

World turns up heat on Myanmar junta

US extends sanctions as lawmakers call for intervention; Yangon blamed for crimes against humanity

AFP, Yangon

Frustrated world leaders tightened the screws on Myanmar yesterday, alleging negligence and possible crimes against humanity by refusing a massive foreign relief effort for the cyclone tragedy.

US President George W. Bush extended sanctions on the military regime while British Prime Minister Gordon Brown denounced the generals' "inhuman" treatment of up to 2.5 million survivors battling to stay alive two weeks after the storm hit.

With the toll of dead and missing now 134,000, the criticisms appeared to mark a shift in tactics in the face of the junta's resistance, even though a second wave of deaths could lie ahead due to starvation and disease.

"We have an intolerable situation created by a natural disaster," Brown, whose country was the colonial power when Myanmar was known as Burma, told the BBC. "It is being made into a man-made catastrophe by the negligence, the neglect and the inhuman treatment of the Burmese people by a regime that is failing to act and to allow the international community to do what it wants to do."

Deeply suspicious of any foreign influence that could weaken its 46 years of iron rule in Myanmar, the junta has insisted on managing the relief operation itself and kept most international disaster experts away.

But aid groups say the government cannot possibly handle the tragedy by itself, with hundreds of tonnes of supplies and high-tech

equipment piling up in warehouses, bottle-necked by logistics and other problems.

The groups say even their own operations are short of fuel and the proper trucks to manoeuvre in a disaster zone where bridges are out, flooding has been heavy and new seasonal rains are deepening the difficulties.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu wrote to Brown, Bush and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, calling on the UN Security Council to authorise aid drops over the objections of the generals.

Jean-Maurice Ribert, France's UN ambassador, told a meeting of all members of the United Nations that the situation was turning "slowly from a situation of not helping people in danger to a real risk of crimes against humanity."

Bush announced that sanctions on the junta would be extended for a year because of its "large-scale repression of the democratic opposition." The statement stressed it would not affect humanitarian cyclone aid.

US lawmakers on Friday asked President George W. Bush to consider "humanitarian intervention" in cyclone-hit Myanmar after its military rulers refused to allow foreign experts to direct relief efforts despite rising deaths.

Forty-three members of the House of Representatives wrote to Bush asking him to "strongly consider" backing efforts by France, Britain, Germany, Denmark and other nations to gain entry into the devastated Irrawaddy Delta region "to provide urgent life-saving humanitarian aid."



Exhausted children suffering from diarrhoea sleep together in an apparent bid to keep their bodies warm on a mat at a temporary shelter in a monastery on the outskirts of Yangon on Friday. Health workers on Friday reported cases of the infectious and potentially deadly disease cholera in cyclone-hit areas of Myanmar, while 20 percent of children there have come down with diarrhoea.

World powers work out details of new Iran offer

AFP, Washington

Six world powers have completed the details of a "refreshed" offer they will present to Iran in an effort to persuade it to halt its controversial nuclear activities, a US official said Friday.

The United States, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China agreed earlier this month to make a new offer to Iran, but a date has yet to be set for it to be delivered to the Islamic republic.

"We have completed work on the details of the package and the accompanying letter," US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters.

The European Union's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, will contact the Iranian government to "work on a date and venue for a meeting where representatives of the (six

nations) can hand over and discuss this refreshed package," he said.

McCormack reiterated, however, that the United States would not be sending a representative. "We are not going to have a physical presence here," he said.

According to diplomatic sources, negotiations are under way with Iranian officials to send to Tehran a delegation of political directors from foreign ministries.

The West fears Iran could use uranium enrichment to make atomic weapons but Iran denies this is its aim, insisting it has a right to enrichment to make nuclear fuel as a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The UN Security Council has imposed three sets of sanctions on Iran to force it to stop enrichment, but the measures have failed to dissuade the government.

Lebanese politicians start talks in Qatar

AFP, Doha

Lebanon's bickering political leaders on Saturday began Arab-brokered crisis talks in Qatar in a bid to end a long-running feud that drove their country to the brink of a new civil war.

After 65 people were killed in nearly a week of fighting, the US-backed Beirut government and the Hezbollah-led opposition supported by Syria and Iran agreed to a national dialogue aimed at electing a president and forming a unity government.

The talks officially started on Friday evening with a briefing session chaired by Qatar's Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani who stressed the need to preserve Lebanon's unity and hoped the rivals would reach an agreement.

He then adjourned the meeting until the first round of substantive talks on Saturday.

Qatari mediation reportedly continued overnight with the emir

shuttling between rival parties, according to the Lebanese pro-government newspaper An-Nahar.

Prime Minister Fuad Siniora and parliament majority leader Saad Hariri flew to Qatar on a private plane on Friday.

Christian leader Samir Geagea, former president Amin Gemayel and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt of the ruling coalition arrived separately on a Qatari aircraft that also brought opposition member and parliament speaker Nabih Berri and his ally Christian leader Michel Aoun.

The head of the militant Shia Hezbollah movement Hassan Nasrallah is not in Qatar, reportedly because of security concerns, and is represented by Hezbollah MP Mohammed Raad.

Berri and Jumblatt met during the flight, but the Hezbollah delegation did not mix with the pro-government delegations, the opposition Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhar reported.



Chinese rescuers and survivors run as they evacuate Beichuan, southwest China's Sichuan province yesterday after the order goes out to leave the area following landslides which have clogged the Qingzhu river, creating a body of water that is already overflowing into a nearby village.

Thousands flee China quake area over flood fears

AP, Beichuan

Thousands of Chinese earthquake victims fled areas near the epicenter Saturday, fearful of potential floods from a river blocked by landslides.

Soldiers carried older people out of Beichuan town, one of the areas hit hardest by the magnitude 7.9 quake Monday while survivors cradled babies on a road jammed with vehicles and people. The death toll jumped to near 29,000.

A policeman told The

Associated Press that rescue officials were worried that water from the choked river would inundate the town.

"The river was jammed up by a landslide, now that may burst. That is what we are worried about," the policeman said as he hurried by, not giving his name.

"I'm very scared. I heard that the water will be crashing down here," said Liang Xiao, one of the people fleeing. "If that happens, there will be over 10 yards of water over our heads."

The official Xinhua News Agency said earlier that a lake in Beichuan county "may burst its bank at any time," without giving details on why the water was rising. Residents left homes for higher ground, but 46 seriously injured were still at risk, the agency said.

In what apparently was a similar landslide-blocked river, Xinhua said more than 2,000 people were being evacuated farther north near Qingchuan town, where blocked parts of the Qingzhu river formed a large stretch of water.

Pakistan lawyers mull street protests

AP, Lahore

Pakistani lawyers met Saturday to decide whether to mount street protests against the government after its failure to reinstate judges ousted by President Pervez Musharraf.

Musharraf, a stalwart US ally, imposed emergency rule and purged the Supreme Court last year to halt legal challenges of his re-election.

A new coalition made up of his opponents took office six weeks ago and promised to reinstate the justices, casting doubt on Musharraf's political survival.

But the government has missed two self-imposed deadlines to do so and appears to be unravelling over the issue, a process that could accelerate in the face of protests.

Some 60 senior leaders of the country's powerful lawyers' movement gathered at the high court in the eastern city of Lahore to consider how to step up their yearlong protests in defence of the judiciary.

10 militants, 4 Afghans killed in violence

AP, Kabul

A series of clashes, airstrikes and bomb blasts left 10 militants and four civilians killed in Afghanistan, officials said Saturday.

A roadside blast hit a vehicle in the eastern Paktia province Saturday, leaving three civilians dead early, said a government spokesman Ghamai Mohammadi.

Another bomb placed on a bicycle exploded as a police vehicle passed by near Kandahar city in southern Afghanistan. The blast killed a 10-year old boy, and wounded another civilian, said police officer Mohammad Nabi. There were no police casualties from the blast.

Militants regularly use roadside bombs against Afghan and foreign troops in the country, but most of those killed in such attack have been civilians.

In the western Farah province Afghan and foreign troops bombed a Taliban hideout where two hostages were being held, leaving eight militants dead, said Afghan army commander Gen. Jalander Shah.

India, Pakistan making progress on resolving Sir Creek dispute

PTI, Islamabad

India and Pakistan have made "considerable progress" towards resolving the Sir Creek maritime boundary dispute in the wake of a joint survey of the region by experts from both countries.

Of the eight issues being discussed by the two countries as part of their composite dialogue process since 2004, "tangible progress has been made on the issue of Sir Creek", diplomatic sources said here.

The issue will figure during the meeting here between External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee and his Pakistani counterpart Shah Mehmood Qureshi on May 21 to review the composite dialogue process.

Progress towards determining the final status of the marshland,

which separates the Kutch region of India's Gujarat state from Pakistan's Sindh province, was made possible by a 20-day joint survey of Sir Creek by hydrographers from India and Pakistan, the sources told Daily Times.

This survey, which began in January 2007, was conducted on land and off the coast to "verify the outermost points of the coastline based on the principle of equidistance", the sources said.

Hydrographers from India and Pakistan exchanged their maps at the Wagah land border on March 22. Though officials from both sides initially said they had differences on the maps, it was later announced that they had found "points of convergence" on the maps, raising hopes for a solution, the daily reported.

Kidnapped Pak envoy to Afghanistan freed

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan's envoy to Afghanistan Tariq Azizuddin, who was kidnapped by militants three months ago, has been freed after secret parleys between the government and local Taliban leaders.

Azizuddin has been released and is expected to return home soon, local news channels on Saturday quoted official sources as saying.

The ambassador, his driver and a guard were kidnapped on February 11 while he was on his way to the Afghan Capital Kabul from his home in Peshawar via the restive Khyber Agency in the north-west Pakistan.

Azizuddin's release came days after Pakistani authorities and the Taliban swapped prisoners following peace parleys initiated by the new federal government led by Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.

Eighteen Taliban cadres have been freed in exchange for about 55 security personnel, who were being held captive by militants in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.



Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (L) meets US President George W. Bush (C) and First Lady Laura Bush (R) during a reception ceremony at Sharm el-Sheikh International Airport yesterday. Bush arrived in Egypt Saturday for talks with Middle East leaders including Mubarak of Egypt and Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas amid growing Arab criticism of his perceived bias towards Israel and faltering peace talks.

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