



US President Bill Clinton applauds remarks while sitting with South African President Nelson Mandela during a visit with Parliament in Cape Town, Thursday, on the first day of his historic visit to South Africa. — AP/UNB photo

Confidence vote today BJP opens confidence debate with friends & foes

NEW DELHI, Mar 27: Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee pleaded with friends and foes alike to help his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rescue India from instability and uncertainty, opening debate Friday on whether his government should remain in power, reports AP.

Vajpayee, who is expected to narrowly survive a confidence vote scheduled Saturday afternoon, reflected on how far his BJP, once ostracised for its now-soften Hindu nationalist ideology, has travelled since it was able to hold onto power only 13 days two years ago. Elections last month and earlier this month left no party with the majority needed to govern alone, but the BJP and the allies it could never before attract form the largest group. "Can't we work together for the nation and face troubles together as a new century knocks at our door? Please let this experiment succeed," he said in a 30-minute speech in Hindi that opened the confidence debate. "We have been passing through political uncertainty for many years... How long will this go on? Political uncertainty? Political instability

will hurt our economy and spoil our image as the largest democracy in the world," he said. "India needs an honest and stable government that can endure for five years."

The last parliament fell three years short of its five-year term after 1996 elections resulted in a similarly deadlocked parliament.

Vajpayee recalled Friday that just as in 1996, he was the first to try to form a government because he led the largest bloc.

That first BJP government lasted only 13 days before losing a vote of confidence. This time, the BJP has worked to build support by striking deals and compromising on Hindu nationalist ideology that had worried the nation's minorities, particularly Muslims, and all those who championed the constitutional separation of religion and government.

In the quest for supporters, the BJP and its allies were running neck-and-neck with their main rival, the alliance of the centrist Congress party and the United Front group.

Vajpayee was sworn in as prime minister a week ago but must muster a simple majority

among members of parliament voting on the confidence measure to remain in power. The vote was scheduled Saturday afternoon.

The BJP group has 266 lawmakers; the Congress and UF combine has 261.

If all the 541 members now sitting in parliament vote, the BJP would need 271 votes to survive the confidence measure.

But the total of 541 is likely to be reduced by at least 12, reducing the majority to 265. Telegu Desam Party leader Chandrababu Naidu has traditionally been opposed to the BJP because of its Hindu nationalist ideology but has now indicated he will support the BJP by having his 12 lawmakers abstain Saturday, or even vote with the BJP.

Another regional party, the National Conference, announced Friday its two parliamentarians would abstain.

Two more lawmakers who are BJP supporters are likely to miss the vote, one because he is ill and the other because he has not yet been sworn in for technical reasons. That would leave the BJP with 264 votes, just enough to squeak through if the TDP sits out.



Mark and Roberta Griswold, left, of Detroit, Mich., still kiss as Mentha Clark, second right, and Chike Lamar Carter, right, university students from New Orleans, offer their congratulations ending the "Breath Savers Longest Kiss Challenge" at the Harley Davidson Cafe in New York Thursday. Mark and Roberta Griswold, who kissed for a record 29 hours will be credited with the world's longest kiss in the Guinness Book of Records. Both couples earned a trip to Paris. — AP/UNB photo

Ranariddh likely to return Monday Khmer Rouge denies fall of stronghold to govt

PHNOM PENH, Mar 27: The Khmer Rouge accused the government Friday of lying in claims that their last main jungle stronghold has fallen and their leaders are fleeing to Thailand, reports AFP.

In their regular daily radio broadcast, the last Khmer Rouge hard-line faction said claims that the base, Anlong Veng, had been taken by government-backed militaries were intended "to cheat and fool the people."

"Our troops and all people in Anlong Veng deny this strongly," the broadcast said.

Tea Banh, a co-defence minister, and other officials said Thursday that government troops had captured Anlong Veng when a mutiny erupted in the hard-line faction against leader Ta Mok.

But the government has made previous claims of military victories that proved untrue. Thai military officers monitoring the situation at Anlong Veng, near the border with Thailand, said Phnom Penh's claims were greatly exaggerated.

A That officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, acknowledged recent Khmer Rouge defections to strongman Hun Sen's government. One hundred breakaway troops were trading small-arms fire with the main Anlong Veng about 10 kilometers (7 miles) east of the base, he said.

Thailand often has superior intelligence contacts with the Khmer Rouge than the Phnom Penh government.

Another AP report adds: Prince Norodom Ranariddh's return to Phnom Penh — the fruit of months of negotiations by diplomats to ensure democratic elections in July — will probably last only a few days, his supporters said Friday.

Ranariddh has set a tentative date of Monday to return home with the goal of participating in the July 26 elections called by the rival who deposed him as co-premier nine months ago, Hun Sen.

BRIEFLY

Fire in Philippines kills 2: A woman and child were killed and two firemen were injured in a fire that razed the residence of Vanuatu's consul general in an upmarket residential area in Manila yesterday, police said, AFP reports from Manila.

Yao Eng Hue, consul general of the South Pacific Island, was out of the house during the blaze, initially blamed by firefighters on faulty electrical wiring. Police identified the fatalities as Margie Manza, 25, and Christina Villaus, eighth, but could not say if they are employees or relatives of the consul.

Mass grave unearthed in Vietnam: A mass grave containing the remains of more than 100 people has been unearthed near the northern port city of Haiphong, a report said yesterday, AFP reports from Hanoi.

A construction crew clearing land to build a bridge discovered a hole with a diameter of 20 metres (66 feet) in mid March, the Lao Dong Newspaper said. The bodies are believed to be victims of a famine in 1945 in northern Vietnam, the report said.

Blast kills 11 in China: An underground explosion in southwestern Sichuan Province killed 11 coal miners and poisoned 24 people who drank water from nearby wells, it was reported in Beijing yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

The explosion of natural gas occurred early on Monday in Kaijiang county, causing the earth to shake violently the Beijing Youth Daily said. "Well and river water turned cloudy and 24 people were poisoned while 11 were trapped in the mine," the newspaper said.

20 girls killed in fire in Kenya: Fire swept through a girls' dormitory at a boarding school, killing at least 20, Kenyan Police said yesterday, AFP reports from Mombasa.

More than 80 others were seriously injured in the fire overnight Wednesday at the Bombolulu Girls' High School, 20 kilometres (12 miles) north of the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa. The cause of the fire was not immediately known. The injured were taken to the Coast General Hospital in Mombasa.

Communist leader in Vietnam dies: Tran Cong Man, a leading communist revolutionary, has died at the age of 72 in Hanoi, a report said yesterday, AFP reports from Hanoi.

Man joined the communist party in 1945 and eventually rose to become the political commissar of the school of army engineering officers, the Thanh Nien Newspaper reported. He was also the editor in chief of Quan Doi Nhan, the army daily newspaper and former vice general secretary of the Vietnam Association of Journalists.

5 shot dead in Arkansas in US: Three children and two young women were shot dead in Arkansas, police said Thursday, two days after students were slain at school elsewhere in the southern US state, AFP reports from Washington.

"These were murders, we are conducting an appropriate investigation," said Captain Ken Slocum of the Jefferson county sheriff department near the town of Redfield where the killings occurred.

Rebels holding 5 in Bogota: Leftist rebels are holding three Americans, an Italian man and a French woman, officials confirmed Thursday, AFP reports from Bogota, Colombia.

They said the five were captured Monday while on a bird-watching tour 75 kilometres (46 miles) east of Bogota. Rebels of the revolutionary armed forces of Colombia (FARC) Monday set up roadblocks around the capital and rounded several motorists amid clashes with security forces.

Quake hits Central Italy: An Earthquake lasting 10 seconds shook Central Italy at 1626 GMT on Thursday and was felt as far away as Rome and Venice, civil security officials said, AFP reports from Rome.

There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries. The intensity of the quake, which had its epicentre in the Apennine mountain range between Umbria and Marche about 150 kilometres (90 miles) north of Rome, was not immediately given by the National Geophysical Institute.

5 students killed, 8 hurt in Rwanda: Hutu rebels attacked two schools in northwest Rwanda, killing five high school students at one and looting at the other, a local official said Thursday, AP reports from Kigali Rwanda.

The looting occurred while US President Bill Clinton visited the capital of Kigali, where he promised to help Rwandans bring stability to their country recovering from a 1994 genocide.

Lankan air force bombs rebel ships, 60 killed

COLOMBO, Mar 27: Sri Lankan air force bombers attacked a flotilla of separatist Tamils in the northern seas, killing 60 guerrillas, a news report said Friday, reports AP.

Defence ministry's spokesman Major Kumara Dewage confirmed the attack but could not give details of casualties.

The island newspaper quoting an unnamed spokesman for the air force said the flotilla consisted of 20 boats and that at least 60 rebels were killed in Thursday's attack in Mullaitivu. The area is 280 kilometers (173 miles) northwest of Colombo.

There was no independent confirmation of the attack, as the area is out of bounds for reporters and civilians.

The rebels are demanding a separate homeland, accusing the Sinhalese majority of oppressing the Tamil minority.

The war began in 1983 and has so far claimed 51,000 lives.

Yeltsin nominates Kiriyenko as PM

MOSCOW, Mar 27: President Boris Yeltsin on Friday said he would name acting Prime Minister Sergei Kiriyenko for the job permanently, Russian news agencies reported, reports AP.

Yeltsin, in a letter to parliament's lower house, the State Duma, asked lawmakers to approve his choice of Kiriyenko to head the Russian government.

The Duma must vote on Kiriyenko's appointment within a week. If the Duma rejects Yeltsin's candidates for prime minister three times, then the president can disband the parliament and call new elections.

Kiriyenko, a young reformer, was plucked from political obscurity on Monday after Yeltsin fired his Cabinet. Kiriyenko, 35, who was the oil minister in the old government, is expected to face a tough fight for parliamentary approval.

Chechnya, its capital renamed

MOSCOW, Mar 26: Chechnya on Wednesday was renamed the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and its capital Grozny was renamed Dzhokhar, after the late independence leader, following an amendment to the constitution by parliament, reports AFP.

Legislators ordered the name change to be implemented throughout the republic and on all official documents, Interfax news agency reported.

Dzhokhar Dudayev died in an explosion in April 1996 in southern Chechnya. His body, however, was never recovered and rumours persist that he is still alive and living in hiding.

He declared his tiny north Caucasus republic independent in 1991 and led the 21-month war against Russia from December 1994.

Diplomats head out for 2nd inspection of weapons to Iraqi presidential site

BAGHDAD, Mar 27: Diplomats headed out Friday for a second visit to a presidential site with UN weapons inspectors searching for Iraq's weapons of mass destruction at highly guarded sites previously placed off-limits, reports AP.

On Thursday, the experts for the first time inspected a palace compound of President Saddam Hussein — one of eight sites at the heart of a longstanding dispute between Iraq and the United Nations that threatened to spill over into violence.

Jayantha Dhanapala, leader of the corps of diplomats, refused Friday to give details of the 8-hour inspection of the Radwaniyah palace complex or discuss relations between the Iraqis and the UN experts.

"We had a hard long day. We worked hard... I ate a chicken sandwich," Dhanapala, the UN top disarmament expert, told reporters.

Other diplomats praised Iraqi cooperation with the team.

Horst Hothloff of Germany, described Iraqi cooperation as "fantastic, absolutely positive."

"I am personally really impressed by the spirit of cooperation. The team saw everything (it) wanted to see," Hothloff said, without elaborating.

UN spokeswoman Janet Sullivan said Thursday's visit to the Radwaniyah complex laid the groundwork for more elaborate inspections later.

The palace compound comprises at least a dozen villas, five artificial lakes and streets lined with palm trees. In December, the Iraqi authorities took foreign reporters to Radwaniyah, one of Iraq's largest presidential complexes, in an attempt to prove that the compound contained no weapons. Until the inspectors certify

that Iraq is rid of all its weapons of mass destruction, the UN Security Council will not lift economic sanctions imposed after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Iraq has long insisted it has met all the requirements of the UN resolutions that impose the sanctions, which include a ban on the unlimited export of the country's most valuable commodity, oil.

On Friday, Dhanapala and the multinational group of 20 diplomats emerged from their downtown Baghdad hotel and were driven to the UN headquarters in another part of the capital to meet with the UN arms experts. Hotel employees loaded the van with sandwiches for the long day ahead. The diplomats and the experts will leave together later for the inspection.

Pakistan calls upon int'l community to impose sanctions against India

ISLAMABAD, Mar 27: Pakistan yesterday called upon the international community to impose sanctions against India for its plans to induct nuclear weapons, reports PTI.

The international law provides for certain sanctions against the states which intend to produce nuclear weapons. Pakistan Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan said referring to the national agenda of the BJP-led coalition government.

BJP has made its intentions known to the world. There would have been a hue and cry all over the world, had a Muslim country made such a pronouncement, the official APP news Agency quoted Gohar

Ayub as saying immediately on his return from Saudi Arabia today.

"It is the first government which has announced that it would expedite its nuclear programme," the minister said.

Gohar Ayub rejected the contention of Defence Minister George Fernandes that India's nuclear policy was defence oriented saying "nuclear weapons are never built for a defence purposes. New Delhi's nuclear programme was aimed against Pakistan," he said.

The foreign minister returned here yesterday along with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from a two-day trip to Saudi Arabia.

Spy agencies find no evidence of Iraq exporting major weapons

MUNICH, Germany, Mar 27: European spy agencies have not been able to substantiate a US congressional report that Iraq had smuggled weapons of mass destruction to other Arab countries, the Economics Ministry said Thursday, reports AP.

A ministry spokeswoman, speaking on condition of anonymity, was confirming information in a report in the Munich-based Sueddeutsche Zeitung, which had quoted a confidential four-page memo from the ministry.

However, the newspaper's wording that the congressional report largely amounted to "disinformation from US security agencies," did not come from the memo, the spokeswoman said.

Australia, NZ for closer defence collaboration

AUCKLAND, Mar 27: New Zealand and Australia on Friday agreed to greater defence collaboration, including in the procurement of military equipment, reports AP.

Australian Defence Minister Ian McLachlan said he saw "some enormous buying opportunities together," not only in purchasing new items, but also in upgrading existing hardware. "We will now be looking carefully at whether we together can save ourselves some money," he said.

McLachlan said it was too early to say whether future joint spending might occur, but one area could be in the upgrading of armoured vehicles.

He said a good example of collaboration had been in the ANAZC frigate project, which he described as a sensible deal.

Assassination of Rajiv SC stays death sentence of 26 Indians, Lankans

NEW DELHI, Mar 27: India's Supreme Court today stayed the death sentences of 26 Indians and Sri Lankans found guilty of involvement in the 1991 assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, court officials said, reports AP.

The 26 were condemned to hang by a special court in January for conspiracy to murder.

A panel of three Supreme Court judges said it would hear appeals on behalf of the accused, listed as members or sympathisers of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of Sri Lanka.

A court in Madras on January 28 found the LTTE, which is fighting for an independent homeland in Sri Lanka's north

and east, guilty of assassinating Rajiv, at an election rally near Madras on May 21, 1991.

The Supreme Court ruling will mean an immediate delay of two months after it called for the case records to be translated from Tamil, the state language of Tamil Nadu, into English.

It ordered 100 translators to be employed and said the work should be completed in two months.

"The hearing on the appeal will start immediately thereafter," the judges said.

The January judgement followed almost seven years of investigations, during which 1,044 witnesses were cited by the prosecution.

Russia's bonds with Europe to give a dominant role in world

RUSSIA, Mar 27: Russia's bonds with Europe will give the continent a dominant role in the world, President Boris Yeltsin said Thursday after summit talks with the leaders of France and Germany, reports AP.

"Greater Europe will be a hegemony, because Russia has joined it," Yeltsin said at a joint news conference with French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl after their first "Troika summit."

"At the moment, Europe is a powerful structure, and currently there is no other structure more powerful in the world. Everybody must know this and remember it," Yeltsin said.

He hosted the two leaders at Bor, a residence in a pine forest 48 kilometres (30 miles) south of Moscow. He has forged close personal friendships with both leaders through earlier informal meetings.

His remarks appeared to be a veiled warning to the United States, echoing his repeated calls for a counterweight to Washington's global influence since the end of the Cold War.

"The multi-polar world will be born here, not out of single country, but from certain countries, certain leaders," said Yeltsin.

Despite Yeltsin's rhetoric, analysts were lukewarm about the prospects for a Paris-Bonn-Moscow axis.

"This new alliance is Utopian in the current situation," said Maxim Yusin, a political analyst at the Izvestia daily.

"The three leaders just have ties of personal friendship, and once one of them leaves the scene, the Troika will fall apart," Yusin said, recalling that Yeltsin had much cooler relations with former French President Francois Mitterrand.

Yusin said neither France nor Germany were ready to

form a joint counterweight to the United States, and "This will not take shape under Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov."

Yevgeny Volk, head of the heritage Foundation think-tank here, said the Troika idea was "masterminded by Primakov to weaken NATO and aggravate the differences between the United States and European powers — but it's a very short-sighted and futile policy."

Yeltsin's calls for a multi-polar world were part of Primakov's doctrine, originating from an inferiority complex in the Russian political establishment since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Volk said.

Despite further speculation about his health, Yeltsin appeared in good form Thursday, beaming for the cameras and vigorously shaking hands with Kohl.

The summit was aimed at boosting Russia's integration with Europe, with security issues high on the agenda.

But it was overshadowed by Yeltsin's dramatic dismissal of the government this week, which threw Russia into political turmoil.

Yeltsin gave a further hint Thursday that his young protégé Sergei Kiriyenko would be his choice for prime minister by saying that age was no barrier to high office.

Kiriyenko, 35, was appointed acting premier after Yeltsin sacked Viktor Chernomyrdin, who had served him loyally for five years.

The summit agenda included Russia's relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and regional

hotspots including Kosovo, scene of a bloody crackdown by Serbian police against Albanian nationalists.

All three leaders voiced unanimity over moves to resolve the Kosovo conflict peacefully. Interfax quoted a Yeltsin aide as saying:

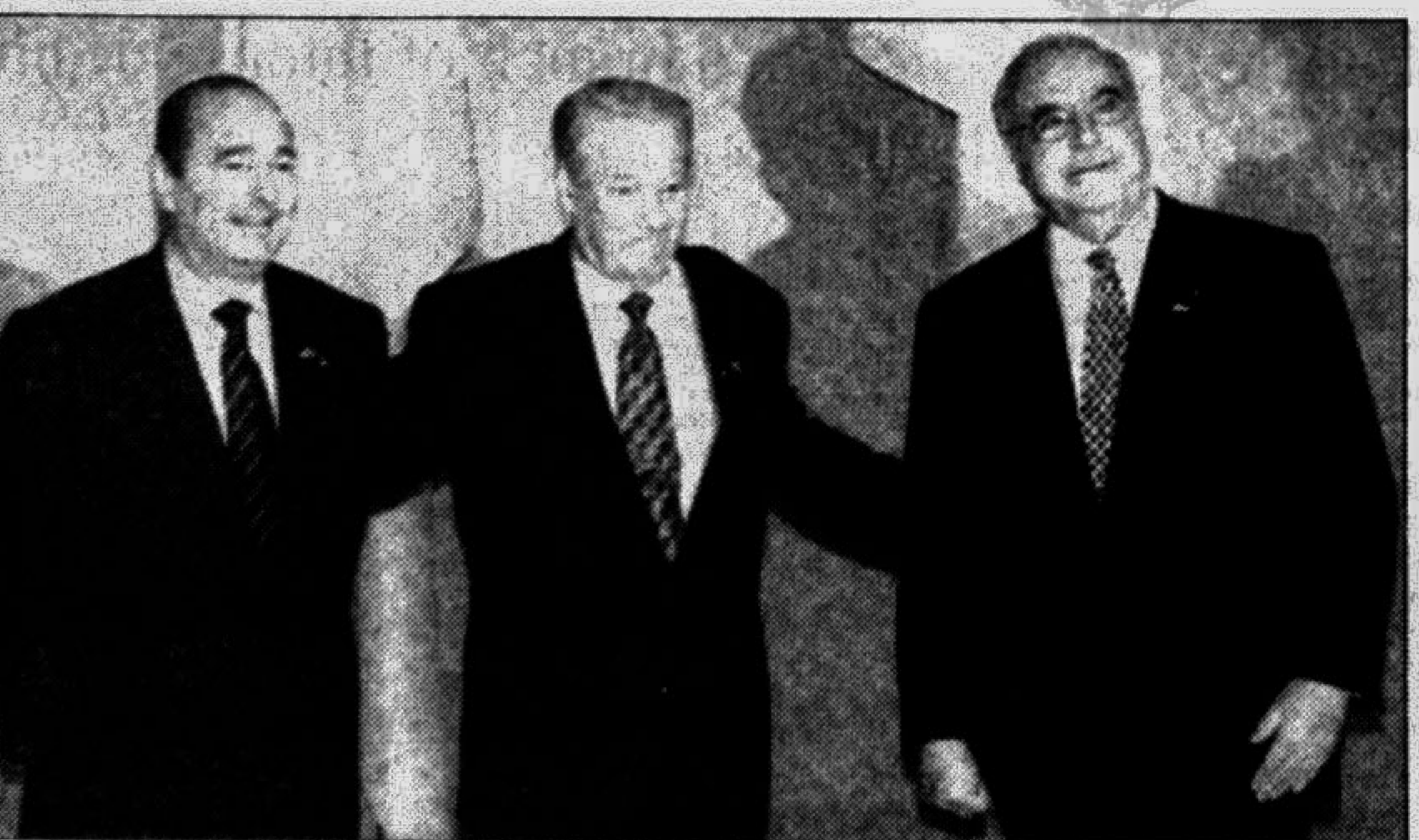
Yeltsin said the Troika meeting was "very productive and successful. It must be continued and have an historic place in the world."

Chirac echoed his comments, saying the meeting was "historically important."

"As the European Union is beginning a necessary and ambitious enlargement, we are all aware of the importance of having trusting, friendly and constructive ties between the EU and Russia," Chirac said.

Kohl stressed that Russia "is Germany's most important neighbour."

Chirac said the next Troika summit would be held in Paris, probably in May 1999.



French President Jacques Chirac, left, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, right, smile as they pose to photographers prior to their talks in Bor, a wooden retreat outside Moscow, Thursday. — AP/UNB photo



A few of the pictures from West Heath School Thursday, showing former famous pupil Lady Diana Spencer when she returned as the Princess of Wales, to visit. The entire contents of West Heath School near Sevenoakes in Kent are to be auctioned on March 30. — AP/UNB photo