

Power out as cyclone hits Myanmar's main city

Severe tropical cyclone Nargis lashed Myanmar's main city yesterday, downing power lines and tearing roofs off houses as residents took shelter in their homes and waited for the storm to pass.

State-run MRTV and Yangon City Radio were off the air, as were the normally shaky Internet services and forcing the military authorities to close the airport.

Electricity supplies in Yangon have been cut since late Friday night as the storm bore down from the Bay of Bengal, packing winds of 190-240 kilometres (120-150 miles) per hour, residents said.

Trees were uprooted across the city and streets were deserted with no buses or taxis seen and all shops closed. Many buildings were damaged with their roofs blown off and

billboards knocked down.

"I have never seen such a storm in my life," one resident told AFP.

Nargis made landfall around the mouth of the Ayeyawaddy (Irrawaddy) river, about 220 kilometres southwest of Yangon, before hitting the country's economic hub.

Saturday evening it was forecast to move northeast towards Thailand, which warned that flash floods could hit the north, centre and east of the country and said heavy rains were expected until Monday.

Myanmar's state-run radio was off the air in Yangon and Internet connections were down, with even government sites unavailable. A meteorologist said he was unable to give updated information as he had lost contact with other offices.

The post and telecommunications office however sent a mes-

sage to mobile phone users warning that the rear eye wall of the cyclone was approaching after winds dropped mid-afternoon.

An official at Yangon International Airport said all incoming flights had been diverted to the second city of Mandalay, in the middle of the southeast Asian nation, and all departures from Yangon had been cancelled.

Witnesses said police trucks with loudspeakers were also relaying the warning and telling residents to stay indoors.

Food and water prices doubled at the few roadside stores, which dared to open as supermarkets and other shops remained shut.

A rare military helicopter was spotted surveying the scene of destruction across the city.

There were no immediate reports of casualties but an official

in the capital Naypyidaw told AFP some fishing boats were missing but he had no further information.

A Red Cross official said they had lost contact with Ayeyawaddy district since Friday.

"This morning we haven't received any list of damage or casualties as we lost contact with Ayeyawaddy Division since yesterday evening," an official with the International Federation of the Red Cross told AFP.

"There could be a lot of damage from this sort of situation, especially in satellite towns. There might also be some casualties," he said.

An information ministry official said radio and television were airing storm warnings. But residents of Yangon said they were unable to receive the radio and the power outage meant they could not check the television.



Wrecked ambulances sit at the site of a US air strike in Baghdad's Sadr City yesterday. A hospital in the Iraqi capital's Sadr City, a Shia militia stronghold, was damaged in a US air strike Saturday, wounding at least five people.

Twisters tear up parts of 4 US states

8 killed in Arkansas

Violent storms unleashed tornadoes, high winds and hail in four central states and killed eight people in Arkansas, including a teenager who died when a tree fell into her bedroom as she slept.

The storms late Thursday and early Friday ripped off roofs and toppled train cars near Kansas City, Mo., pelted parts of Oklahoma with hail, and knocked over tents at a popular open-air market in east Texas. Severe thunderstorms were moving into Kentucky and could make for a wet Kentucky Derby on Saturday.

Greg Carbin, a meteorologist for the National Storm Prediction Centre in Norman, Oklahoma, said as many as 25 tornadoes may have cut through stretches of Oklahoma, Arkansas, eastern Kansas and western Missouri.



Supporters listen to Democratic presidential hopeful Sen Barack Obama of Illinois as he speak at the North Carolina Democratic Party Jefferson Jackson dinner at the NC State Fair Grounds on Friday in Raleigh, North Carolina. Voters in Indiana and North Carolina go to the polls on May 6.

Bush seeks \$70b for Iraq, Afghan war

US President George W. Bush on Friday formally asked lawmakers for 70 billion dollars to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan into early next year, when his successor takes over.

The budgetary measure includes a request for 770 million dollars in new aid to cope with food shortages and soaring prices that have left many hungry and fuelled angry protests around the world.

The request came as Bush's previous 108 billion dollar request for the wars has languished in the US Congress, which is controlled by Democrats who oppose the US involvement in Iraq.

The monies include 45.1 billion dollars for combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, 3.7 billion to expand and train Afghan security forces, and two billion to bolster Iraq's security forces.

The request also seeks three billion dollars for classified activities, 2.2 billion to cope with rising

fuel costs, three billion dollars for technology to battle improvised explosive devices like roadside bombs, and 2.6 billion to transport and maintain armoured vehicles resistant to such weapons.

Other items include:

- 400 million dollars to maintain and enhance medical and rehabilitation services associated with traumatic brain injury and psychological health issues for wounded soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.
- 1.3 billion dollars to buy 28 unmanned aerial drones
- 2.5 billion dollars for diplomatic and reconstruction efforts to thwart terrorists.
- 350 million dollars "to expand stability in the Middle East," including 200 million for the West Bank, 100 million for Jordan, and 50 million for Lebanon.
- 193.2 million dollars for Pakistan to fund military and economic assistance, increase diplomatic activities in restive tribal areas and to expand USAID help.

Guam chooses between Hillary and Obama

The tiny Pacific island of Guam weighed in Saturday on the epic political between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton while the Democratic rivals chased voters for the next key primaries in the United States.

A heavy turnout was reported in the contest for four electoral votes up for grabs in the US territory's nominating caucuses, held more than 12,900km from Washington.

Local Democrats said some 4,000 people could take part in the Guam caucuses, up from 1,500 in 2004, highlighting the global interest in the rivalry between the pair, neither of whom made it to Guam.

They gave interviews to local radio stations as they traded new blows in the chase for voters in Indiana and North Carolina states, which hold crucial primaries on Tuesday.

US airstrike hits Baghdad hospital

14 militiamen killed

A US airstrike damaged a hospital in the Iraqi capital's violent Shia stronghold of Sadr City on Saturday, injuring 20 people, as American forces claimed to have killed 14 militiamen.

The US military said it carried out the strike in Sadr City, a bastion of anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, where US troops in separate confrontations killed at least 14 militiamen since Friday.

"I can confirm that we conducted a strike in Sadr City this morning," a US military spokesman told AFP. "The targets were known criminal elements. Battle damage assessment is currently ongoing."

However, witnesses and an AFP reporter at the scene said the main Al-Sadr hospital had been badly damaged and a fleet of ambulances were destroyed.

Just outside the hospital, a shack, which appeared to be the target was reduced to a pile of rubble.

The military said it destroyed a "criminal element command and control centre" at approximately 10 am (0700 GMT).

"Intelligence reports indicate the command and control centre was used by criminal elements to plan and coordinate attacks against Iraqi security and coalition forces and innocent Iraqi citizens."

Hospital staff said at least 20 people wounded in the air raid were taken to the same hospital, which had its glass windows shattered, and medical and electrical equipment damaged.

Doctors and hospital staff were livid they had been hit.

World powers ask Iran to suspend enrichment

Russia on Saturday said that world powers concerned about Iran's nuclear programme were asking Tehran only to suspend uranium enrichment during a period of talks.

Following a meeting on Iran in London of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said no mention had been made of new sanctions and that Tehran must be made to see the advantages of cooperation.

"Our first conditions are the freezing, suspension of uranium enrichment. The approach of the six (powers) is that Iran should suspend enrichment only for the period in which talks continue," Lavrov told

the Interfax and IJAR-TASS news agencies.

"There wasn't anything about new sanctions although our American colleagues take the view that pressure on Iran must be maintained."

"It's necessary to explain to Iran the advantages it would receive from agreeing to start talks, on the basis of one condition -- the freezing of uranium enrichment," Lavrov said.

Western powers fear Tehran wants to use its nuclear programme to make atomic weapons but the Islamic republic insists the drive is peaceful and solely aimed at providing energy for a growing population.

The six have been using a mix of incentives and sanctions to try to

persuade Iran to rein in its nuclear work.

Following Friday's talks in London, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband said the powers had "reviewed and updated" an offer made to Iran in June 2006, but that the contents of the new proposal would only be disclosed to the Islamic republic.

The proposals are in the areas of energy, trade and investment and regional security, Lavrov said.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said on Friday the proposals were more "precise and detailed" than before.

The six powers have offered technical, political and economic rewards to Tehran for suspending its nuclear programme.

Zimbabwe opposition weighs election run-off

Zimbabwe's opposition yesterday debated taking part in an election run-off against the embattled President Robert Mugabe despite claiming outright victory as tensions in the country mounted.

Members of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) were to meet in Harare to discuss a course of action ahead of a meeting of party leaders "within days," party spokesman Nelson Chamisa told AFP.

Election officials on Friday said MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai had won 47.9 percent and Mugabe had won 43.2 percent and called a second round of the election between the two men at a date yet to be announced.

Mugabe's party said its 84-year-old leader would contest the run-off. But MDC secretary general

Tendai Biti denounced the results as "grand theft" and said Tsvangirai was the rightful president of Zimbabwe and should proceed to form "a government of national healing."

Ahead of the announcement of the results, Tsvangirai said that there was "no need for a run-off" but he has also said that he could take part if international observers were present.

Observers from the Southern African Development Community (SADC), an influential regional organisation, monitored the March 29 election but Western observers were banned by the authorities.

Political analysts say Tsvangirai, 56, has no real option but to contest the run-off as a decision not to take part would automatically hand victory to his longtime rival Mugabe, who has ruled Zimbabwe since independence in 1980.



Protesters gear up for their demonstration in support of the war-renouncing Japanese constitution in central Tokyo yesterday on Constitution Day. Some 4,300 pacifists held the rally and marched to demand the government not to tamper with the war-renouncing Article 9 of the Japanese constitution.

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3 Yemeni cops, 2 rebels killed in gunfight

Three Yemeni policemen were killed as their checkpoint came under fire in the northwestern region of Saada, shortly after a blast killed 18 people, tribal sources said on Saturday.

The attack on the checkpoint manned by special security forces late Friday in Munbah also left two policemen wounded. Two of the assailants were killed while four others escaped, the sources told AFP requesting anonymity.

Fighting between security forces and the Shia Huthi rebels erupted again overnight in the district of Muran, northwest of Saada, where insurgents attacked army posts with rockets, tribesmen in the region said.

Eighteen people, mostly soldiers, were killed in Yemen on Friday when a blast blamed by authorities on the insurgents exploded at the entrance to a mosque in the rebels' stronghold.

The renewed violence deals another blow to ongoing Qatari mediation to implement a peace deal between the government and the Zaidi rebels brokered in Doha in June 2007.

The rebels have been fighting to restore the Shia Zaidi imamate, which was overthrown in a 1962 republican coup in Yemen, one of the world's poorest countries.

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