



Human-rights activists displays yesterday a poster of prominent Indonesian human right activist Munir, who was murdered in a Garuda flight, during a demonstration in front of the presidential palace in Jakarta.

Flash floods in Angola claim 71 lives

AFP, Luanda

Days of flash flooding in Angola have claimed 71 lives, officials said Thursday, as authorities in the seaside capital Luanda released 10 million dollars to shelter 1,300 homeless families.

Sixty five of the deaths were in Luanda, whose centre had been cut off after three key downtown bridges were damaged.

Residents of the sprawling but rundown city of 4.5 million are struggling to cope with the rising waters. The city has been lashed by torrential rains since Monday.

Despite Angola's oil riches, Luanda has a skeletal infrastructure which still bears the scars of a brutal 27-year civil war that ravaged the former Portuguese colony.

Telephone lines have been badly hit and vast tracts of low-lying and sordid slums are under water.

"According to the last count, there have been 71 deaths," fire service spokesman Faustino Sebastiao told AFP, saying 65 of these were in Luanda and six in the southern province of Benguela.

The Angolan government meanwhile approved emergency measures to shelter, re-home and provide "other forms of assistance to citizens between now and June," a communique said.

This followed warnings by the national weather office that the torrential rains were set to continue until June, traditionally the end of the monsoon in the southern African country.

Kerry won't relaunch bid for White House

AFP, Washington

US Senator John Kerry, the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate who narrowly lost to Republican President George W. Bush, announced Wednesday he will not launch a new bid for the White House.

Kerry alluded to his failed presidential bid, which hinged largely on his strong opposition to the US war in Iraq, in making his announcement.

"We came close -- certainly close enough to be tempted to try again," the Massachusetts senator said on the floor of the US Senate.

"There are powerful reasons to want to continue that fight now. But I have concluded that this is not the time for me to mount a presidential campaign," Kerry said.

Donors pledge billions in aid to Lebanon

AFP, Paris

Saudi Arabia, the United States, France and other donors pledged more than six billion dollars in aid to Lebanon yesterday to bolster the Western-backed government in Beirut and help the country recover from war.

The pledges poured in during a one-day international donors' conference to raise funds for Lebanon following the devastation of the July-August war between Hezbollah and Israel.

"We are on the verge of a deep recession as a result of the Israeli aggression," Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora told the gathering at a Paris convention centre.

"We can't overcome all our problems alone. We need the support of the international community," said Siniora, who has been facing calls from the Syrian-backed opposition to step down.

French President Jacques Chirac opened the meeting with an appeal to help Lebanon where "terrible confrontations have brought death and destruction."

"A very substantial and immediate financial support from the international community is absolutely indispensable," Chirac said.

Saudi Arabia pledged 1.1 billion

dollars (846 million euros) in aid to Lebanon, reaching out to its fellow Sunnis in power in Beirut, and the United States put 770 million dollars to the massive aid effort.

France announced a 500-million-euro (650-million-dollar) loan and the European Commission pledged 400 million euros (519 million dollars) in aid.

Multilateral donors weighed in with large pledges, the World Bank giving one billion dollars in aid, the European Investment Bank 960 million euros (1.2 billion dollars), the Islamic Development Fund offering 250 million dollars and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development 700 million dollars.

Britain offered 48 million dollars (37 million euros) to a UN agency to assist Palestinian refugees, many of whom are in Lebanon.

The meeting is being held two days after protests led by the Syrian-backed Hezbollah opposition erupted into violence, leaving three people dead and fuelling fears Lebanon could slide back into the civil strife that wracked the country in decades past.

Lebanese officials have said they need several billion dollars to rebuild villages and infrastructure devastated in the month-long war between Israel and Hezbollah.

Democrats seek Republican support on Iraq resolution

AP, Washington

US Senate Democrats won their first major vote against the Iraq war. Now they need to get some Republicans on board.

A resolution swiping at President Bush's Iraq war plans is headed to the full Senate as early as next week as administration officials and Republican leaders labour to keep the effort from gaining more GOP support.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday passed 12-9 a resolution that dismissed Bush's plans to increase troops in Iraq as "not in the national interest." The vote on the nonbinding measure was largely along party lines, with Sen. Chuck Hagel (news, bio, voting record) of Nebraska being the sole Republican on the committee offering his support.

"The president has made his decision," Vice President Dick Cheney fired back in a CNN interview, a response that made it clear the administration would go ahead anyway. "We need to get the job done."

Republicans have been meeting behind closed doors to shore up support for the Iraq war plan. The Senate is tied 49-49 between the

two parties, with two independents caucusing with the Democrats. That means either party needs help from the other in order to achieve the 60 votes needed to overcome a filibuster and advance legislation.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, has threatened to filibuster the Iraq resolution.

Senate Democratic leaders say they are willing to negotiate the language to pull in more GOP support. Sen John Warner, R-Virginia, who sponsored a rival proposal, has already met with Sen Carl Levin, D-Michigan, and others to discuss his position.

"The goal is to try to salvage this situation and not send the additional troops with a message of disapproval," Sen John McCain, R-Arizona, said.

As the two sides try to find consensus, the State Department's senior Iraq adviser, David Satterfield, planned to testify Thursday on reconstruction efforts before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

While most Republicans refused Wednesday to back the Iraq resolution, some of them suggested their position may change.

Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio,

said he believed the resolution could be viewed as a political attack on Bush and misinterpreted "by our enemies as abandoning Iraq." But, he added, he remained sceptical that additional troops in Baghdad would be successful.

"I have been waiting for the administration to extend an olive branch in an attempt to forge a compromise" that would make clear "we stand united as a nation," he said. "I obviously have been disappointed since that has not happened."

Voinovich and like-minded GOP senators say they might be willing to sign on to a measure backed by Sens Warner, Susan Collins, R-Maine, Norm Coleman, R-Minnesota, and Ben Nelson, D-Nebraska.

Warner, a prominent Republican and former chairman of the Armed Services Committee, cast his measure as a milder alternative. It leaves open the possibility of Bush sending in a much smaller number of troops, particularly to the western Anbar province, and uses language that some say may be seen as less partisan.



An Israeli soldier readies to lob a stun grenade towards Palestinian stone throwers during a military operation in the northern West Bank city of Nablus yesterday.