



# Briefing Notes

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

27 February 2023

## Afghanistan

### Security situation

On 23.02.23, a Taliban district governor and four other Taliban insurgents were killed in a bomb attack carried out in Taloqan city in Takhar province. Furthermore, one civilian was killed and 10 others were injured. On the same day, a Taliban commander was also killed in a bomb attack carried out in the city of Kabul. No group has claimed responsibility for the attacks. On 26.02.23, the Taliban raided houses in the provincial capital of Zaranj (Nimruz). Another clash erupted between the Taliban and Pakistani border guards at the Torkham border crossing. Both sides closed the crossing temporarily.

### Government leadership

On 22.02.23, the Pakistani Defence Minister and the head of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) travelled to Kabul for talks, prompted by the increase in the number of attacks carried out by the Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan) (TTP) on the Pakistani government. It is hoped that the Afghan Taliban will bring the TTP back to the negotiating table. The TTP operates from Afghanistan with Taliban support (cf. BN of 20.02.23). According to reports issued on 20.02.23, the Taliban government is planning to convert some former foreign military bases into "economic zones" for commercial activities. According to a source quoted on 26.02.23, the Taliban have officially taken over the Afghan embassy in Tehran with the agreement of the Iranian government. The same is likely to happen in Istanbul, Türkiye, soon.

### Persecution events

According to a media report issued on 25.02.23, the local Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in Balkh province has asked its staff to patrol more frequently. They have been told to remind women of the obligation to wear the veil, to encourage all citizens to pray and to put a stop to music at weddings.

There has been a series of unexplained killings of civilians in Bamiyan province, according to a report issued by the daily Etilaat-Roz on 26.02.23. The Taliban have made no comment on this. According to media reports, the Taliban have detained a total of around 36 former soldiers and civil servants in Helmand province. According to Hasht-e Subh, approximately 50 civilians, including minors and senior citizens, were arrested by the Taliban in Panjshir province on 22.02.23. Nothing is known about the background to the arrests or the detainees' whereabouts. The previous day, a man whose relatives were members of the National Resistance Front (NRF) and died fighting the Taliban was arrested in Kabul. On 21.02.23 and 23.02.23, the Taliban shot dead two men, accusing them of theft, and displayed their bodies in central squares in Herat city. In Sar-e Pul province, 14 men and nine women were publicly flogged. Also on 21.02.23, in Parwan province, two relatives of a former policeman, who is himself living in hiding, were arrested by the Taliban. On the same day, a former policeman was arrested in Kabul. On 21.02.23, the Taliban closed several educational institutions in Bamyan province that were secretly teaching girls.

## Angola

### **Activist convicted and released**

The activist Luther "King" Campos was given a suspended prison sentence of one year and 10 months on 17.02.23 and was subsequently released. Campos, considered to be a political prisoner by civil society organisations, had been detained since 12.01.22 (cf. BN of 30.01.23). According to the report, Campos was found guilty of public instigation but was acquitted of charges related to outrage against the state, its symbols and bodies, rebellion and criminal association. The suspension of the prison sentence due to serious illness obliges Campos not to commit crimes of the same nature for the next five years. Campos blames the government for his very poor health.

Meanwhile, a lawyer for José Mateus Zeca Mutchima, leader of the autonomy movement Movimento do Protectorado Português da Lunda Tchokwe (MPPLT) (Movement of the Portuguese Protectorate), who is also considered to be a political prisoner, announced to the media on 20.02.23 that he expects Zeca Mutchima to be released within a few days on the basis of the amnesty law passed on 15.12.22 (cf. BN of 19.12.22) and a court decision. In February 2022, Zeca Mutchima and his co-defendants were sentenced to four and a half years in prison for criminal association and incitement to hatred. According to a media report issued on 26.02.23, also citing the lawyer, Zeca Mutchima's release has been held up so far by the excessive bureaucracy of the prison administration.

## Bangladesh

### **Government bans leading opposition party's newspaper**

The leading opposition publication Dainik Dinkal has been banned since 20.02.23. A court in the capital Dhaka upheld the government-ordered closure of the newspaper. In the court order, the Bengali-language paper is accused of violating printing and publication laws. Dainik Dinkal had long been an important mouthpiece for the opposition centre-right Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), reporting on issues often ignored by the more pro-government mainstream media. According to the BNP, these included unlawful arrests of its members and other methods of intimidation. In response to the court's decision, journalists in Dhaka protested against the government.

### **RSF: increasing restrictions on freedom of the press**

In the 2022 Press Freedom Ranking published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Bangladesh ranks 162nd, thus performing worse than Russia (which ranks 155th) and Afghanistan (which ranks 156th). By imposing media bans and cracking down on media professionals based on the Digital Security Act which entered into force in 2018, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League is setting an example of creeping authoritarian rule in Bangladesh. In January 2023 alone, for instance, the government demanded the closure of 191 websites it accuses of publishing anti-state news.

## Burkina Faso

### **More than 70 soldiers killed in two attacks**

According to various media reports, a serious attack was carried out on the army in the province of Oudalan, which lies in the north of the country near the border with Mali, on 17.02.23. An army unit was reportedly ambushed on a road between the towns of Deou and Oursi. Over 51 soldiers were killed and an unknown number of soldiers were injured. Suspected jihadists are being blamed for the attack. It has been reported that 160 "terrorists" were killed in an airstrike.

On 20.02.23, another attack was carried out on the army. Nineteen soldiers were reportedly killed and others injured in the attack carried out on the military camp in the town of Tin-Akoff (Oudalan province). Several soldiers are still missing.

## Colombia

### **ICG warns of rise in child recruitment by armed groups**

On 24.02.23, the think-tank International Crisis Group (ICG), when publishing a new report (Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace") based on more than 90 interviews conducted with a wide range of civil society and state actors, urged the government not to lose sight of measures taken by armed groups to wield social control over particularly vulnerable groups, such as gender-based violence, movement restrictions and curfews, and to also curb them. In this context, ICG also warned of a rise in child recruitment by armed groups even though there has been a sharp reduction in lethal violence based on temporary ceasefires within the framework of the government's strategy for total peace (so-called "paz total"). Child recruitment is being used increasingly to sow dependence. The pandemic as well as economic reasons are reportedly factors influencing this observed rise in child recruitment. The Colombian Child Protection Agency (ICBF) also shared the view, when asked by Reuters, that there has been an increase in child recruitment. ICBF says there have been more than 1,150 cases of child recruitment since 2016, whereas ICG assumes that this number is an undercount.

## Djibouti

### **Parliamentary elections held despite criticism and boycott**

Only two parties, Ismael Omar Guelleh's ruling party and the opposition Union for Democracy and Justice (UDJ), contested seats in the parliamentary elections held on 24.02.23. The main opposition parties, including Movement for Democratic Renewal and Development (MRD) and Republican Alliance for Democracy (ARD), boycotted the election, claiming it was non-transparent and undemocratic. It is not clear how many of the 230,000 eligible voters actually cast their ballots. According to local media, voter turnout was low. Incumbent President Guelleh was re-elected for a fifth term in the last presidential election in April 2021, garnering 97% of the vote.

## Ecuador

### **Extortion offences up 300% year-on-year in 2022, impunity high**

According to the Attorney General's Office, more than 9,000 extortion offences were reported in 2022, compared to only about one-third of that number the previous year 2021. Only 66 of these more than 13,000 reported extortion offences resulted in a conviction; about 90% of the cases are still under investigation. In January 2023 alone, more than 1,000 cases were reported, and the number of unreported crimes is high due to fear of reprisals. According to an article published in the Spanish newspaper El País, the extortion of protection money (so-called vacunas) by criminal groups affects various population groups and sectors.

## Ethiopia

### **Majority vote for new regional state**

Under the direction of the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), a referendum on the formation of a 12th regional state was held in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) on 06.02.23. More than three million people were registered to vote in the zones of Gamo, Gofa, South Omo, Gedeo, Wolayta and Konso as well as in the woredas (special districts) of Derashe, Amaro, Burji, Ale and Basketo. The new region is to be called the Southern Ethiopia Region. The chairperson of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, Daniel Bekele, announced that the referendum had met legal standards and had been conducted peacefully. On 21.02.23, the NEBE declared that the majority of people had voted for autonomy.

Under the constitution ratified in 1995, Ethiopia initially consisted of nine regional states, which were divided along ethno-linguistic lines. While almost all regional states - such as Afar, Amhara, Oromia and Tigray, among others - are each considered the "homeland" of the ethnic group whose name they bear, even if other ethnic minorities live there, SNNPR is characterised by ethnic diversity, which can invoke autonomy at local level. However, according to critical voices, this "ethnic federalism" is also responsible for violent clashes between the ethnic groups, which

mainly involve access to resources such as water and arable land. Since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018, two new regional states have already been carved out within the SNNPR: Sidama in 2019 and South West in 2021.

## **Ethiopia / Kenya / Somalia**

### **Drought**

In a statement issued on 22.02.23, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development Climate Prediction and Applications Centre (ICPAC) said the current drought in the Horn of Africa could potentially be more severe than the one in 2011 that claimed the lives of at least 250,000 people. Rainfall is expected to be below average in the coming rainy season over the next three months. This could be the sixth consecutive failed rainy season. As a result of the drought, which has lasted for almost three years, tens of thousands of people are reported to have already died. According to UN figures, more than one million people have been displaced in Somalia alone. According to the UN, almost 23 million people in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya are considered to be highly food insecure. Eleven million livestock have reportedly perished already.

## **Guinea**

### **Launch of the drafting of a new constitution; transfer of power promised**

At a symposium to launch the drafting of a new constitution, interim President and junta leader Mamadi Doumbouya reiterated on 21.02.23 that "we will not be part of the post-transition period", as quoted in media reports. According to the ruling authorities, the transition phase is to end on 31.12.24. The drafting of a new constitution by the National Council of the Transition (Conseil national de transition) (CNT) is one of ten points in a timetable agreed between the junta and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in October 2022 (cf. BN of 24.10.22). Another issue is the holding of a referendum on the draft constitution, which should be ready by the end of 2023. On the future constitution, Doumbouya said it should not be tailored to any one person or party, should not be a copy and paste constitution and should be able to stand the test of time.

At a special meeting held on the sidelines of the African Union (AU) summit, ECOWAS had decided on 20.02.23 to maintain sanctions against Guinea (just as it did against Burkina Faso and Mali). As media further reported, the transitional government was cautious in its initial response. The three countries had sought an end to the suspension of their membership in ECOWAS and the AU. Previously, the AU had decided to maintain the suspension of Guinea's membership (like that of Burkina Faso, Mali and Sudan). An AU representative justified this with "zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government".

## **Iran**

### **Two long-serving prisoners executed**

Foreign media, quoting a Kurdish human rights network, have reported that on 22.02.23 two men who had been imprisoned for several years were executed in separate locations. They were a 29-year-old man from Ravansar (Kermanshah province) and a 44-year-old man from Ahvaz (Khuzestan). The former had been arrested by security forces in December 2019 on charges of assassinating a policeman. The man was also a former member of a Kurdish opposition group. The second prisoner had been held at a prison in Ahvaz for more than ten years on charges that included membership of an anti-regime group. No more specific charges were reported.

### **Security forces descend on Sunni mosque in Zahedan**

According to media reports, security forces surrounded the Makki Grand Mosque in Zahedan (Sistan and Baluchistan) on 24.02.23 and attempted to enter the mosque. The regime reportedly stationed snipers around Zahedan and disrupted local internet services as well. Isolated arrests have been carried out in the vicinity of the mosque. The weekly Friday prayers held at the mosque regularly become a gathering place for worshippers commemorating victims of the brutal crackdown law enforcers unleashed on protestors on 30.09.22. The regime

has significantly stepped up its security presence in Zahedan since January 2023 to deter Abdol Hamid from criticising the regime (cf. BN of 23.02.23).

### **Disciplinary measures at universities**

According to media reports, measures to monitor student activities and discipline university staff have been intensified. They say that new disciplinary regulations for universities include, inter alia, rules on the formation of student groups on social media and publications there. Groups with more than 100 members will generally be required to register. The regulations also aim to enforce compliance with the Muslim dress code for women (mandatory hijab) at universities. In case of violations, punishments will range from temporary suspensions to a nationwide exclusion from university and to achievements and academic degrees being revoked. During the nationwide protests that have been taking place since the end of September 2022, universities have often been the scene of protest rallies. This has led to an increase in dismissals, suspensions, but also arrests of students and teaching staff participating in the rallies.

## **Iraq**

### **Environmental activist released following abduction**

The environmental activist Jassem al-Assadi who was abducted on 01.02.23 was released on 16.02.23 following intervention by the Iraqi government. Al-Assadi was travelling by car towards Baghdad when he was stopped and abducted by armed men. Al-Assadi claims he was tortured during his abduction. His family and Human Rights Watch (HRW) suspect that militias are behind his abduction.

Al-Assadi is one of the leading experts on Iraqi water resources and the southern Iraqi marshlands that are under threat. In recent years, prominent environmental activists have also been deliberately harassed by the government, for instance, with arbitrary arrests or charges of insult after criticising the government's policy regarding the drastically reduced flow in the rivers.

### **ISIS in Anbar: at least 21 killed**

On 26.02.23, at least four people from the local tribal militia were killed in an attack carried out by ISIS on a checkpoint in Anbar. Seventeen ISIS supporters were killed in an operation carried out by special forces of the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) also in Anbar on the same day.

## **Kenya**

### **Supreme Court rules in favour of the LGBTIQ community**

According to local press reports, the Supreme Court of Kenya ruled on 24.02.23 that the decision by the Kenyan NGO Licensing Authority to exclude LGBTIQ people from forming a recognised civil organisation is discriminatory. The court held that despite the illegality of homosexuality in Kenya, LGBTIQ persons still have the right to assemble. The majority of the Supreme Court members were in favour of the decision. The ruling now gives LGBTIQ people the opportunity to apply for formal recognition by the Non-Governmental Organisations Coordination Board.

## **Lebanon**

### **Economic situation**

As the banking strike is crippling large parts of the economy, the Banking Association has decided to open banks in Lebanon for the week between 27.02.23 and 03.03.23 so that salaries and other payments can be withdrawn and used, standing orders can be booked and other vital services can be provided. After a series of bank heists mostly depositors who wanted to withdraw their savings, the banks had closed repeatedly, also to ensure the safety of their staff.

## **LGBTIQ**

On 21.02.23, Human Rights Watch published a report online on the situation of LGBTIQ people, focusing on Lebanon, among other countries. It describes various tactics and forms of abuse and threats facing LGBTIQ people. For example, private individuals set up fake profiles to impersonate LGBTIQ people on dating apps in order to find or "convict" people, and there is also evidence of death threats being made and of their addresses being revealed.

## **Mali**

### **UN blue helmet soldier killed**

On 21.02.23, three UN blue helmet soldiers from Senegal were killed and five were seriously wounded in central Mali when their vehicle ran over an explosive device. The convoy was heading to its military base in Sévaré (Mopti region) when they were attacked near the village of Songobia. So far, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

## **Myanmar**

### **Junta adopts law allowing civilians who are loyal to the state to own firearms**

On 31.01.23, the Ministry of the Interior ordered the revival of a 1977 law that allows civilians who are "loyal to the state" to possess firearms. Members of this group can purchase 9 mm pistols and revolvers, shotguns, hunting rifles and air rifles without a permit, and handguns larger than 9 mm, assault rifles and submachine guns with a permit.

### **Security situation**

Between 09.02.23 and 13.02.23, junta troops burned down around 600 houses in six villages in Katha (Sagaing Region) and Mabein (Shan State), killing six people. On 12.02.23, in Myinmu (Sagaing), three people, including one child, were seriously injured by Myanmar Army artillery fire. In Shwebo (Sagaing), on the same day, junta soldiers and pro-military Pyu Saw Htee militia burned down at least 500 houses and killed four civilians in raids. An explosion triggered by unknown persons at a railway station in Nyaunglebin (Bago region) killed three people and injured nine others on 13.02.23. Between 10.02.23 and 16.02.23, the junta flew daily airstrikes on Thantlang town, located in Chin state, according to local media reports. Thantlang is almost entirely under the control of the Chin National Army/Front (CNA/F) and Chinland Defence Force (CDF). After fighting resistance forces in Kawlin (Sagaing) on 17.02.23, junta forces abducted 17 men who remain missing. Three civilians from a nearby IDP camp, including a child, were injured in Junta airstrikes on a forest area in Kawkareik (Kayin State) on 19.02.23 and 20.02.23. Earlier, on 19.02.23, armed clashes had erupted between Junta troops and the Karenni Army (KA) in Mese (Kayah State).

## **Nigeria**

### **General elections: vote counting in progress**

Presidential and parliamentary elections took place on 25.02.23 under considerable security precautions. With around 93.5 million registered voters, it was the largest ballot ever held in Africa. Border crossings remained closed on election day. According to consistent media reports, the major outbreaks of violence feared by observers (cf. BN of 20.02.23) did not occur, by and large. However, some polling stations had to be reopened on 26.02.23 due to various delays. It will take several days to count the votes. The most promising presidential candidates are the former governor of the south-eastern Anambra State, Peter Obi (cf. BN of 23.01.23), Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) (cf. BN of 30.05.22) and Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) party (cf. BN of 20.06.22). For the first time, no officer or former military ruler is running. To win the presidential election, a candidate must win the most votes nationwide and at least a quarter of the votes in two-thirds of the states. If no candidate succeeds, there will be a run-off election. Nigeria's next president will face a number of major challenges, including an economic crisis with high inflation and various security crises in several parts of the country (cf. BN of 06.12.22 and 12.12.22). According to experts, the elections will set the course for democracy and stability in the region.

### **South East: attacks against politicians and security forces**

It has been reported in the media that on 22.02.23, unknown gunmen shot dead a senatorial Labour Party (LP) candidate and two aides in Enugu State. An attack on a People's Democratic Party (PDP) convoy left one driver dead. According to the authorities, violent separatists are responsible for these acts. According to others, political opponents could be behind the attack on the LP politician. In the South East, attacks on security forces increased in the days running up to the General Elections held on 25.02.23. Unidentified assailants killed seven police officers within a few days.

## **Pakistan**

### **Attacks in Belochistan**

On 20.02.23, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) claimed responsibility for an armed raid on a paramilitary checkpoint in Mastung district, southwest of Quetta, in which two Balochistan Levies Force (BLF) personnel were killed and their weapons were taken away.

On 26.02.23, at least four persons were killed and at least a dozen were injured when a bomb was detonated by remote control at a market in Barkhan district. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack. In a second incident, two police officers were killed and at least two other security personnel were seriously injured when a car bomb exploded in Khuzdar district.

### **Media regulatory authorities ban live coverage of terrorist attacks**

Last week, the Pakistani authorities banned television stations from reporting live on terrorist attacks. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) explained that this kind of reporting violates journalistic ethics.

### **Bilateral government talks in Kabul; border opened**

On 23.02.23, the Afghan Taliban opened the Torkham border crossing after a four-day closure. Prior to this, talks had taken place between the Taliban and a Pakistani delegation led by Defence Minister Khawaja Asif in Kabul. The security situation was the main topic of the talks. Both sides had agreed to jointly counter the terrorist threat.

## **Palestinian Autonomous Territories / Israel**

### **East Jerusalem: Israeli policeman killed**

On 13.02.23, an Israeli policeman was shot dead in the line of duty in East Jerusalem. A Palestinian pulled out a knife and stabbed the policeman as he was conducting a security check. A security guard then opened fire, but accidentally hit the policeman, who later succumbed to his injuries. The Palestinian assailant was arrested.

### **West Bank: many people killed in clashes, attacks by settlers**

Between 13.02.23 and 22.02.23, at least 12 Palestinians were killed in raids carried out by Israeli forces. Among them were reportedly at least two minors. Ten of those killed died on 22.02.23 in a daytime Israeli military operation carried out in a busy part of the city of Nablus, where there was an exchange of fire with armed Palestinians. Ten Palestinians, aged between 16 and 72, were reportedly killed and more than 100 people were wounded. The Israeli army announced that it would launch investigations into several cases.

On 13.01.23, Issa Amro, a prominent Palestinian activist, was physically assaulted by an Israeli soldier during an interview in Hebron. The soldier subsequently spent ten days in a military prison and is to be barred from active combat service in the future. The military stated that he had not adhered to the given guidelines of conduct. Human rights organisations have repeatedly criticised the fact that military personnel rarely have to face consequences for misdemeanours.

On 25.02.23, two Palestinians were seriously injured by Israeli settlers' gunfire at a location in the north of the West Bank. According to Palestinian authorities, a group of settlers entered the village where one opened fire on the residents.

On 26.02.23, a Palestinian shot and killed two Israelis on a street in the south of Nablus. Settler organisations then organised several demonstrations near the crime scene, which turned into violent riots against Palestinian people and their property. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, one Palestinian was killed by gunfire and several

dozen were reportedly injured. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appealed to Israelis in the West Bank not to take the law into their own hands, but to let the security forces do their job and track down the Palestinian assassin. The incidents overshadowed a meeting of Israeli and Palestinian representatives in Aqaba, Jordan, held on the same day, aimed at finding a way out of the current spiral of violence.

#### **Israel: Law on the Revocation of the Nationality of Arab Offenders**

On 15.02.23, the Israeli parliament approved a law to strip Arabs convicted of nationalistic attacks of their Israeli citizenship or residency and deport them if they have accepted stipends from the Palestinian Authority. The internationally recognised Palestinian Authority has long provided stipends, inter alia, to the families of Palestinians killed or imprisoned in connection with the fight against Israel. The Palestinian Authority considers these payments to be a form of welfare to needy families, but Israel says they reward violence and serve as an incentive for others to carry out attacks against Jews.

According to the new bill, the authorities have the right to deport these persons to the Gaza Strip or the West Bank. Arab politicians in the Knesset have criticised the law, calling it racist.

## **Peru**

#### **Payments to relatives of those killed and seriously injured during socio-political protests**

According to a decree published in the official gazette El Peruano, the Peruvian government will make a single payment between the equivalent of USD 3,000 to the relatives of the people who lost their lives and USD 6,500 to those who suffered serious injuries during the social protests that took place between 08.12.22 and 10.02.23. The Multisectoral Commission, a body made up of government representatives and human rights organisations, will be in charge of identifying the criteria that qualify to determine that a person was seriously injured. The decree explicitly emphasises that such payments do not have a reparatory nature. As early as 16.02.23, a report published by Amnesty International (ai) had once again criticised the disproportionate violence used by state security forces against demonstrators and in particular the comparatively higher concentration of repression and deaths in strongly indigenous-dominated regions of the country. Ai also emphasised that the affected indigenous-dominated regions, such as Apurímac, Ayacucho and Puno, have long been disadvantaged, for instance in the areas of healthcare and education.

## **Republic of the Congo**

#### **CAD: human rights situation deteriorates**

According to a media report referring to the 2023 annual report of the Centre d'action pour le développement (CAD) (Centre of Action for Development), the human rights situation has deteriorated compared to the situation in 2021 (cf. BN of 28.02.22). In the reporting year 2022, CAD documented 572 human rights violations, including excessive use of force and lethal force, arbitrary arrests, torture, forced evictions, and increased police assaults on young people in the context of the fight against crime. CAD Executive Director Trésor Nzila Hitze called for effective reform of the security apparatus and a thorough investigation into the documented human rights violations.

## **Republic of Moldova**

#### **Anti-government protests, heightening of political tension**

On 19.02.23, according to media reports, several thousand people took part in a demonstration in the capital Chişinău in the context of the protests that have been ongoing since autumn 2022 (cf. BN of 24.10.22 and 21.11.22), which are directed above all against the pro-Western government and the socio-economic situation aggravated by the war in Ukraine. After the government resigned on 10.02.23, the Moldovan parliament confirmed the cabinet of the new Prime Minister Dorin Recean on 16.02.23 (cf. BN of 13.02.23). Meanwhile, according to media reports, Moldova's political tensions with the Russian Federation are intensifying. The Moldovan government accuses the Russian side of continuously trying to destabilise the Republic of Moldova in the context of the protests and the

unresolved Transnistrian conflict. The Moldovan Ministry of Defence stated on 24.02.23 that there was no direct threat to the security of the Republic of Moldova at the present time.

## **Russian Federation**

### **Initial conviction for planned sabotage**

On 31.01.23, two defendants were sentenced by Belgorod Regional Court to three and a half years imprisonment in a strict regime colony (the second highest level in the penal colony system). They were found guilty of plotting to sabotage a section of railway line near the village of Tomarovka in Yakovlevsky district, Belgorod region. According to the Russian domestic intelligence service (FSB), the planned derailment was intended to cause damage to the tracks and the military equipment transported by rail as well as casualties among servicemen.

Their convictions were the first based on the "Sabotage" Article 231 of the Russian Criminal Code since Russian forces invaded Ukraine on 24.02.22.

### **Expulsion of foreign transgender women based on LGBTIQ Act**

According to a report published by the independent Russian media portal Mediazona on 23.02.23, two Moscow city courts have sentenced at least three transgender women to fines and expulsion from the Russian Federation under Article 6.21 pt. 7 of the Russian Code of Administrative Offences, applying the amendment to the law banning the promotion of non-traditional sexual relations and preferences (cf. BN of 06.12.22), which entered into force on 05.12.22.

A fourth woman was given a five-day administrative detention and was also deported from Russia. The persons concerned, non-Russian nationals, were trans women who had engaged in sex work and advertised their services on the Internet.

## **Senegal**

### **Prevalence of female genital mutilation**

According to the NGO ActionAid, female genital mutilation (FGM), which is prohibited under criminal law, is still widespread. It reports that FGM of girls occurs mainly in rural areas and in secret. The highest prevalence rate of FGM is reportedly in some regions of southern Senegal, where almost all women are circumcised. The overall prevalence of FGM in Senegal has stagnated for almost a decade at an almost constant level (around 25%), according to Zakaria Sambakhé, Country Director at ActionAid Senegal. He said women are more likely to be circumcised in rural areas (34%) than in urban areas (22%).

### **More PASTEF members arrested; more demonstrations banned**

According to media reports, further investigations and prosecutions of members of the opposition party Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité (African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity) (PASTEF) have come to light. Abdoulaye Thomas Faye, a PASTEF leader in the Kaffrine region, was reportedly arrested on 18.02.23 and transferred to a prison on a judicial pre-trial detention/committal order ("mandat de depot"). Among other things, Faye is reportedly accused of inciting violence and public riots because of a post on social media, the content of which is not known but which is allegedly connected to the state's action against the party leader Ousmane Sonko (cf. BN of 20.02.23). Dembo Sakho, a PASTEF sympathiser, was reportedly also arrested for a social media post. Sakho reportedly criticised the judicial authorities using harsh language. Biram Soulèye Diop, a member of PASTEF's leadership and current faction leader of the Yewwi Askan Wi (YAW) opposition coalition led by Ousmane Sonko, was recently sharply critical of the alleged arrest of a total of 160 PASTEF activists.

It has also been reported in the media that demonstrations planned and announced by PASTEF (in Kébémér) and YAW (in Dakar) for calendar week 07 were banned by the authorities, who cited as reasons the danger of a disruption to public security and the lack of emergency personnel, among other things.

## **Somalia**

### **Fighting in Somaliland**

Despite the ceasefire agreed on 10.02.23 between Somaliland security forces and clan militias allied with the Somali government (cf. BN of 13.02.23), clashes continue in the embattled town of Las Anod (Sool region). On 23.02.23, several artillery and mortar shell attacks were reportedly carried out in Las Anod. The main hospital in Las Anod is said to have also been shelled. The electricity supply, the oxygen system, the blood bank and parts of the hospital are reported to have been destroyed. According to several sources, the Somaliland military withdrew from Tukaraq (Sool region), a strategic base, on 25./26.02.23. Health workers say at least 112 people, including civilians, have been killed and 500 wounded so far in the clashes, which have been ongoing since 06.02.23. According to UN reports, more than 185,000 people, 89% of them women and children, have been displaced by the violence. More than 60,000 of them are reported to have fled to the Ethiopian regional state of Somali.

### **Attack in Mogadishu**

On 21.02.23, at least 10 people, including civilians, were killed and seven others injured in an attack in the Abdiqazib district of Mogadishu. Armed al-Shabaab members reportedly attacked and for seven hours laid siege to a care home for members of the armed forces, which accommodates government employees, a high-ranking military commander and injured soldiers, among others.

### **US airstrike**

Seven al-Shabaab fighters were reportedly killed in a US airstrike in Galmudug State on 21.02.23, the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) said in a statement, adding that it had been a "collective self-defence strike". It was the sixth US airstrike to be carried out since the beginning of the year.

## **South Sudan**

### **Amendment of the National Security Service Act**

On 21.02.23, President Salva Kiir and his First Vice-President Dr. Riek Machar announced at a press conference that the long dispute over the security services' powers to make arrests without an existing warrant had been resolved. The National Security Service Act, which has been in place since 2014, previously allowed the country's security services to arrest suspects, search their property and residence and monitor them almost without restriction and without an existing warrant. The fact that a warrant was not required for arrest and detention resulted in long-standing discussions between the president and his First Vice-President. Amendment of the Act to produce the current draft version was already part of the 2018 peace agreement but has since been the subject of controversy and debate and has therefore not been implemented. The relevant passage has now been deleted.

## **Syria**

### **Germany: war criminal from Syria sentenced**

The Berlin Court of Appeal sentenced a 55-year-old stateless Palestinian from Syria to life imprisonment on 23.02.23. Moafak D. was found guilty of a war crime, four counts of murder and two counts of attempted murder. The convicted man allegedly fired an anti-tank grenade into a crowd in the Palestinian refugee neighbourhood of Yarmouk (Damascus) on 23.03.14 and later, in 2018, arrived in Germany as part of the family reunification process. In 2021, he was arrested by German authorities in Berlin.

Pro-government militias, of which Moafak D. was also a member, are alleged to have regularly harassed and mistreated the residents of Yarmouk in the past.

### **Targeted killings by foreign drone strikes**

The Turkish state news agency Anadolu reported on 24.02.23 that Turkish intelligence had neutralised Halil Menci, the alleged mastermind behind the Istanbul bombing on 13.11.22, in northern Syria two days earlier. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said that a civilian had been killed and a local policeman wounded in a Turkish airstrike on a road connecting Qamishli (Hasaka) to the nearby village of Qahtaniya. The man killed is

reported to have regularly smuggled people into Türkiye; however, he had denied smuggling the Syrian attacker across the border.

SOHR also reported a US drone strike in the locality of Qah (Idlib/Aleppo) on 24.02.23, in which two members of the radical Islamic Huras al-Din group were reportedly killed. The US military has not yet commented on the incident.

### **Earthquake region**

On 20.02.23, the earthquake region in Türkiye and north-western Syria (cf. BN of 06.02.23, 13.02.23 and 20.02.23) was hit by a particularly severe aftershock. According to Syrian state media, it resulted in the deaths of a woman and a girl in the governorates of Hama and Tartus. About 190 people were reported injured in the rebel areas. The Turkish Minister of National Defence announced on 21.02.23 that a total of around 20,000 Syrians had returned to Syria from Türkiye in the aftermath of the earthquakes of 06.02.23.

## **Togo**

### **USA warns against travel to the north**

According to media reports, on 21.02.23, the US State Department issued a travel warning for northern areas near the borders with Burkina Faso and Benin. Specifically named are the towns of Sokodé, Bafilo and Mango near the border with neighbouring Benin. A current directive for US foreign mission personnel also prohibits travel north of the city of Dapaong as well as to the prefectures of Kpendjal and Kpendjal-Ouest, located in the far north of Togo. The background to these measures are relatively frequent acts of violence by militant and criminal groups in the region in recent times. For example, unknown assailants killed around 30 civilians in the prefecture of Kpendjal on 10.02.23 (cf. BN of 20.02.23).

## **Tunisia**

### **Negative statement about migrants**

In a speech delivered on 21.02.22, President Kais Saied called for "urgent measures" to be taken against the illegal immigration of people from sub-Saharan Africa. He spoke of "hordes of illegal immigrants" who are responsible for violence, crime and unacceptable acts. Demonstrators, human rights organisations and the African Union criticised Saied for his remarks.

### **Further action against opposition forces**

According to media reports on 22.02.23, further opposition members have been arrested and judges dismissed in June 2022 (cf. BN of 13.06.22) have not been reinstated. In addition, it has reportedly still not been made public what the arrested persons are specifically accused of. On 21.02.23, it was reported that the leader of the Islamic-conservative party Ennahdha had been summoned for further questioning.

Furthermore, on 20.02.23, the General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), Esther Lynch, was expelled from the country for participating in a protest against the government (cf. BN of 20.02.23). In its subsequent statement, the ETUC said such "authoritarian tactics" had no place in a democratic country.

### **HRW report on LGBTIQ**

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on 21.02.23 that, because of their online social media activities, LGBTIQ people have been tracked by security forces, blackmailed online, harassed, exposed and prosecuted based on unlawfully obtained digital photos, chats and similar information.

## **Türkiye**

### **Deaths in further earthquakes in Hatay**

On 21.02.23, at least six people were killed and another 294 injured in new earthquakes in the southern Turkish province of Hatay. The two quakes, measuring 6.4 and 5.8 in magnitude respectively, occurred two weeks after the

severe earthquakes of 06.02.23 in the same region. The Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (AFAD) reported that the first quake of magnitude 6.4 shook Defne district in the province at 8:04 pm local time before the second quake of magnitude 5.8 struck three minutes later, with the epicentre in Samandag district. According to press reports, the tremors were felt in many neighbouring provinces as well as in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Cyprus and Egypt. In Syria, 26 people were reported injured.

The mayor of Hatay province, Lutfu Savas, said that the earthquakes had caused more buildings to collapse and that people had been buried under the rubble. According to media reports, rescue workers are working in the city of Antakya to recover people buried under the rubble.

### **Humanitarian situation following the earthquakes**

On 21.02.23, a spokesperson for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) said that an estimated 1.5 million people in Türkiye had been left homeless by the recent earthquakes and that approximately 500,000 housing units needed to be rebuilt in the country. The Turkish government had reportedly inspected around 70% of the buildings affected by the quakes. Of these, 412,000 housing units in 118,000 buildings had collapsed or would have to be completely demolished. The government had completed the search and rescue phase for the first quakes on 19.02.23, and the last survivor had been rescued almost 300 hours after the quake.

At a press conference held on 21.02.23, WHO senior emergency officer Catherine Smallwood said communicable disease control was crucial as many of the people left homeless were living in confined spaces, some with inadequate access to sanitation and clean water. She said there was an increased risk of respiratory diseases, cholera, hepatitis A and measles.

At least 44,374 people were killed in the powerful earthquakes that shook south-eastern Türkiye on 06.02.23, the Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (AFAD) announced on 26.02.23. The head of AFAD also said that search and rescue work had been completed in almost 21,000 buildings.

## **Ukraine**

### **Development of the war**

One year after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the war continues unabated. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that within the space of a year, around 5,000 missile attacks and around 4,500 airstrikes with aircraft, drones and helicopters had been carried out by the Russian armed forces. The Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office announced on 26.02.23 that since 24.02.22, more than 71,500 war crimes committed by the Russian military had been registered. In the early morning of 27.02.23, an air raid alert was declared throughout the country after Russian missile and drone attacks and explosions had been reported in several areas the night before. According to the authorities, damage to civilian infrastructure was reported in the cities of Zaporizhzhia, Nikopol and Khmelnytskyi, as well as in Sumy Oblast, as a result of the attacks. Several civilians were reported injured in Khmelnytskyi and in Donetsk Oblast. The Ukrainian military announced on the morning of 27.02.23 that 81 attacks had been repelled along the frontline in the past 24 hours, particularly near Bakhmut, Avdiivka and Kupiansk.

## **Venezuela**

### **Discussion on disinformation campaigns using artificial intelligence in various media**

In calendar week 08, various media reported on disinformation campaigns, especially regarding the economic situation in Venezuela, using artificial intelligence. The Spanish newspaper El País, for example, reported on the use of various avatars based on the software Synthesia as alleged television presenters. In several videos of the presumably fictitious news agency House of News live streamed on a YouTube account, which has only existed since 26.01.23, these alleged media professionals reported on a supposed economic recovery in Venezuela, citing unsubstantiated figures and without sources. Several media outlets and NGOs accuse the Venezuelan government of being the originator of corresponding disinformation campaigns and fake news and of using them to spread a pro-government narrative. The videos in question went viral on social media, including Tik Tok, and were also broadcast on the state television station Venezolana de Televisión.

**OVP press release: detention conditions in Ciudad Bolivar prison; payments to so-called pranes**

According to a press release issued by the NGO Venezuelan Prison Observatory (OVP), more than 400 prisoners held at the prison Internado Judicial de Ciudad Bolívar, also known as Vista Hermosa, are victims of reprisals because they are unable to pay required weekly levies to prisoners who operate internally as prison bosses (so-called pranes). Such payments reportedly amount to about USD 20 per week. Non-payment reportedly results in them being deprived of sleeping places, visits or food brought by relatives.

**Yemen****Hodeidah: first container ship carrying general cargo docks since 2016**

For the first time since 2016, a container ship carrying general commercial goods docked at Hodeidah, which is under Houthi control, on 25.02.2013. All ships heading for areas controlled by the Houthis need permission from the United Nations Verification & Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM). So far, permits have only been issued for certain goods, such as food, cooking oil and fuel. UN-mediated talks are currently underway between the Yemeni government and the Houthis to renew the ceasefire that expired in October 2022.

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