



A shelterless family cooks food under the open sky in the cyclone-hit area of Dedaye township, some 48km south of Yangon Wednesday. The United States has urged Myanmar's military rulers to accept international disaster relief after the top US diplomat in Yangon warned that more than 100,000 people may have died when a cyclone pounded the country.

Grim fight for survival after Myanmar cyclone

AFP, Yangon

More than one million homeless in Myanmar were battling to stave off disease and hunger Thursday, with the military government still limiting foreign assistance six days after a massive cyclone.

With death toll estimates near 100,000 and the clock ticking for those who survived, Myanmar's junta -- long suspicious of the outside world -- came under new pressure to fully open up to help from abroad.

Aid was only trickling in despite warnings that specialists were needed to deliver food and water through disaster zones strewn with rotting bodies, and it was unclear if the regime was giving visas to foreign aid staff.

The United States, one of the junta's most vocal critics, announced it was not sending an aid flight after earlier saying it was, adding to the sense of confusion and frustration over the international relief effort.

Aid groups said the country needs hundreds of planes to cope with Cyclone Nargis, which barreled into Myanmar overnight Friday, unleashing one of the worst natural disasters in recent memory.

They said help was slowly arriving from Thailand, China and India, but not enough -- and not quickly enough -- for most of those in the stricken southwest Irrawaddy delta who saw their villages ripped apart or washed away.

The United Nations said four

disaster experts received permission to travel to Myanmar, but there was no immediate word for hundreds of others awaiting a green light from the military, which has ruled the former Burma since 1962.

In a rare break from its policy of non-interference in its members' affairs, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) pressed the junta to soften its stance, as did China, Myanmar's most powerful ally.

Asean secretary general Surin Pitsuwan said the regime needed to work with the international aid community "before it's too late."

"It's very much a matter of urgency," he said.

Authorities in Yangon raised their official death toll to nearly

23,000 late Wednesday, with state media saying more than 42,000 others were missing.

But a military official in the delta township of Labutta estimated 80,000 dead there alone, and many families there told an AFP reporter most of their relatives had been killed.

"The storm came into our village," said one man in his 20s, "and a giant wave washed in, dragging everything into the sea."

"Houses collapsed, buildings collapsed, and people were swept away. I only survived by hanging on to a big tree." His wife and two children died.

"The waves were so strong, they ripped off all my clothes. I was left naked hanging in a tree," said one teenager.

Suu Kyi's home damaged in cyclone

AFP, Yangon

The home of Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was lightly damaged in the weekend cyclone, but she was unhurt and remains in good health, her party said yesterday.

The roof of Daw Suu's house has to be fixed as a small part of it was taken off by the wind, National League for Democracy spokesman Nyan Win told AFP.

"A tree at the front of the compound has fallen over and it hasn't been removed yet."

"As far as I know, she is in good health," he said, adding that her family doctor was able to visit her as usual.

A Myanmar official told AFP on Monday that Aung San Suu Kyi's house had been lightly damaged, but she was unhurt.

Nyan Win said he wasn't sure if Aung San Suu Kyi's electricity supply had been reconnected yet at her lakeside home in Yangon, Myanmar's main city.

Journey from horror to misery in Myanmar

AP, Labutta

Some survivors arrived half-naked, others wore clothes they scavenged from the dead.

Myanmar's rice-trading town of Labutta, the only spit of high ground in a vast watery landscape has become a beacon of hope for tens of thousands who lived through the cyclone's fury, most losing homes and family members.

The survivors made the journey in rickety wooden boats with makeshift sails fashioned out of blankets, dodging the bloated corpses of buffaloes and dead neighbours floating in the murky waters.

It was a journey from horror to misery for most, who described desperate hours clinging to trees and debris, followed by days of waiting for aid to arrive, in video shot for The Associated Press by a Myanmar journalist.

The footage provided a first glimpse of Myanmar's worst-hit

Irrawaddy delta, which has been cut off from the rest of the world since Cyclone Nargis struck Saturday, unleashing 12-foot-high storm surges that flooded the low-lying area of rice paddies and bamboo homes.

"I was hanging from an 18-foot-tall coconut tree for a long time until the weather subsided. I don't know what happened to my wife and young children," said Phan Maung, 55, sobbing as he spoke.

Many survivors were shaking and had trouble telling their tales. Some were angry, others hysterical. Only a few were willing to give their names, fearful of retribution by a government already embarrassed by its failure to bring prompt relief.

"I am the only survivor of a family of 11. The entire village was wiped out," said a man from the village of Yay Way.

Nearby, a woman in her 50s stared ahead in shock as she spoke. "The wind came first and the waves

started to roll over us, so that we had to crawl over the thatch walls to get to the upper floor of the house. I saw people drowning and dead bodies floating," she said.

More than 60,000 people were killed or are missing in the densely-populated delta, which sits just above sea level, and as many as 100,000 are feared dead.

Meteorologists say the storm, which gathered strength in the Bay of Bengal and whipped up 120-mph winds, took an unusual track heading eastward into the densely populated delta region where a quarter of the nation's population live.

Jim Andrews, a senior meteorologist at AccuWeather, said that satellite photos taken after the storm showed flooding of similar magnitude to that of Hurricane Katrina. He said water covered thousands of square miles in the Irrawaddy Delta, although it was unclear how deep the water was.

REINSTATEMENT OF JUDGES

Pak coalition leaders to meet in London

AFP, Islamabad

Top leaders of Pakistan's ruling coalition will meet in Britain this week for a final decision on how to reinstate judges sacked by President Pervez Musharraf, party officials said.

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) leader Asif Ali Zardari left for London on Thursday, party spokesman Nazir Dhokhi told AFP.

Dhokhi did not give details but other party officials said Zardari would meet former prime minister and chief of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Nawaz Sharif on Friday.

Sharif, who is already in London where his wife underwent surgery, announced last Friday that the deposed judges would be reinstated on May 12.

Musharraf imposed emergency rule and ousted Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad

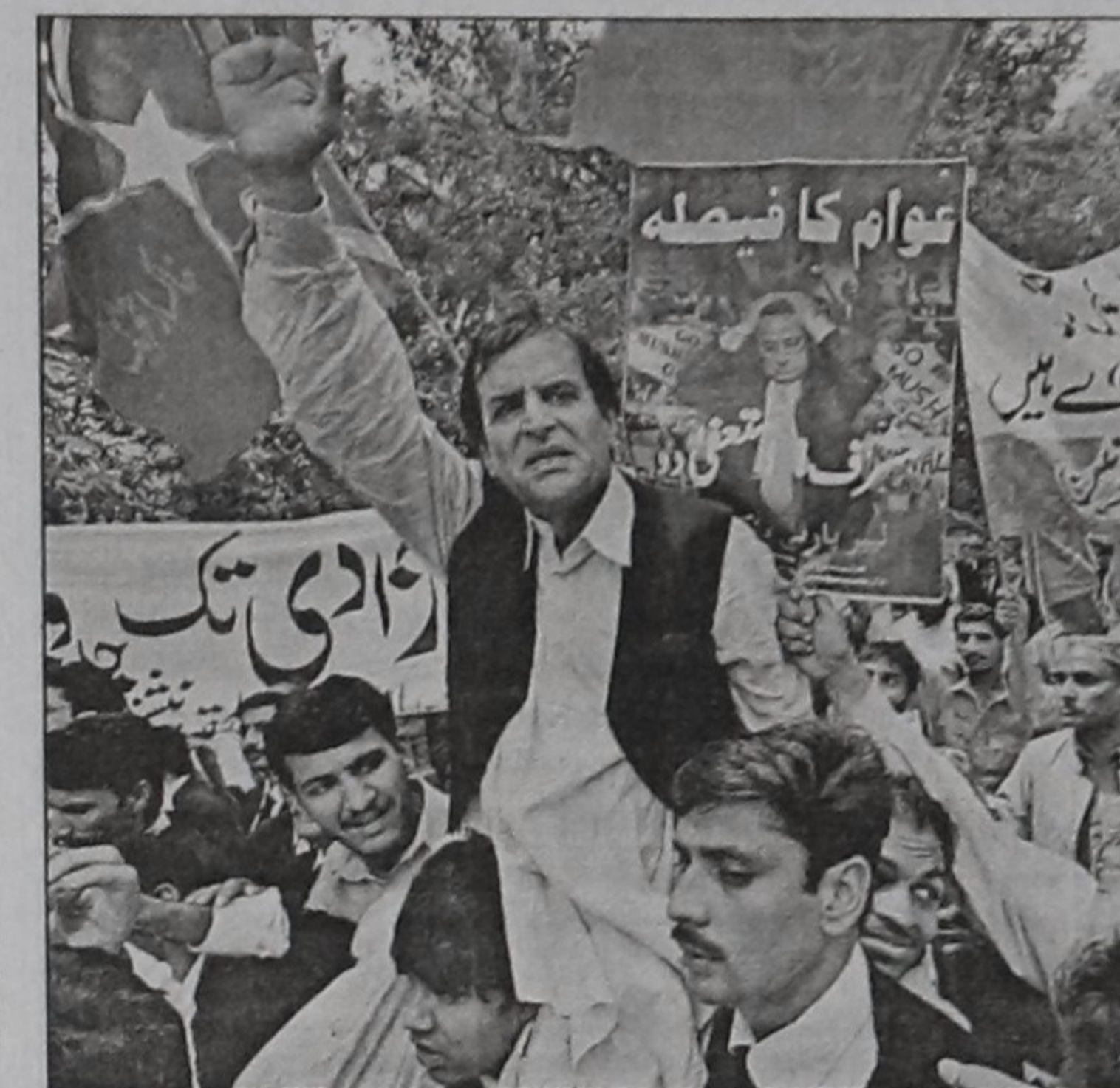
Chaudhry and dozens of other judges in November last year when it appeared they might overturn his re-election as president the previous month.

Reinstatement of them is likely to cause a major headache for embattled former army chief Musharraf, who considers them hostile to his rule.

The coalition partners will discuss the report of an expert committee they set up to work out a framework for the restoration of the judges.

Officials said the committee at a meeting here overnight finalised a draft resolution to be endorsed by parliament, which is dominated by anti-Musharraf lawmakers.

Law Minister Farooq Naek said the draft was ready but there were divergent views among legal experts on whether the judges should be reinstated through an executive order or through a package of constitutional reforms.



Pakistani ruling coalition leader Javed Hashmi (C) is carried by supporter of deposed judges during a march in Lahore yesterday. Top political leaders in Pakistan ruling coalition Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif will meet in London this week for a final decision on how to restore judges sacked by President Pervez Musharraf, party officials said.

26 killed in Kashmir bus plunge

AFP, Jammu

At least 26 people died and four were injured after a bus plunged into a river in Indian Kashmir on Thursday, and the death toll was expected to rise, police said.

"Twenty-five bodies were recovered at the site of the accident and five critically injured passengers were airlifted to Jammu," senior police superintendent Salim Baig told AFP.

Out of the five, one succumbed to his injuries.

The number of dead was expected to increase as police were still trying to recover bodies from the Chenab River, which flows into Pakistan, Baig said.

The 42-seater bus was heading from Jammu, the state's winter capital, to Kishtwar district, some 240 kilometres (150 miles) to the north-east.

Rescue work was slow since the fast-flowing Chenab is fed by glacial snow melt, police said. Bus accidents are common in India because of a mix of bad roads, overcrowding and poor maintenance of vehicles.

Russian parliament okays Putin as PM

AP, Moscow

Russia's parliament has overwhelmingly voted to make Vladimir Putin the prime minister.

Putin's confirmation in the State Duma comes a day after he handed the presidency to his protégé Dmitry Medvedev.

Thursday's 392-56 vote caps months of maneuvering by the popular leader to maintain influence after stepping down from the presidency due to term limits.



Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (back) walks back to his seat, after presenting his nominee for prime minister Vladimir Putin (front) to the State Duma, lower chamber of parliament, in Moscow yesterday.

Iraqis asked to quit Sadr City

AP, Baghdad

Iraqi soldiers for the first time warned residents in the embattled Sadr City district to leave their houses Thursday, signalling a new push by the US-backed forces against Shia extremists who have been waging street battles for seven weeks.

Iraqi soldiers, using loudspeakers, told residents in some virtually abandoned areas of southeastern Sadr City to go to nearby soccer stadiums, residents said. UNICEF says about 6,000 people have been forced to flee their

homes in Sadr City, most of them from the southeastern section.

US forces have increased air power and armoured patrols in an attempt to cripple Shia militia influence in Sadr City, a slum of 2.5 million people that serves as the Baghdad base for the Mahdi Army led by anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

The US military is trying to weaken the militia's grip in the slum and disrupt rocket and mortar strikes from Sadr City on the US-protected Green Zone, which includes the US Embassy and key Iraqi government

offices.

Several civilians were injured in rocket or mortar attacks that hit downtown Baghdad this week.

The battles started in late March after the Iraqi government opened a crackdown on militias and armed gangs in the southern city of Basra, including some groups Washington says have links to Iran.

At least four people were killed and 13 injured in clashes late Wednesday in Sadr City, Iraqi health officials said Thursday. It was not clear whether any militants were among them.

Bhutan holds 1st parliament session as democracy

AFP, Guewahati

The tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan yesterday held its first parliament session, marking its shift from absolute monarchy after elections in March, officials said.

Jigme Tshulthim, speaker of the Bhutan National Assembly, or the lower house in parliament, led the joint session in the 72-member parliament.

The lawmakers -- 47 members of the National Assembly and 25 members of the National Council, or the upper house -- met at the renovated parliament in Thimphu, capital of the isolated Buddhist nation.

During the next few weeks they are expected to endorse the draft consti-

tution as well as bills on elections, the National Assembly, National Council and parliamentary entitlement.

"The bills would first go to the National Council then to the National Assembly and finally presented to the king for assent before (they) become an act," National Assembly secretary Nima Tshering said by telephone.

According to Kuensel, Bhutan's national newspaper, the parliament has an inverted C-shaped seating arrangement.

Forty-five of the National Assembly's members are from the ruling Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) party, which won a landslide in the general election, while opposition People's Democratic Party has just two.

China, Japan take step towards better ties

THE STRAITS TIMES/ ANN, Tokyo

The leaders of Japan and China Wednesday moved to put the past behind them, agreeing to further lift bilateral ties and pledging not to view one another as a threat.

The agreement was embodied in a landmark joint statement signed by visiting Chinese President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda following two hours of talks.

"The two sides confirmed that they are partners of cooperation and will not be threats to each other," it said.

The key document was the fourth since the normalisation of

ties in 1972 that will define the future development of bilateral relations.

To enhance mutual trust, they will alternately host annual summits in each other's country and boost people-to-people exchanges at all levels.

At a press conference after their meeting, Hu said: "PM Fukuda and I believe that Sino-Japanese relations are at a new historic starting point."

Hu arrived here on Tuesday for the much-heralded five-day visit to improve relations, the first such visit by a top Chinese leader in a decade.

It is also his longest trip to a single country since taking office.

Hillary vows to press on as time, options run out

AP, Washington

Her money drained and her options dwindling, a resolute Hillary Rodham Clinton vowed to press on with her presidential bid even as she and top advisers were hard-pressed to describe a realistic path for her to wrest the nomination from Barack Obama.

After a wrenching primary outcome Tuesday in which she was routed in North Carolina and barely won Indiana, Clinton made a hastily scheduled trip to West Virginia to show her determination to fight on. The state holds a primary next Tuesday.

"I'm so happy to be here in West Virginia and excited about the next week as we campaign here in this beautiful state about our country's future," Clinton told an audience at Shepherd University Wednesday.

She planned to return to the state Thursday, then fly to South Dakota and Oregon, which also have upcoming contests.

Also Wednesday, aides disclosed that Hillary Clinton had lent her campaign \$6.4 million since mid-April, on top of a separate \$5 million loan in February. She contributed \$5 million on April 11, \$1 million on May 1 and \$425,000 on May 5.

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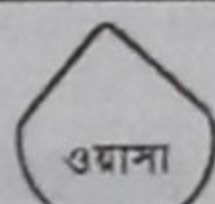
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