

Britain may offer N Ireland referendum on its future

LONDON, Mar 28: The British government may offer Northern Ireland a referendum on its future every five years as a way of encouraging the IRA's political wing, Sinn Fein, to sign up to a peace deal next month, it was reported today, says AFP.

The proposal, which has not yet been submitted to participants in the northern Ireland peace talks, aims to entice republicans into backing a deal which is sure to fall far short of their goal of a United Ireland, the Financial Times said.

An anonymous senior British official told the London newspaper that he hoped the idea would appeal to Sinn Fein, which is trying to convince its supporters that any settlement will be a "transitional" step on the road to Irish unity.

As negotiators enter the final two weeks of talks, ahead of an April 9 deadline set by the British and Irish governments Britain appears to be using the lure of future referendum to keep the republicans on board, the FT said.

Demographic projections suggest that Catholics, who make up 43 per cent of the population of the British-ruled province, are set to close the gap with the Protestant majority.

But David Trimble, the leader of the Ulster unionists, the largest pro-British Protestant party, described the plan as a recipe for disaster.

Palestinians won't accept changes in '97 accord

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Mar 28: The Palestinians said they would insist on a far-reaching Israeli troop withdrawal in the West Bank, dampening hopes that the latest US peace initiative could succeed, reports AP.

The Palestinian Cabinet convened Friday evening, just before Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat met for three hours with the chief US Middle East mediator, Dennis Ross.

Ross is shuttling between Israeli and Palestinian leaders to win acceptance for a US proposal for an Israeli troop pull-back from 13.1 per cent of the West Bank over 12 weeks, with each gradual withdrawal to be met by Palestinian security gestures. The American proposal has yet to be announced formally, but it has been widely reported and US officials have not denied it.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has rejected such a pullback, saying he would not return more than 9 per cent of the land to the Palestinians before beginning talks on final borders.

Under a US-backed accord reached a year ago, Israel had pledged to carry out three pull-backs by this summer. The Palestinians took that to mean that by the end of the withdrawal, they would control most of the West Bank before

talks begin on a permanent peace agreement.

However, Netanyahu later said he would make only one withdrawal, and this only if the Palestinians met a series of security demands, such as arresting and disarming Islamic militants.

The US plan was to break the year-long stalemate by proposing a withdrawal more generous than the one offered by Israel, but far less than what the Palestinians had expected.

Ross said Friday, after meetings with Netanyahu and Arafat, that the plan was first presented to both sides in mid-January and that the purpose of his trip was to "finalise the ideas."

"Both sides, I think, will be digesting some of what I have conveyed," Ross said, adding that he expected to hear the leaders' final response in another round of talks before returning to Washington. Based on Ross' report, US president Bill Clinton will then decide whether to go public with the American initiative, a step that would widely be seen as imposing pressure on Israel.

The Palestinian Cabinet decided Friday that it would not accept changes in the 1997 accord.

"We are very clear on not reopening discussions or renego-

tiating signed agreements or accepting modifications that will violate the integrity of the agreements... and that is redeployment in three full phases," said Hanan Ashrawi, minister of higher education. The Cabinet also said all construction in Jewish settlements must cease.

The Palestinians have been careful until now not to reject the US initiative outright, and it was not clear whether the position stated by Ashrawi on behalf of the Cabinet would make it impossible for Arafat to accept the American plan as a first step.

Earlier in the day, Ross held talks with Netanyahu, and a second meeting with the Israeli leader was scheduled for Saturday evening.

In talks with Netanyahu, Ross did not discuss the scope of a withdrawal envisioned by the United States, said the Israeli Cabinet secretary, Danny Navah.

"There was no talk of numbers. There was no talk of percentages," Navah told Israel TV's Channel One, adding that a 13 per cent withdrawal "is totally unacceptable to the government." Netanyahu has said he was ready to sweeten a proposed 9 per cent pullback by giving the Palestinians land adjacent to areas that are already autonomous.

Ranariddh's planned return protested in Cambodia

PHNOM PENH, Mar 28: About 1,000 people marched Saturday to protest the planned return of deposed Cambodian co-premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh, displaying a minor but well-organised example of the kind of political pressure the returning leader will face, reports AP.

Although some protesters claimed to be worried that new fighting would break out if Ranariddh came back to his homeland, the demonstration appeared to be more of an event staged by the government as a warning rather than a spontaneous popular protest.

Many of those marching said that they were promised, but did not receive, money if they participated.

After the march ended, protesters were offered free food and water. Many, apparently brought to the capital city of Phnom Penh from the provinces, were given rides back north in about 40 waiting trucks.

Ranariddh, in exile since he was deposed by co-premier Hun Sen in a coup d'etat last July, plans to return Monday to begin preparing for a general election on July 26. The prince is initially scheduled to stay for a week at most.

The demonstration was widely believed to have been orchestrated by Hun Sen, the country's strongman who has set obstacle after obstacle in the

way of Ranariddh's political comeback.

As the son of the country's popular constitutional monarch, King Norodom Sihanouk, Ranariddh is potentially his only serious opponent in the upcoming election.

The demonstrators began their march early Saturday at the Hun Sen Park near the capital's centre and walked for about five kilometres before dispersing at the National Assembly.

Cyclo drivers peddled their three-wheeled pedicabs through the streets, alongside women from the countryside carrying young children on their hips, disabled soldiers, and labourers. Traffic on the capital's main thoroughfares was clogged for almost two hours.

Some of the protesters carried signs with slogans such as "Will Ranariddh bring Khmer Rouge hard-liners when he comes to Phnom Penh?" and "Will he bring weapons?"

The signs referred to charges against Ranariddh which allege that before being deposed, he conspired with Khmer Rouge guerrillas to stage his own takeover and smuggle heavy weapons into the country.

Despite his denials and scant credible evidence, he was convicted in absentia of both charges in show trials staged by Hun Sen-controlled courts.

"We don't like Ranariddh because he will bring war and weapons again," said Khan Sarom, who criticised the prince over a bullhorn as he walked alongside the protesters. "Not only the leaders in this demonstration, but everyone wants peace."

About two-thirds of those who suffer strokes experience such severe disabilities as paralysis and loss of speech and memory.

Worldwide more than 4 million people suffer each year from strokes, the third-leading cause of death and the leading cause of disability, although many of them have high cholesterol.

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BJP stages 'dummy run'

NEW DELHI, Mar 28: India's New Hindu nationalist coalition government, facing a touch-and-go confidence motion here today, planned to stage a "dummy run" in the morning to take sure its members did not blunder during the real vote, a newspaper reported, says AFP.

The Asian Age said the mock vote was planned to make new members of parliament confident of the ballot procedure.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's 17-party coalition, while just short of a parliamentary majority, is expected to scrape through the motion because of abstentions.

It was sworn in last week following February-March elections.

India has had five governments in the past two years. The previous Hindu nationalist administration, in 1996, lasted just 13 days.

The newspaper, quoting coalition sources, said the practice session was "thought necessary... because a sizeable chunk of its members are first timers in the Lok Sabha (lower house)."

Inspectors to go north for palace searches in two Iraqi towns

BAGHDAD, Mar 28: UN arms experts and diplomats were travelling Saturday to northern Iraq to inspect two more palace compounds of President Saddam Hussein in their search for weapons of mass destruction, reports AP.

Antonio Montiro, the spokesman of the corps of diplomats, confirmed that they are going to north for an extended period but refused to give details. Other diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they will be away for three days in the towns of Tikrit and Mosul.

As is the routine, the 20 diplomats plus the leader, Jayantha Dhanapala of Sri Lanka, drove from their downtown hotel to the UN headquarters to team up with the arms experts. The larger group later headed out in a convoy of about 20 vehicles escorted by the Iraqis to the north.

Iran rejects any reconciliation with US

TEHRAN, Mar 28: The head of the Iranian judicial system, Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi rejected any reconciliation between his country and the United States on Friday, a day after Washington called for direct talks with Tehran, reports AFP.

"A rapprochement with oppression (the United States) is impossible," Yazdi said as he led weekly Friday prayers before several thousand Shiite Muslim faithful at Tehran University.

"Oppression is hostile to Islam as political power and what happened in Algeria and Turkey proves it."

"In Algeria, oppression has done everything possible to prevent Islam from taking power," he added.

Yazdi also criticised Turkey for distancing itself "from the obvious principles of Islam" and prohibiting women from wearing the Islamic veil.

"If Turkey had really been independent, it would not have favoured Israel first with military cooperation and then with economic ties," he said.

57 civilians massacred in Algeria

ALGIERS, Mar 28: Fifty-seven civilians were massacred overnight in unrest in Algeria in which nine suspected Islamic extremists and a security officer were also killed, a security services said Friday, reports AFP.

The civilian lives were claimed in three different clashes representing the heaviest bloodshed since the series of massacres that bloodied the fasting month of Ramadan, mainly in January.

Forty-six people were killed overnight in the town of Bouirat Lahdab, in the Djelfa region some 250 kilometres (150 miles) south of Algiers, and another 11 were killed in Youb, in the Saïda region, 350 kilometres southeast of the capital.

Elsewhere, the security services said in a communique, nine armed Islamic extremists were killed Thursday, six in Mascara, just north of Saïda, one in the northeastern city of Constantine and two in Birkhadem, an Algiers suburb.

A member of the security forces was killed in the operation in Birkhadem.

The security services said an investigation was underway into the new killings, which broke a period of relative calm since Ramadan in January, when more than 1,000 people were massacred.

Kosovo crisis No headway in talks with Milosevic: OSCE chairman

BELGRADE, Mar 28: The current chairman of the OSCE, Bronislaw Geremek admitted late Friday that he had made no headway in talks with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic on proposals to ease tension in Serbia's violence-wracked Kosovo province, reports AFP.

Geremek said he had won no concessions from Milosevic or from Yugoslav Foreign Minister Zivadin Jovanovic whom he met earlier.

Geremek, who is also Polish Foreign Minister, conceded that he was leaving Belgrade empty-handed.

He said there had been no change in the position of Yugoslavia, (Serbia and Montenegro) with regard to Kosovo. Geremek came to Belgrade to try to prepare a round table with the Yugoslav authorities and the Albanian leadership in Kosovo, he earlier said Milosevic had given "preliminary agreement" to the initiative.

However Milosevic reiterated Friday Belgrade's long-held view that Kosovo was an internal affair to Serbia, in a statement to Tanjug news agency Friday, Milosevic said: "We cannot accept a foreign envoy for internal matters, which is what Kosovo is."

Geremek had also suggested that former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez might undertake a mission to Yugoslavia on behalf of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe).

The mission would have the support of the contact group for the former Yugoslavia: United States, Russia, Britain, Germany, France and Italy and by the European Union.

But there again, Geremek secured no agreement from Milosevic.

The OSCE leader called too for OSCE permanent missions in three regions of Yugoslavia with significant ethnic minorities to be reopened, namely in Kosovo.

Colombian rebels free hostages

Some of the hostages plucked by Marxist rebels from a highway outside Bogota were released on Friday, ending their five-day ordeal, but four Americans and an Italian were not among those freed, authorities said. Reuters Reports from Bogota.

The army said that at least 30 civilians were carried off by Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels on Monday after they blockaded a stretch of major highway southeast of the capital for seven hours.

UNSC votes for 1st mission in Africa

The UN Security Council on Friday voted unanimously for the first peacekeeping mission in Africa in five years, by sending up to 1,350 UN troops to Central African Republic, AFP says from United Nations.

The UN troops are to replace an all-African peacekeeping force deployed alongside French troops amid efforts to ensure stability ahead of planned elections in the impoverished central African country in line with peace accords. France had bankrolled the African force which quelled a series of army mutinies over the payment of wage arrears in the past two years.

Vinod Khanna confident of long innings in politics

NEW DELHI, Mar 28: Cinesart-turned-politician Vinod Khanna is confident of a long innings in politics unlike his other superstar colleagues, reports PTI.

The newly elected BJP MP from Gurdaspur in Punjab told a private TV channel that to ensure the longevity of his political career, he will stay in his constituency to solve the problems of the people efficiently.

Asked why he joined the BJP after working and campaigning for the Congress, Khanna said the people gave 45 years to Congress and one chance has to be given to some other party.

He said the BJP, with its host of experienced leaders, would be able to achieve what the Congress could not in the past.

One need not have political experience to become a politician, he said adding the needs of the nation are clear and we have come here to achieve these quickly, according to a press release from Media Pvt Ltd.

Asked about his roles as actor, Sanyasi, father and MP, Khanna said one should work at each of his roles wholeheartedly and "I have done so."

Mandela tells Clinton Set example, make peace with Cuba, Libya

CAPE TOWN, Mar 28: Nelson Mandela lectured US President Bill Clinton to "set an example to all of us" and make peace with adversaries in Iran, Libya and Cuba. Then he took Clinton to the desolate island where he was jailed for 18 years in his struggle against apartheid, reports AP.

"This was my home," the 79-year-old Mandela said Friday, showing Clinton the bleak cell with only a bucket for a toilet. Gripping the window bars, Clinton looked out on the high-walled courtyard where Mandela once tended a garden and hid the handwritten notes that became his autobiography.

Clinton said it was amazing that Mandela emerged "without having his heart turned to stone, without giving up his dream for South Africa."

Amid the celebration of Clinton's visit as the first US president in South Africa, there were jarring policy differences. But Clinton, in a reversal after

talks with Mandela about Nigeria, seemed to drop US insistence that Nigeria's repressive ruler, Gen Sani Abacha, completely relinquish power.

Even while they disagreed on some topics, Clinton and Mandela warmly embraced each other as friends. Trying to steady the frail Mandela down the steps, it was Clinton who stumbled. Clinton smiled throughout a joint news conference despite Mandela's admonitions.

The two leaders discussed their policies toward Iran, Libya and Cuba but did not agree, US officials said. Urging Clinton to take the first steps toward reconciliation, Mandela made the point that he has forgiven the former South African government that "slaughtered our people, massacred them like flies."

The United States, as the willful leader of the world, should set an example to all of us," Mandela said.

Arrest of illegal immigrants continues in US

PHOENIX, Mar 28: The US Border Patrol calls them OTMs "other than Mexicans" and reports a resurgence in arrests of illegal immigrants from such far-flung countries as China, India and El Salvador, reports AP.

"We're already arrested 161 OTMs this month," Border Patrol spokesman Rob Daniels said Friday. "This tends to be a trend and it appears the numbers are starting to pick up."

The patrol's Tucson-based sector is the busiest for illegal crossings, averaging more than 950 arrests daily. Illegal immigrants from Mexico comprise 99 per cent of the sector's apprehensions, but Daniels said 540 immigrants from other countries have been taken into custody since October.

If that rate continues through the end of the fiscal year on June 30, the arrest total would approach 1,300.

That compares to 820 OTMs and 925 the previous two years. Why the recent upswing? It may be tied in to the record amount of drugs being confiscated at the border these days.

"We've seized 21,200 pounds (9,600 kilos) of marijuana so far this month with a few days to go, compared to 9,000 pounds (4,100 kilos) in March of last

year," Daniels said.

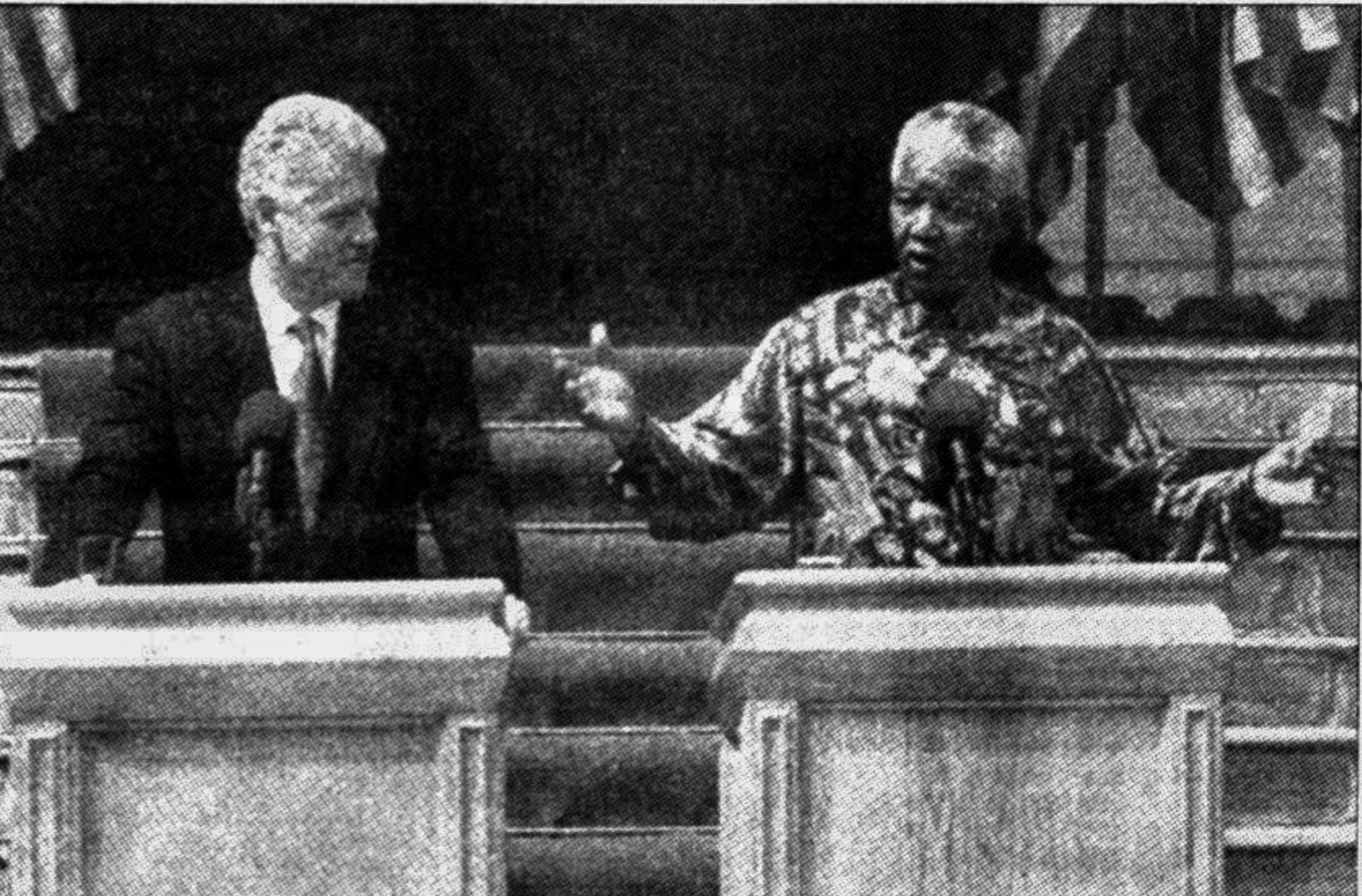
As an example of the diversity, border agents stopped a truck Monday near Casa Grande and found 55 illegal immigrants inside — 25 from Mexico, 22 from El Salvador, five from Guatemala, two from India and one from Costa Rica.

Daniels said some Chinese immigrants picked up this year total of paying up to \$36,000 to be smuggled into the United States.

Many go through travel agents, booking trips to Mexico or other countries in South and Central America with loose visa requirements and then using "coyotes" to smuggle them into Arizona on their way to other cities, according to Daniels.

In all, immigrants from 19 countries have been detained after crossing the Arizona border this fiscal year, including 212 Salvadorans, 142 from Guatemala, 79 from China, 60 from Honduras and 12 from Bulgaria.

In fiscal 1997, 25 immigrants from India were detained. Others caught in lesser numbers included immigrants from the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Russia, the United Kingdom, Iran, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan,



US President Bill Clinton, left, looks on while South African President Nelson Mandela delivers a statement during a joint press conference outside Tuynhuis residence at parliament in Cape Town Friday. Clinton on a six-nation African tour, is scheduled to visit a game park in Botswana and Senegal. — AP/UNB photo

Hillary — Clinton's key adviser in Lewensky controversy

WASHINGTON, Mar 28: Far from shrinking from the allegations of sexual misconduct against President Bill Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton is a driving force behind her husband's political and legal strategy. The precise nature of that role has become a critical point for lawyers wrangling over executive privilege, reports AP.

Clinton's attorneys have argued that strategic conversations among presidential advisers can be withheld from prosecutor Kenneth Starr's grand jury — and that Hillary is one such adviser.

"She's the President's best friend and her opinion matters more than anybody else," said Democratic consultant James Carville, who worked closely with Hillary on the 1992 campaign. "I don't know for a fact, but I would be awfully surprised if she wasn't a key adviser in the Monica Lewinsky case."

It may seem odd that Hillary would not flinch from advising her husband on matters that stem from alleged infidelities, but it is a role she is familiar with.

Six years ago, when Gennifer Flowers claimed a long-term affair with Clinton while he was governor, Hillary helped calm the uproar by publicly declaring their marriage sound. She said she was not just "sitting here like some little woman standing by my man."

Similarly, on the January morning when the Lewinsky story broke, Hillary appeared unshaken and moved quickly to shore up support. She picked up the telephone and began dialing her network of friends.

Presidential aides, speaking only on condition of anonymity, say there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to support the assumption that Hillary is a party to the executive privilege maneuvering. — Hillary conferred with senior presidential advisers, including communications director Sidney Blumenthal, to shape her comments on NBC television. Her talk about a "vast right-wing conspiracy," a phrase she didn't clear with advisers beforehand, helped turn attention from Clinton's conduct to Starr's inquiry.

She led a chorus of internal criticism about Clinton's first denial, telling aides his statement was "too vacillating."

Days later, the president stood before TV cameras and firmly said he never had sexual relations "with that woman."

Hillary urged her husband not to mention the Lewinsky inquiry in the State of the Union address. "It will just muddle up," the speech she told one adviser. Nobody mentioned the subject again.

Hillary fought to release Kathleen Willey's letters to the media. Many aides opposed the idea, either out of fear that it would backfire or out of a desire to keep the notes as an ace in the hole for when the controversy worsened. Hillary didn't think it could get any worse, with Willey about to appear on CBS TV to accuse the president of making a sexual advance.

An aide close to Hillary, also speaking on condition of anonymity, said the first lady didn't prevail at first but then "worked through back channels to get word out to the press that there were Willey letters." That left the White House with no other choice: Clinton lawyers released the letters a day after Willey's interview, a move that released the letters a day after Willey's interview.

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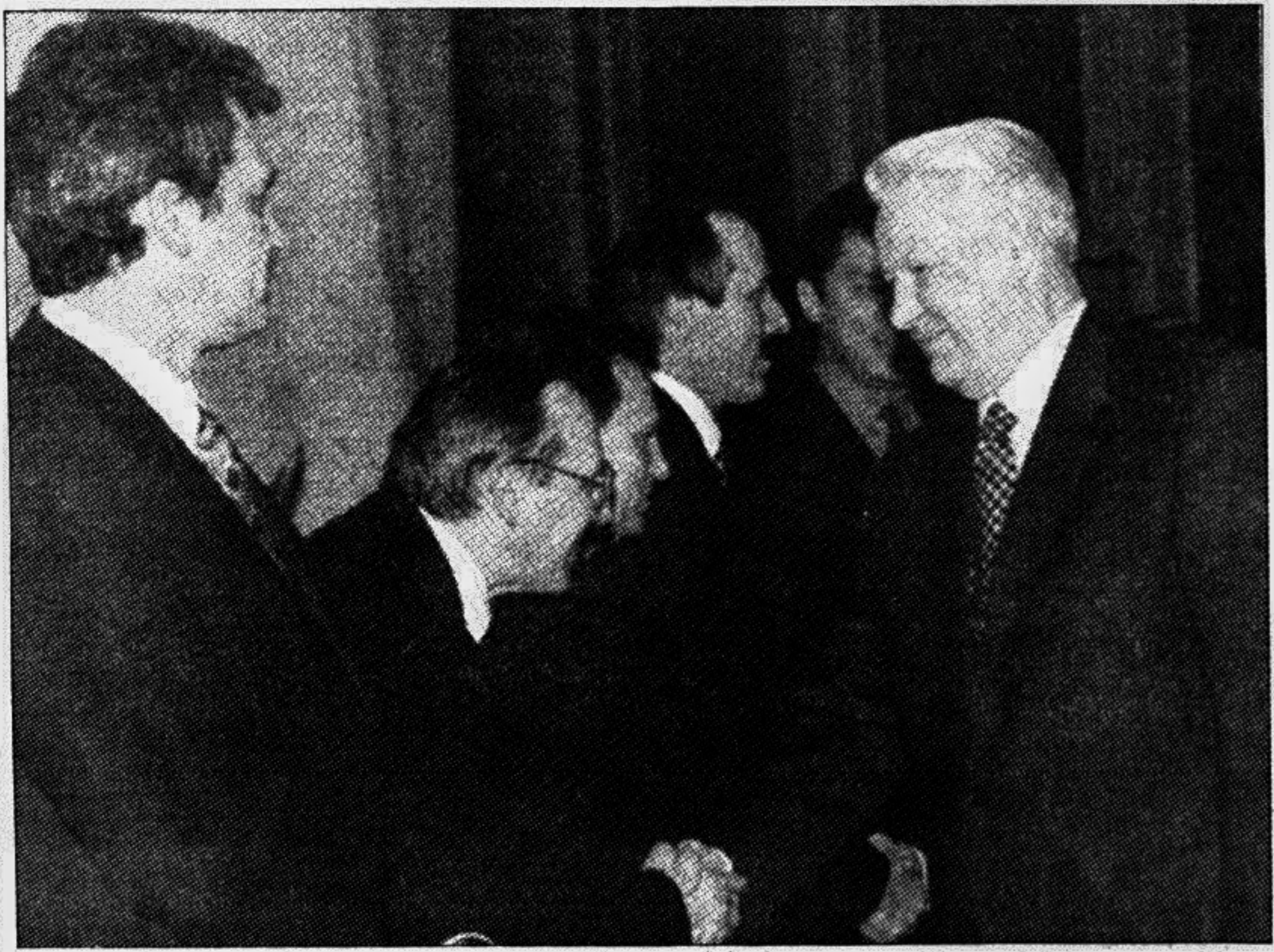
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Russian President Boris Yeltsin, left, shakes hands with Yakov Urinson during a meeting in Kremlin, Friday. Urinson served as economic minister in the previous government which Yeltsin ousted on Monday. It remains unclear what ministers who served in the government will be offered job in the new cabinet. The other persons are unidentified. — AP/UNB photo