12.14, *Sierra Leone* has now recorded 7,798 cases, exceeding the number counted in *Liberia* (7,719 cases), which had been the country worst affected by the outbreak. The disease is still spreading quickly in western Sierra Leone. Still, Liberia has recorded the highest number of fatal cases (3,177), followed by Sierra Leone (1,742) and *Guinea* (1,412).

The EU has announced a further 61 million euro of support in response to the crisis. So far, the EU Member States have contributed more than 1.1 billion euros to fight the disease.

On 08.12.14, the ECOWAS Committee of Chiefs of Defence Staff called for the deployment of more military personnel to fight Ebola at an extraordinary session. The committee urged ECOWAS to put in place additional logistical arrangements, medical personnel and local workforce in order to set up new treatment centres and to guarantee security. In Monrovia (Liberia), a German treatment unit will become operational on 15.12.14.

Ukraine

Imminent state bankruptcy

Despite international financial support, the country has been facing state bankruptcy since February 2014. In view of this, Germany and France have called for economic reforms. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has also asked for speedy reforms, making various suggestions like an immediate substantial increase of gas prices. However, already today many people cannot pay their heat consumption and are dependent on state support. The poor socio-economic situation may be a decisive reason for the increasing number of Ukrainians who decide to leave the country, although they are not directly affected by the armed conflict in the country's eastern part.

Numbers of victims and refugees

According to the latest figures provided by the U.N. humanitarian agency OCHA, the fighting in Eastern Ukraine between government troops and pro-Russian separatists has claimed more than 4,600 lives since April 2014. Also, a total of about 10,000 soldiers, insurgents and civilians have been injured in the troubled regions. At least a million people have left the conflict area seeking refuge in the central parts of the country or in Russia.

Kosovo

New government, new Prime Minister

Six months after the election (see BN of 24.11.14), a new government was formed. On 09.12.14, the new cabinet was appointed and sworn in. 63-year-old Isa Mustafa, head of the Democratic League (LDK), will be the new prime minister. The outgoing prime minister and representative of the Democratic Party (PDK) Hashim Thaci will be foreign minister and deputy head of government. The grand coalition of LDK and PDK holds 87 of 120 seats in parliament, including several representatives of minorities. For the first time, also the Serb minority from the northern part of Kosovo, who until now had not been represented in the government, will run several ministries.

The formation of the new government is met with both relief and criticism. Now the way is open for drawing up a budget for 2015 and for continuing negotiations with Serbia. However, Isa Mustafa, the new leader, is deemed rather colourless. Hashim Thaci will continue to play the lead role, so no major changes are expected. Kosovo is the poorest of all Balkan countries, with a third of the population being unemployed and about 40 percent living below the poverty line.

China

Hong Kong: road blockades lifted

On 11.12.14, workers removed the protesters' blockades in Admiralty under the protection of security forces. While the expected riots did not materialize, over 200 protesters preventing road clearance with a sit-down blockade were arrested. The day before, thousands had taken to the streets demanding more democracy. A last small protest camp at Causeway Bay was cleared on 15.12.14; several individuals were arrested. Since 28.09.14, the occupy movement and student groups had blocked key intersections in their demand for democratic elections for the city's next leader in 2017; however, they were not able to enforce their claim. Meanwhile, representatives of the demonstrators have announced more protests, though in a different form.

Xinjiang: verdicts

It was reported last week that the Urumqi intermediate people's court convicted seven students of prominent Uighur scholar and civil rights activist Ilham Tohti and imposed prison terms of three to eight years. Already on 23.09.14, Ilham Tohti himself had been sentenced to life imprisonment for separatism and other charges (see BN of 29.09.14).

On 08.12.14, the Urumqi intermediate people's court convicted several alleged Uighurs for having participated in two attacks committed on 30.04.14 and on 22.05.14 in Urumqi, which had left dozens killed or injured (see BN of 05.05.14 and of 26.05.14). Eight of the accused received death penalties, five suspended death penalties and four were given sentences of between five years and life imprisonment.

Indonesia

Journalists faces five years in prison for satirical cartoon on IS

According to police, the editor-in-chief of Indonesian newspaper *Jakarta Post* has been summoned for questioning by the police for publishing a cartoon that depicted radical Islamists. If found guilty, he could be sentenced to up to five years in prison.

Philippines

Police is said to obtain confessions made under torture

According to a report published by Amnesty International on 4 December 2014, police continues its practice of torturing supposed criminals to obtain confessions from them. Although the Philippines has ratified two major international treaties against torture, police still uses torture methods including electric shocks, feigned executions, waterboarding, beatings and rape that go unpunished.

In 2009, the government had adopted an anti-torture law. However, no official has been sentenced since under this law, Amnesty International states.

Hostage returns home

A Swiss ornithologist who had been hold hostage by Islamist extremist group Abu Sayyaf for three years and was able to escape, arrived at Zurich airport on 12.12.14. The Islamist group says that it is fighting for an Islamic state in the south of the predominantly catholic Philippines.