

Agencies rush emergency aid to cyclone-hit Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

Aid agencies rushed emergency food and water into Myanmar yesterday after a cyclone tore into the impoverished nation, killing nearly 4,000 people and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless.

Despite the devastation wreaked by tropical cyclone Nargis, the ruling junta vowed to press ahead with its controversial referendum this weekend on a new constitution, which critics say will entrench military rule.

The death toll from the cyclone that hit Myanmar over the weekend has reached 3,969, state television said Monday, warning that thousands more may have been killed in the disaster.

A further 2,129 people were officially listed as missing, it said, adding tens of thousands more

may have been killed in the remote towns of Bogalay and Labutta in the Ayeyawaddy (Irrawaddy) delta.

"According to the information that we have as of May 5, there could be tens of thousands dead in Bogalay township and thousands more dead in Labutta township," state television said.

"So far, in Irawaddy and Yangon division, 3,969 were killed, 41 people injured and 2,129 missing," it said.

People in the main city, Yangon, were busy Monday clearing roads blocked by fallen trees and queuing to collect water from neighbours with private wells, as supplies were cut by the storm.

"I haven't seen anything like this in my whole life. It will take at least a month to return to normal," a 70-year-old man told AFP.

Several coastal villages south-

west of Yangon were destroyed, according to a preliminary assessment by the International Federation of the Red Cross, its spokesman Michael Annear told AFP in Bangkok.

The villages in the Ayeyawaddy (Irrawaddy) delta bore the brunt of Nargis, which came in from the Bay of Bengal and combined with a sea surge.

State media said nearly 98,000 people were homeless on the delta's Haing Gyi Island alone, which is home to a navy base.

Richard Horsey, a UN official in Bangkok, said that several hundreds of thousands of people had been left homeless and without drinking water across a broad swath of the country.

"If we look at the emergency needs for shelter and drinking water, there are several hundred

thousand people who will need urgent assistance," he told AFP.

UN agencies and other international aid groups met Monday in Bangkok to begin coordinating a response in the country formerly known as Burma, where the military normally imposes tough limits on the activities of aid agencies.

The Thai military said it would airlift food and medicine into Yangon on Tuesday.

Spokesman Annear said Red Cross teams in Myanmar were already distributing essential supplies.

"We're distributing supplies for those who need shelter, plastic sheeting to cover roofs, water purification tablets; we are currently procuring 5,000 litres of water, cooking items, bednets, blankets and clothes for those in most need," he said.



Residents rebuild their house after cyclone Nargis on the outskirts of Yangon on Sunday. Myanmar residents awoke to devastation after tropical cyclone Nargis tore through swathes of the country, battering buildings, sinking boats and causing thousands of casualties.

Myanmar referendum will go ahead, says junta

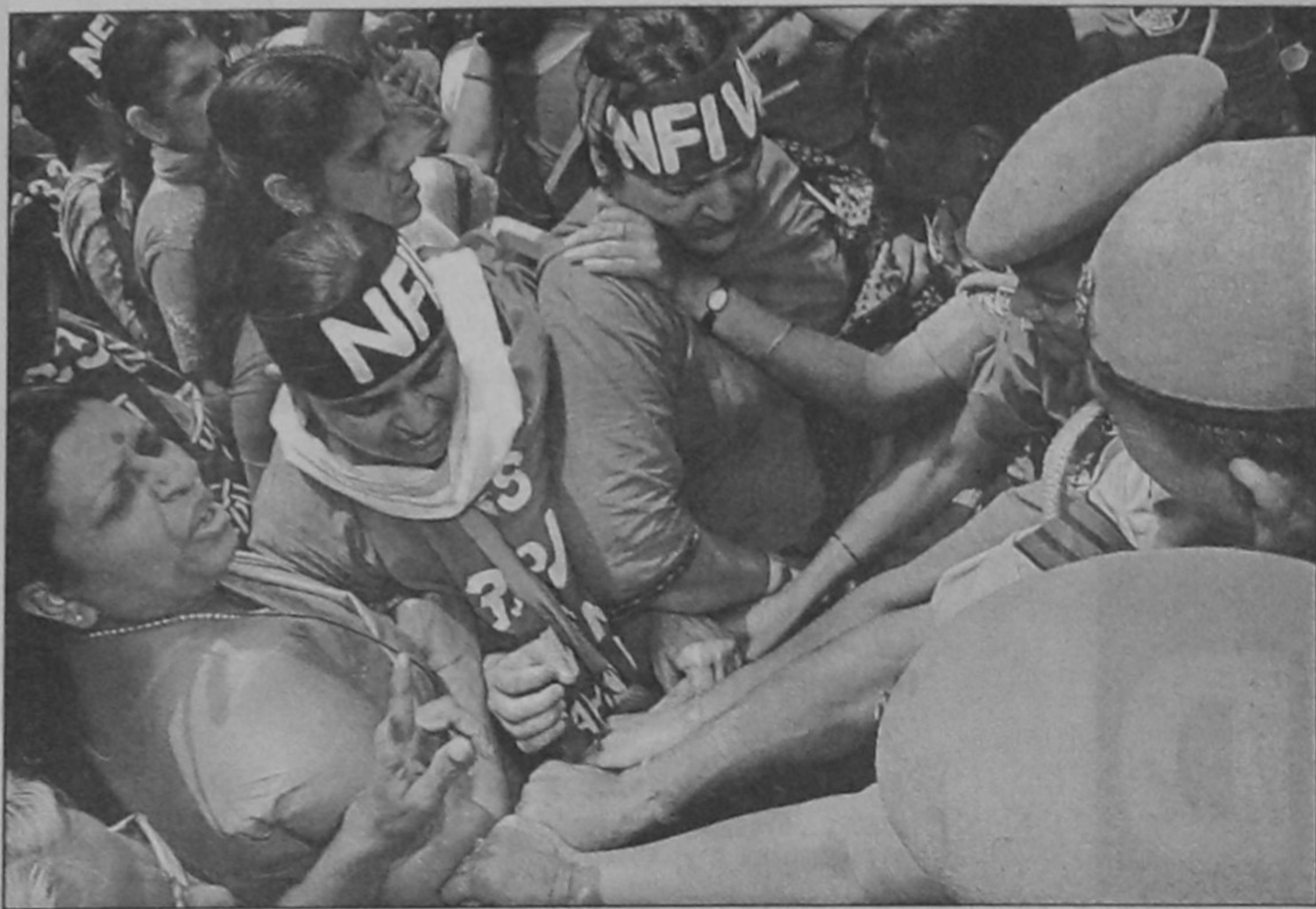
AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's junta will go ahead with Saturday's referendum on a new constitution despite a massive storm, which killed hundreds of people and left tens of thousands homeless, state media reported.

"The government of Myanmar has announced that a referendum for the draft constitution will be held on 10 May 2008 and that multi-party democracy general elections will be held in 2010 in accordance with a new constitution," the New Light of Myanmar newspaper said on Monday.

"The referendum is going to take place in a few days' time and the entire people of the country are eagerly looking forward to that," it said.

The paper said the authorities were "surprised" by a UN Security Council statement urging them to ensure an "inclusive and credible" political process and reminding them of their pledge to ensure a "free and fair" vote.



Indian women activists grapple with Indian police outside the Indian parliament during a protest in New Delhi yesterday. Activists were demanding the debate and passing of the Women's Reservation Bill, which provides for a 33 percent quota for women in parliament.

Lok Sabha adjourns sine die without taking up women's bill

PTI, New Delhi

The three-month long budget session of the Lok Sabha was today adjourned sine die four days ahead of schedule amid protests by key government ally CPI over its abrupt end and without taking up the Women's Reservation Bill.

The House was adjourned sine die by Speaker Somnath Chatterjee soon after the crisis over his action of referring the cases of 32 MPs, mostly from the BJP-led NDA, to the Privileges Committee for "disorderly conduct" came to an end.

Though the crisis was resolved, the Speaker used the occasion to remind the MPs "that instances of interruptions and forced adjournments and defying the authority of the chair do not help our common goal of public welfare and executive accountability".

Soon after the House was adjourned sine die, CPI Deputy Leader Gurudas Dasgupta protested over the way the Congress and the BJP "came together" for adjourning the House ahead of schedule.

"This is a mockery of the Parliamentary system of democracy. The Prime Minister had assured us that the Women's Reservation Bill would be tabled in this session. This makes his assurance a hoax," he told reporters.

During the session, the opposition sought to corner the government on the issue of rising prices of food grains and lack of availability of edible commodities in the Public Distribution System (PDS).

Amid intense debates on the situation arising out of rising prices, the government sought to allay the fears of an impending food crisis.

Iran suspends talks with US on security in Iraq

Tehran vows no halt to nuclear programme

AP, AFP, Tehran

Iran said yesterday it would not hold a new round of talks with the US on security in Iraq until American forces end their current assault against Shia militias.

US and Iraqi forces have been battling supporters of radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and Iraq's government spokesman said Sunday that the crackdown would continue even if Iran pulled out of the talks.

"We believe the talks will not be held given the current situation (in Iraq)," Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini told reporters during his weekly press briefing Monday.

Hosseini's announcement was the first official confirmation that Iran has decided to suspend talks with the Americans. Iran and the US have held three rounds of ambassador-level talks on security in Iraq since last May.

"What we are witnessing is open and extensive bombing of the Iraqi nation, while the main goal of talks with the American side would have been security and peace in Iraq," said Hosseini. "It is a matter of doubt that the US is pursuing a solution for the crisis, which was caused by them."

The US has accused Iran of supporting Shia militias in Iraq. But

Iran, which is predominantly Shia like Iraq, has blamed violence in the war-torn country on the US presence.

A five-member Iraqi delegation was sent to Tehran last week to try to choke off suspected Iranian aid to militiamen.

Commenting on the those talks, Hosseini said, "Tehran has always said that it supports the Iraqi government and legal action against illegal armed groups who commit crimes there."

He did not specify how such action differed from the current assault by US and Iraqi forces against the Shia militias.

Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said Sunday that there was no "conclusive" evidence that Iran was supplying weapons to Shia militias in Iraq.

He said Iraq does not want trouble with Iran and would not be pushed to take an aggressive attitude toward the country.

Meanwhile, Iran's top leader says his country will not bend to international pressure and give up its nuclear programme, according to state television.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say in all state matters, said Iran will continue its nuclear programme despite Western efforts to thwart it with sanctions.

"No threat can hinder the Iranian nation from its path," he said Sunday.

Iran will reject any offer that violates its right to the full nuclear fuel cycle, the foreign ministry said on Monday after world powers said they had prepared a new package to end the atomic crisis.

"Incentives that in any way violate our interests or rights will not be examined by us," foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini told a news conference.

The comments are the latest sign from Tehran that it has no intention of giving ground on the key sticking point of uranium enrichment.

Iran has repeatedly refused to suspend the process -- which can be used to make nuclear fuel or the core of an atomic weapon -- but world powers want Tehran to stop enrichment as a precondition for beginning talks.

The UN Security Council has already imposed three sets of sanctions on Iran for its refusal to halt uranium enrichment. World powers agreed Friday to try again to lure Iran to the nuclear bargaining table with a repackaged set of incentives.

Diplomats said the offer contained no major new enticements.

Outcry as Lanka's defence chief urges censorship

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main media rights group on Monday voiced alarm after the island's hawkish defence chief reportedly branded some journalists "traitors" and called for sweeping censorship.

The Free Media Movement said Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who has long demanded strict controls on how

news organisations are allowed to cover the war with Tamil Tiger rebels, "must be held accountable for his words and reigned in."

Quoting recent comments by Rajapakse to Sri Lankan state television, the FMM said he had "termed as media 'traitors' those who published reports seen as harmful towards the security forces and military operations."

Rajapakse, the younger brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse, also "stressed that such media should be banned," the FMM said.

The group condemned what it said was a "regime that openly calls for censorship, clamps down on critical voices of dissent and is defined by vulture-like thugs who prey on independent media."

No breakthrough in Tibet talks

AFP, Shenzhen

China and the Dalai Lama's envoys agreed to keep the door open on dialogue after holding talks here Sunday, state media said, although no breakthrough in ending the Tibet crisis was reported.

The closed-door meeting was the first between the two sides in over a year and came after global leaders pressured China to reopen dialogue amid seven weeks of deadly unrest in Tibet that has marred the nation's Olympic

build-up.

"Chinese central government officials and the private representatives of the 14th Dalai Lama agreed to hold another round of contact and consultation at an appropriate time," China's official Xinhua news agency reported late Sunday.

However, the Chinese officials in the talks held firm on China's previously stated conditions for dialogue to succeed, positions that the Tibetan spiritual leader has already rejected.

EC puts off Pak by-polls by 2 months

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan's Election Commission yesterday postponed by two months by-polls to the national and four provincial assemblies scheduled for June 18 citing adverse security situation in the country.

This is the second time the by-polls are being put off after they were originally scheduled to be held on June 3.

Election Commission Secretary Kanwar Dilshad told reporters that the decision was made after the chief secretary of the North West Frontier Province sought a post-

ponement of the by-polls due to the security situation.

"The chief secretary said the polls should be postponed for some time due to the adverse law and order situation in the province. The Election Commission's decision was also influenced by the fact that budget sessions of the national and provincial assemblies are due," Dilshad said.

The Election Commission had reviewed the situation across Pakistan and decided that the "overall security environment is not so good", he said, adding a revised schedule will be announced later.

Ten people killed in Baghdad clashes

AFP, Baghdad

At least 10 people were killed in overnight fighting between American forces and Shia militias in Baghdad, six of them in Sadr City, the US military said yesterday.

An Iraqi medic from Sadr City, the stronghold of anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, said that another 40 people, including women and children, were wounded in the clashes in the district.

A girls' school, which has been shut for more than a month because of the fighting was also damaged in overnight violence, they said.

The US military said six Shia militiamen were killed in Sadr City and four in Mansur, a mainly Sunni district west of Baghdad.

At around 10:00 pm (1900 GMT) on Sunday, three militiamen were killed by a Hellfire missile as they prepared to launch a rocket, military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Steven Stover told AFP.



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