

Obama Within Reach Of Nomination

Hillary Rodham Clinton hoped an expected lopsided win Tuesday in West Virginia's primary would slow Barack Obama's seemingly inevitable march to clinching the Democratic presidential nomination, but her rival was already mapping out strategy in battleground states for the campaign against Republican John McCain.



According to AP, Obama appeared poised to secure the nomination within a matter of weeks thanks to a wave of superdelegate support.

The Illinois senator has picked up 26 superdelegates within the last week, putting him mathematically within reach of the Democratic presidential nomination by the end of the primary season on June 3—even if he loses half of the remaining six contests.

Neither Obama nor Clinton can reach the 2,025 delegates needed to secure the nomination just through the final contests in five states and Puerto Rico.

Myanmar Rejects Int'l Pressure

Myanmar's military rulers on Tuesday rejected growing international pressure to accept aid workers, insisting against all the evidence that it had the emergency cyclone relief effort under control, said AFP.

Even as US President George W. Bush and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon voiced their fury at the country's generals, and aid agencies again warned that time was running out, the regime remained defiant about letting in outsiders.

"The nation does not need skilled relief workers yet," Vice Admiral Soe Thein said in the New Light of Myanmar newspaper, a mouthpiece for the military which has ruled the nation with an iron grip for nearly half a century.

He said the needs of the people following the storm, which has left around 62,000 dead or missing since ripping through the southern Irrawaddy delta on May 2, "have been fulfilled to an extent".

But aid agencies tell a starkly different story, warning that as everyday passes without sufficient food, water and shelter, as many as two million people are at risk of adding to the already staggering death toll.

Morales Approves August Recall Vote

President Evo Morales committed himself and Bolivia's nine governors on Monday to face recall votes on Aug. 10, gambling that his unfinished term will survive a referendum whose peculiar rules tilt in the populist leader's favor.

According to AP, Morales originally proposed the recall vote in December amid a fierce battle over his proposed draft constitution that would increase the political power of Bolivia's long-oppressed indigenous majority. Bolivia's lower house of Congress approved it but the idea went nowhere until last week, when it was suddenly revived by the opposition-controlled Senate.

The president's opponents figured Morales had been weakened by the landslide victory of the autonomy measure in Santa Cruz, Bolivia's largest and richest state. But they rushed the recall referendum through without considering the fine print—which clearly gives Morales the upper hand.



Haiti PM Candidate Dismissed

Haitian legislators on Monday rejected President Rene Preval's choice for prime minister, extending a monthlong period without a functioning government for the troubled nation.

Spokesmen in the lower house of Parliament said international banker Ericq Pierre lost a vote that ended his candidacy 51 to 35, with nine abstentions.

Levaillant Louis Jeune, a leading opposition deputy, said legislators did not have faith in the political leadership of Pierre, a senior official with the Inter-American Development Bank.

Pierre could not immediately be contacted for comment. In an interview with The Associated Press last week, the candidate said Haiti must concentrate on long-term strategies to help the millions pushed deeper into misery by higher food prices.

On April 12, the Senate dismissed Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis over criticism that his government failed to show leadership and mismanaged the economy before violent food protests that left seven people dead and destroyed hundreds of businesses.

Medvedev Open to US Dialogue



Relations between Moscow and Washington were strained in recent years thanks to arrays of disputes.

US President George W. Bush congratulated Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on Monday on taking office but also raised his "concerns" about tensions between Moscow and Georgia, AFP quoted the White House as saying.

Bush also telephoned Medvedev's predecessor, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, "to wish him well in his new post," according to spokeswoman Dana Perino, who said each call lasted "a few minutes."

"President Bush called Russian President Medvedev today to congratulate him on his inauguration. The two leaders underscored the importance of the US-Russia relationship and they look forward to working together," said Perino.

"President Bush raised his concerns about the situation in Georgia and hoped that all sides were working to reduce tensions," Perino told reporters.

Medvedev told Bush he is "open to dialogue on the issue," said US National Security Council Spokesman Gordon Johndroe. The two presidents will see each other at a July summit of industrialized nations in Japan.

A Kremlin statement said Bush and Medvedev "voiced a commitment to cooperating closely in maintaining a constructive dialogue."

Bush and Putin agreed in their conversation to see each other at this summer's Beijing Olympics, three Russian news agencies quoted Putin's

spokesman as saying.

"Vladimir Putin and George Bush agreed to hold a meeting while participating in the Olympic opening ceremony in Beijing," the agencies reported, citing Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

Analysts say Russia now has a dual leadership after Medvedev took over from Putin in the president's post and then appointed his mentor prime minister.

"Both President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin congratulated the president on Jenna's wedding and wished the new couple and the whole Bush family well and President Bush certainly appreciated those comments," said Perino.

The US president has long touted his close personal relationship with Putin, who served as Russian president from 2000.

Medvedev, then first deputy prime minister and president-elect, met in Russia's Black Sea resort Sochi in April with Bush who was hosted by Medvedev's predecessor Vladimir Putin.

Putin, now prime minister, is to meet with Bush again during the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games in August, Itar-Tass said.

Relations between Moscow and Washington were strained in recent years thanks to arrays of disputes, especially US plans to deploy anti-missile components in Central Europe despite Russia's objection.

Earlier last week, the White House said that Bush looks forward to working with new Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

"He looks forward to working with him and wishes him the best on his new position," said spokeswoman Dana Perino as Medvedev became Russia's third president since the Soviet Union's fall, taking over from Putin.

"If we have good relations, as the president has had with President Putin, that allows you the ability to speak very frankly when we have concerns when it comes to democracy and human rights," she said.

According to AFP, a top aide to Bush said the United States expects "continuity" in Russia's foreign policy and reiterated that Washington was "very concerned" with Russia's involvement in breakaway regions of neighboring Georgia.

"We expect continuity in Russian foreign policy," national security advisor Stephen Hadley told reporters. "That means there will be areas where we agree and ... areas where we disagree."

Bush was to telephone Medvedev soon, perhaps not Wednesday, said Perino.

"They had a very good meeting" and Bush "said he looked forward to working with him and to having a good relationship with him as he had with President Putin, where they can have a frank exchange of views, and also cooperate on issues such as the nuclear agreement that we signed yesterday," she said.

In Focus



King Gyanendra

Nepal to Abolish Monarchy

Nepal's prime minister has set May 28 as the first day for a special assembly that plans to abolish the centuries-old monarchy in this Himalayan country, AP said.

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala issued a statement Monday saying the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly elected last month will be held on May 28.

"During my meetings with (Maoist leader) Prachanda, I have said that the king should not be given any political authority," said Kamal Thapa, a former royal home minister and unofficial emissary between the Maoists and the palace.

"But he should be given a respectable status that allows him to enjoy his cultural and religious rights," Thapa told AFP on Tuesday.

Nepal's former rebel Maoists emerged as the surprise winners in landmark polls last month, garnering 220 seats in the 601-member constitution-drafting assembly—more than twice the number of their nearest rival.

The ultra-leftists insist that the first meeting of the elected body will end the 240-year-old monarchy, but Thapa believes getting rid of the institution will be dangerous for the impoverished Himalayan nation.

"It is logical to end the monarchy only after the drafting of the constitution is finalized," said Thapa, the leader of the only royalist party elected to the new assembly, with four of the 601 seats.

But the Maoists, now dominant after a resounding election victory, dismissed any appeal from the 61-year-old king for a continued role.

Kouchner Upbeat On Mediterranean Union

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said Monday he had held "very promising" discussions with Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika on the creation of a Mediterranean Union, AFP reported.

"We clarified a number of directions which, I think, from France's perspective, are very promising and I hope that President Bouteflika shares my feelings," Kouchner said after the two met in Algiers.

Bouteflika "not only asked questions but brought answers to questions and problems between" Algeria and France, he added.

Press reports here said Algeria was seeking clarification of the Mediterranean Union project to be announced officially on July 13 by France's President Nicolas Sarkozy at a summit of Mediterranean candidates eligible to join the proposed new bloc.

The Mediterranean Union project, which has met with a cool welcome from some of France's EU partners, aims to improve trade, transport and energy links between southern European countries and nations around the Mediterranean including Morocco, Syria, Israel and Turkey.

Algeria has particular reservations about Sarkozy's attitude to Iran and policy on Israel, the independent newspaper "Al Watan" said.

The independent newspaper "Djazair News" said Algeria would impose three conditions for joining the Mediterranean Union: France's acknowledgement of crimes it committed during its colonial rule in Algeria, a lasting and equitable solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara, and a just solution to the Palestinian question.