

Russia can't afford economic reforms at any cost : Yeltsin

MOSCOW, Mar 5: President Boris Yeltsin said Friday that Russia cannot afford "economic reforms at any cost," but told leading officials in a major Kremlin meeting that the reforms must continue, reports AP.

In his own speech, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin pledged to continue free-market reforms and chastised those who speculate about him having presidential ambitions.

"Russia is not a racing car — turn the wheel, get a ride, then get out, and the entire country is shaken up as if in a fever afterward," Chernomyrdin said.

"I am not one of those know-it-alls who goes from being a lab manager and jumps to the position of vice president and even wants to become president," he said.

Yeltsin, sitting nearby, smiled an applauded along with the hundreds of top representatives of the government, regions and industry.

In a 20-minute speech in the Kremlin's ornate Marble Hall, Yeltsin said Russia must establish a social safety net to

maintain "the proper level of social protection for those who cannot make due without state support."

"Economic reforms at any cost is a false slogan," Yeltsin said. "People can reject an excessive burdensome reform."

However, he added that a further delay in introducing the long-overdue changes does even worse damage."

Friday's session was mainly devoted to discussion of the proposed 1994 budget and the sorry state of the Russian economy.

The draft budget calls for spending cuts and reducing monthly inflation to no more than 12 per cent. Last year, inflation ran at an average of 20 per cent a month.

"In the present circumstances of Russia, any war on inflation will be a trench war," Yeltsin said. "I think that military terms are quite appropriate in this context. You cannot vanquish inflation in a single fierce charge. To win the battle, a full-scale coordination of the action of the president,

the (parliament) and the government will be needed."

"Much of what the prime minister said is absolutely right," he added. "But in real life and in economics, what is done is more important than what is said."

One government critic immediately dismissed the document.

"Nothing will help," ultra-nationalist lawmaker Vladimir Zhirinovsky said. "Only a change in the political leadership will help."

Yeltsin denounced parliament for giving amnesty to hard-liners who battled him last October and to leaders of the 1991 Soviet coup.

The amnesty was a "violation of the constitution, law and moral standards," he said.

But Yeltsin ruled out another clash with Russia's lawmakers for the good of its citizens, its security and civil peace."

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