



Children queue up for food aid in Daydiel in Myanmar's Ayeyawady Delta yesterday. The Group of Eight foreign ministers called on June 27 on Myanmar to lift all remaining restrictions on cyclone aid and to free political detainees including Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Obama, McCain spar for Latino vote

AFP, Washington

Republican presidential hopeful John McCain and Democratic rival Barack Obama called for immigration reform on Saturday as they courted America's ever-growing Latino voting population.

The candidates spoke separately to a Hispanic group in Washington about the need for comprehensive reform to bring the country's 12 million illegal immigrants out of the shadows.

McCain and Obama both backed measures that were blocked by hardline Republicans in Congress that would have given undocumented foreign workers a path toward citizenship.

But McCain, who had championed the reform bill despite opposition within his own party, has since said his focus was now to secure America's porous border with Mexico first.

"We will not succeed in the Congress of the United States until we convince a majority of the American people that we have border security," McCain said.

Israel approves prisoner swap with Hezbollah

Gaza crossing reopens

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's cabinet yesterday gave the green light for a prisoner swap with Hezbollah, although Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said two soldiers held by the Lebanese militia are known to be dead, public radio said.

The agreement was approved with 22 votes in favour out of a total of 25 at a meeting of the Israeli cabinet, the radio said, quoting government sources.

At the start of the session, Olmert urged his cabinet to approve the proposed prisoner exchange but said the two soldiers whose release Israel is seeking are dead.

The Lebanese militia captured Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser in a deadly cross-border raid on July 12, 2006 that sparked a 34-day war in Lebanon.

Regev and Goldwasser are believed to have been wounded during their capture and Hezbollah, which is backed by Tehran and Damascus, has provided no proof that they are still alive.

The deal also drew criticism because it is believed to include the release of Lebanese prisoner Samir Kantar who is currently serving a life sentence for killing two men and a four-year-old girl in a 1979 attack in northern Israel.

The Jewish state would release another four Lebanese prisoners and hand over the remains of Hezbollah fighters buried in Israel.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni have not publicly spoken out on the deal, negotiated with Germany acting as go-between.

He remained tight-lipped up to the last minute, telling journalists

at the start of the cabinet meeting that he "hesitated a lot" over the issue but declining to say where he stood.

Goldwasser's wife Karnit, however, said after a meeting with Olmert on Tuesday that the premier told her he would ask the cabinet to approve the prisoner swap.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak also came out in favour of the deal, despite reservations expressed by the intelligence services.

"As a soldier, as an officer who commanded in combat, as defence minister, I consider we have a supreme responsibility to bring back our sons, dead or alive," he said in a statement.

"I hope the government will give its green light to this reasonable accord as Hezbollah has backtracked, giving up its request for

the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners," deputy prime minister Haim Ramon told public radio.

Meanwhile, Israel yesterday reopened a Gaza border crossing point to allow commercial goods into the Palestinian enclave, which had been sealed off after militants fired rockets in violation of a truce.

"Between 60 and 70 trucks carrying mainly humanitarian aid should go through the Sufa border crossing today," said defence spokesman Gil Karie, adding that Sufa reopened on Sunday morning.

Israeli officials were to decide later whether to also reopen the Karni terminal that has been mainly used to deliver grain to Gaza since Israel imposed an embargo on the Islamist Hamas-run territory.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Cong-led coalition plunges into crisis in Kashmir

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The Congress-led coalition in militancy-hit Jammu and Kashmir state plunged into a crisis when its key component People's Democratic Party (PDP) headed by Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, withdrew support over transfer of government land to a Hindu shrine.

"We have been impelled to withdraw support to the government in view of the ever-deepening crisis and unabated series of deaths" in protests in Kashmir valley against the government's decision to transfer land to create facilities for pilgrims to Amarnath shrine, PDP President Mehbooba Mufti, daughter of party patron Syed, told reporters in Srinagar on Saturday.

The end of the alliance between PDP and Congress culminated after more than five and half years

of coalition rule during which ties between the two parties had come under strain almost right from the beginning on a host of issues including sharing of power, demilitarisation of the state and now the transfer of land to the shrine.

The break-up between the two parties came barely five months before Jammu and Kashmir goes to polls to elect a state legislature.

After the last assembly elections nearly six years ago, Congress and PDP had agreed to lead the coalition government for three years each but PDP had reluctantly handed over the lead role to Congress on expiry of its tenure as the head of the coalition in October 2005.

Mehbooba said her party had requested Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad of Congress to rescind the order of land transfer but since the situation was going from "bad to worse, we do not want to remain

associated with the government".

Three persons have been killed and more than hundred injured in clashes between security personnel and demonstrators opposing the land transfer in Kashmir valley in the last six days.

The withdrawal of support by PDP to Azad government saw the latter reduced to a minority. In the 87-member state assembly, Congress has 22 members, PDP 18, opposition National Conference 24, BJP and allies two and there are 14 independents. The CPI-M, which has two legislators, supports the coalition government from outside.

The withdrawal of support by PDP came even when the Chief Minister was engaged in a meeting with Governor NN Vohra on a formula to defuse the crisis arising out of the land transfer addressing the concerns of both the communities in the state.

Mugabe won in cities

Zimbabwe polls neither free nor fair, say African lawmakers

AP, AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe electoral officials say President Robert Mugabe won in the main cities in an election that has been widely denounced.

The results, being announced area by area Sunday, also showed a high number of spoiled ballots.

In the opposition stronghold of Bulawayo, official results showed Mugabe got about 21,000 votes, opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai had about 13,000, while more than 9,000 ballots were spoiled.

Mugabe was the only candidate in Friday's vote, which followed a campaign of violence against opposition supporters.

Tsvangirai had withdrawn because of the violence, though his name remained on the ballot. His supporters may have spoiled their ballots.

Earlier a group of African lawmakers, which observed Zimbabwe's one-man election

called on Sunday for the holding of a new round of polling, dismissing last week's vote as neither free nor fair.

Marwick Khumalo, head of the Pan African Parliament (PAP) mission, said his team of around 50 observers concluded that "the atmosphere prevailing in the country did not give rise to the conduct of free, fair and credible elections".

"Conditions should be put in place for the holding of free, fair and credible elections as soon as possible," he added at a press conference.

"The political environment throughout the country was tense, hostile and volatile... characterised by an electoral campaign marred by high levels of intimidation, violence, displacement of people, abductions, and loss of life."

Marwick, a Swaziland national, said "hate speech, incitement of violence and war rhetoric instilled fear and trepidation amongst voters."



US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (L) accompanied by unidentified Chinese officials visit the collapsed Tengda Physical Club in the quake hit Dujiangyan, in southwest China's Sichuan province yesterday. Rice arrived in China's earthquake-devastated southwest on Sunday to offer support to victims, ahead of official talks in Beijing.

Tibet-China talks to resume in early July

AFP, Beijing

Chinese authorities will resume talks with representatives of the Dalai Lama in early July following a request from the exiled Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader, state press said yesterday.

"Our door is always open for the dialogue with the Dalai Lama," Xinhua news agency quoted a government spokesman as saying.

"(We) hope that the Dalai Lama would treasure this opportunity and give positive response to the requirements of the central authorities."

No precise date was given for the resumption of talks.

China has for years demanded that the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize winner give up his aspirations for an independent Tibet if he ever hopes to return to his Himalayan homeland.

The Dalai Lama has repeatedly stated his opposition to Tibetan independence, but continues to seek "real and meaningful autonomy" for Tibet, which Beijing says is already an "autonomous region" within China.

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