

US airlifts aid to Myanmar, UN urges junta to cooperate

AP, Yangon

The United States delivered its first relief supplies to Myanmar on Monday, as the UN urged the reclusive nation to open its doors to foreign experts who can help up to 2 million cyclone victims facing disease and starvation.

The military C-130 cargo plane, packed with 28,000 pounds of supplies, flew out of the Thai air force base of Utapao and landed in Yangon, capping prolonged negotiations to persuade Myanmar's military government to accept US military government to accept US

Several Myanmar Cabinet ministers, military officers and the top US diplomat in Myanmar, Shari Villarosa, greeted the plane.

Government spokesman Ye Htut said the aid, which was transferred to Myanmar army trucks, would be ferried by air force heli-

copers to the worst-hit Irrawaddy delta later Monday. Two more US air shipments were scheduled to land Tuesday.

The official death toll from the May 3 Cyclone Nargis is 28,458 with another 33,416 still missing. But the UN Assistant Secretary-General Catherine Bragg and others have said the death toll could reach 100,000 or higher.

Though international assistance has started trickling in, the authoritarian government has barred most foreign experts who are experienced in managing humanitarian crises.

Richard Horsey, a spokesman for UN humanitarian operations, in Bangkok, Thailand, said clean drinking water, shelter, medical support and food were sorely lacking.

"The authorities of the country need to open up to an international

relief effort. There aren't enough boats, trucks, helicopters in the country to run the relief effort of the scale we need," he said. "It's urgent that the authorities do open themselves up."

The junta has made a huge concession in letting the US the fiercest critic of its human rights record bring in relief.

The US plane carried mosquito nets, blankets and water in an operation dubbed "Joint Task Force Caring Response."

Also on the plane was Adm. Timothy J. Keating, the commander of the US military in the Pacific, who will try to personally negotiate with the junta for a larger US role in providing relief.

US Marine spokesman Lt. Col. Douglas Powell said there are 11,000 service members and four ships in the region for an annual military exercise, Cobra Gold, that

could be harnessed to help the mercy mission.

Three US Navy ships in the Bay of Bengal were sailing closer to Myanmar on Monday, ready to aid cyclone victims if they are given permission, Vice Adm. Doug Crowder told reporters in Jakarta, Indonesia.

In Irrawaddy delta, people were surviving in miserable conditions hundreds crammed in monasteries with little access to food. Others camped in the open, drinking dirty water contaminated by human feces or dead bodies and animal carcasses.

"The lives of thousands of cyclone survivors are at extreme risk," aid group World Vision said.

"Displaced people are living in appalling conditions in makeshift shelters and camps where overcrowding and unsanitary conditions are prevalent."



PHOTO AFP

Survivors of the cyclone Nargis wait under the rain for relief in Kyaiklat, in the Ayeyarwady Division of south-west Myanmar yesterday. The flow of international aid into Myanmar, which says 62,000 people are dead or missing, has increased in the past two days, but relief agencies say much more is needed to avert a humanitarian catastrophe.



PHOTO: AFP
Family members gather at the remains of the collapsed Juyuan middle school where 900 school children are trapped under the rubble in Duijiangyan, in southwest China Sichuan province yesterday after an earthquake measuring 7.8

Israel sets conditions for Gaza truce

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert asked Egypt's intelligence chief on Monday to tell Gaza militants a truce would be conditional upon progress being made towards freeing a captive Israeli soldier.

Olmert also asked Omar Suleiman to tell the Palestinian armed factions they would have to stop smuggling arms into Gaza if they want Israel to accept the Egyptian-brokered proposals to halt the violence in the besieged territory.

Suleiman was in Israel to seek the support of the country's leadership for the truce plan, which already has Palestinian backing.

In his talks with the Egyptian official, Olmert linked any truce to "progress in the negotiations for the release of Gilad Shalit," captured by Gaza militants in a 2006 cross-border raid, a senior Israeli official said.

"The prime minister asked Suleiman to obtain the response of the Palestinian factions to the

conditions," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Unless he receives a positive response, Olmert will not convene his powerful security cabinet to discuss and vote on a truce.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak earlier met Suleiman at his Tel Aviv residence and said Israel would respond to any attack from the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.

Barak made it clear that Israel will be unable to tolerate the continuing terror activity and fire from the Gaza Strip, and gave his assessment that Israel will have to launch a broad operation in Gaza if the rocket and mortar fire does not end," Barak's office said in a statement after the meeting.

He too linked any truce to progress in the negotiations for the release of the Israeli serviceman.

"Israel sees the release of Gilad Shalit and immediate progress in the negotiations on his release as a key component in normalising the security situation in the Gaza Strip," the statement said.

Aid falls far short of Myanmar's needs Say relief groups

AFP, Yangon

Aid groups said Sunday that supplies trickling into cyclone-hit Myanmar were far less than was needed, as the faltering relief effort suffered a new blow with the sinking of a Red Cross boat.

The boat, carrying vital supplies of drinking water, rice, and purification tablets, hit a submerged tree trunk as it travelled by river through the disaster zone. Much of the aid was lost, but no one was injured.

"Apart from the delay in getting aid to people we may now have to re-evaluate how we transport that aid," said Michael Annear, disaster manager in Yangon for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Supplies have slowly begun to make their way into isolated Myanmar, but relief workers are frustrated over restrictions by the ruling junta, which has refused to

allow foreign experts in to direct the recovery effort.

"Some opening-up on the part of the authorities is allowing us to get these materials to their destination," said Stephan Goethgebuer, director of operations of medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

"But it's no more than a drip-feed, really, given a serious response is more than required. We still need more back-up aid and personnel ready to leave."

A United Nations flight from Italy carrying water purification equipment and other supplies landed in Yangon, but three UN disaster assessment experts were still waiting for visas in Thailand.

In an indication of the tight controls the junta is maintaining, two of the three had their UN travel documents refused by Myanmar officials at Yangon airport when they tried to enter the country Thursday.

Bush calls Jenna's wedding 'spectacular'

AP, Waco

President Bush spent months joking about being a father of the bride, but on Sunday he was downright wistful about giving his daughter Jenna away to her longtime beau.

"Our little girl, Jenna, married a really good guy, Henry Hager," Bush said, standing next to Mrs. Bush at an airport in Waco where he boarded Air Force One for his flight back to Washington. "The wedding was spectacular. It's just it's all we could have hoped for."

Unlike other first family weddings that have been broadcast live, the Bushes didn't share their daughter's nuptials with the nation. The day after, however, they briefly shared their joy.

"The weather cooperated nicely," Bush said about the wedding at his 1,600-acre Texas ranch. "Just as the vows were exchanged, the sun set over our lake and it was just a special day and a wonderful day and we're mighty blessed."

A reporter asked the president if he had been up late partying. Bush winked, then turned toward the plane, ignoring a second question about whether the wedding had given the slumping US economy a boost.



PHOTO: AFP
This official White House photograph released on Sunday shows Henry and Jenna Hager, daughter of US President George W. Bush, as they cut their wedding cake on May 10 during a reception in their honour following the ceremony at Prairie Chape Ranch near Crawford, Texas.

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