

International

US, Russia inching closer to deal

HELSINKI, June 18: US and Russian negotiators on Friday resumed marathon talks on Russia's role in a Kosovo peace-keeping force, inching towards a compromise that could be clinched at a summit in Cologne on Sunday, reports AFP.

The meeting opened at 0600 GMT between US Defence Secretary William Cohen, his Russian counterpart Igor Sergeev and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.

They were joined within minutes by a late-arriving US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

"Everything will be fine. We will find an agreement," said Boris Mayorsky, a senior Russian diplomat.

The US and Russian leaders matched that optimism. President Boris Yeltsin said through a spokesman in Moscow that he "hopes to reach a mutual understanding with the US president on the Kosovo problem in Cologne."

He is due to meet US Presi-

dent Bill Clinton in the German city on Sunday on the sidelines of the G8 meeting, grouping the world's seven leading industrialized nations and Russia.

Midnight Sunday is the deadline for the final withdrawal of Belgrade's forces from Kosovo.

Yeltsin also called negotiations over Russia's participation in the force, dubbed KFOR, as "difficult."

For his part Clinton, speaking in Cologne, said he thought an agreement with Russia over the Kosovo conflict was near.

"I don't think it should take much longer," Clinton said.

Washington has flatly rejected the idea of a separate Russian-run sector in Kosovo for fear it would lead to de-facto partition of the separatist Serbian province, suggesting instead a Russian "area of responsibility."

Yeltsin in an emotional outburst Thursday said he "categorically disagrees" with NATO's position, adding: "We still have a few things up our sleeves

about this matter."

Sergeev also repeated that Moscow had not given up hope on getting its own sector to police in the separatist province.

Both Cohen and Albright have consulted with allies that have each been assigned one of five sectors in Kosovo, US officials said.

A senior US official said Britain, France, Germany and Italy were contacted because "what is being discussed affects the equities of other countries."

But the talks dragged on Friday afternoon, with William Fallon, a US delegation member, saying only: "We are still working."

The two sides broke for lunch after four hours of talks at 1000 GMT.

Media reports in Moscow speculated that Russia may be assigned a military zone within either a French or an Italian sector, whereas a Berlin daily said Germany could share its sector.

On Thursday, the London representative of the Kosovo

Liberation Army (KLA) warned the separatist guerrillas would not disarm if Russia refused to accept NATO command of the international security force or were given its own zone of control.

The decision to continue the negotiations on Thursday came shortly after Cohen presented the Russians with a second US proposal aimed at breaking the impasse.

One source said talks between the two sides continued even after the Sergeev-Cohen meeting broke up.

The experts meeting lasted a good part of the night, one US official said.

In another sign of détente, the Russian state airline Aeroflot announced that it planned to resume regular flights to Belgrade starting next week.

The issue is laced with emotion in Russia, which bitterly opposed the 11-week NATO campaign against its traditional ally and whose politicians pride themselves on play-

ing a decisive role in ending the airstrikes.

Lawmakers here are demanding a Russian-run sector in Kosovo, which they say is a fair reward and would reflect both Moscow's military strength and negotiating skill.

US President Bill Clinton said here Friday that an agreement was near on including Russia in a NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo.

"I don't think it should take much longer," Clinton said about talks that resumed Friday in Helsinki to resolve the problem caused by Russia demanding control of its own sector in Kosovo, something the West rejects.

Clinton was speaking before meeting here with Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, ahead of a G8 summit due to open later Friday in Cologne, in western Germany.

He said the US and Russian defense and foreign ministers meeting in Helsinki "are still working."



Ethnic Albanian Kosovars cross the road carrying Albanian flags in front of French armored vehicles in Mitrovica, Kosovo Thursday. France's first heavily-equipped KFOR troops arrived in Mitrovica with 15 tanks, where they control the main roads, according to General Xavier Delcourt, a senior officer at army headquarters in Mitrovica. — AFPphoto

India launches diplomatic drive to end 'Pak aggression'

NEW DELHI, June 18: India has launched a diplomatic offensive to end what it calls Pakistani "aggression" in Kashmir and while its rival is under pressure their conflict could still degenerate, diplomats and analysts warned Friday, reports AFP.

India has convinced most of the international community that it is the victim of the latest Kashmir conflict.

Indian troops are trying to dislodge Muslim separatist fighters from mountain peaks that dominate a key Kashmir route. India says the fighters slipped across from Pakistan along with Pakistani soldiers.

At the same time the two countries are fighting fierce artillery duels along the disputed frontier.

India has ruled out any negotiated settlement as the fighters are withdrawn. But Pakistan has denied any part in the operation.

Without a Pakistani withdrawal, the deadlock will remain and tension could get worse, unless the Indian military operation against the unwelcome peaks is successful.

The Muslim force, estimated around 1,000 men, is still getting supplies through and Indian military officials admit they may need time to win the campaign.

The Indian government could, at the same time, face mounting pressure to take radical action across the Line of Control that separates the rival armies in Kashmir. That would almost certainly ignite all-out hostilities.

Diplomats say the more the dispute drags on the greater the risk of a more serious conflict.

Firstly because India is to hold a national election in September and October and the Hindu nationalist government may seek a swift end to the

troubles. Secondly, winter will hit the Himalayas from October, freezing the combat theater, and India will not want to see any Pakistani occupation of its territory.

"That means there is only a few weeks to put diplomatic pressure on Pakistan," said one western diplomat. There is a "window of opportunity" until the end of July when India's election campaign will start, the source added.

India is fighting on two fronts. The army says it has taken some of the peaks, even if the progress is slow and costly in lost soldiers and civilians. It is also increasing attempts to make the international community put pressure on Pakistan.

Diplomats in New Delhi said there is a consensus that Pakistan is to blame for initiating the conflict and that the message is being clearly made to Islamabad.

US President Bill Clinton has already called Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to appeal for Pakistan forces to be withdrawn. Even China has not yet given public support for its key ally Pakistan.

India hopes the summit of the Group of Eight -- the seven industrial powers and Russia -- in Cologne, Germany this week-end will at least make a similar appeal to Clinton's.

India's national security adviser, Brajesh Mishra was in Europe before the summit to reinforce the campaign.

But India cannot be seen to be shouting to loud, observers said.

The international community also wants to see India and Pakistan resume talks to sort out their troubles. But India does not want to risk Kashmir becoming an international problem -- India's nightmare and Pakistan's dream.



Kashmiri schoolgirls perform their morning prayers as an Indian Army truck, part of a convoy, passes by on the Srinagar - Kargil road Thursday. Two mine blasts killed seven Indian security officers Friday on the highway, causing the army to cordon off the area as they performed house-to-house searches, and mine-clearing operations. — AFP photo

Change in admin
Businessman
replaces
governor
of Sindh

KARACHI, June 18: Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has removed the governor of troubled Sindh province and replaced him with a businessman with fewer powers, the official APP news agency said.

Mamnoon Hussain, president of the Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry, replaced retired lieutenant major general Moinuddin Haider as governor of the province.

Sindh province, of which Karachi is the capital and Pakistan's main business centre has been under direct federal rule since October in an attempt to quell religious, sectarian and political violence.

Sharif also appointed his education minister, Ghous Ali Shah, as an advisor on Sindh affairs, APP said late on Thursday night.

"The governor will act on the advice of the advisor, except for his (the governor's) discretionary powers," the agency quoted an official statement as said.

When Sharif imposed federal rule in Sindh after sacking his provincial government in October, Haider was given full powers to administer the province as a means to combat political and sectarian violence in Karachi.

No reason was given for the change.

Mbeki names new
South African
cabinet

JOHANNESBURG, June 18: President Thabo Mbeki chose loyalty, strong personality and political credentials over experience on Thursday in putting together South Africa's newest Cabinet of ministers, reports AP.

A day after his inauguration as the nation's second freely elected leader, Mbeki appointed a Cabinet likely to continue market-friendly policies and to pursue peacekeeping beyond the young democracy's borders.

But Mbeki promised to lay the course he set in running the government as deputy president under Nelson Mandela, who retired Wednesday when Mbeki took office.

"What we see here is partly a reshuffle," Mbeki said at a news conference in Pretoria, the capital. "We are not visualising any major changes in policy."

Mbeki retained the three Cabinet members from the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party -- a sometime foe of Mbeki's African National Congress -- including Inkatha leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi as home affairs minister. Their inclusion has helped keep the peace between the two parties, whose rivalry has led to thousands of deaths in the past.

Mbeki also created an interesting new dynamic by appointing Jacob Zuma, Mbeki's jovial second-in-command in the ANC, as deputy president and naming Zuma's ex-wife, former Health Minister Nkosazana Zuma as foreign minister.

Ms Zuma, a former ANC militant who replaces the lackluster Alfred Nzo, has often been at the center of controversy, taking on the tobacco and pharmaceutical industries and angering many AIDS activists for refusing to fund AZT, a widely-used treatment, for pregnant mothers infected with the virus.

Chirac countered that the British-Dutch plan was pointless because it would not be acceptable to Iraq.

UNSC still divided
over new Iraq policy

UNITED NATIONS, June 18: The United States has backed the suspension of the oil embargo against Iraq for the first time but the Security Council is still seriously divided as it searches for a new policy toward Baghdad, reports AP.

President Bill Clinton said Thursday in Paris that the United States supports a British-Dutch proposal that would suspend the embargo if Baghdad answers unresolved questions about its banned weapons programmes, a move that British officials called "encouraging."

But the United States and Britain are still at odds with the other three veto-wielding permanent Council members -- France, Russia and China. The differences were highlighted during Clinton's meeting with French President Jacques Chirac.

The most important difference between the British-Dutch draft resolution and a rival proposal by France, Russia and China is the condition for suspending sanctions.

The British and Dutch insist on further Iraqi compliance with its disarmament obligations before the oil embargo is suspended. The French, Russians and Chinese would sus-

pend all sanctions -- not just the oil embargo -- if Iraq cooperates with a new commission that would monitor its banned weapons programmes.

Another key difference is that the British and Dutch insist that Baghdad continue to adhere to strict financial controls to ensure that revenues from oil sales aren't spent on new weapons. The French-backed draft has an alternative plan to control oil revenues which Washington and London contend is too porous.

The Security Council has been deadlocked on Iraq since the United States and Britain launched air strikes in mid-December over Baghdad's refusal to cooperate with UN weapons inspectors.

Inspectors from the UN Special Commission pulled out just before the bombing, and Iraq has banned them from returning. Council members have been trying since the beginning of the year to devise a way to get inspectors back while improving life for ordinary Iraqis suffering under sanctions for nearly nine years.

Chirac countered that the British-Dutch plan was pointless because it would not be acceptable to Iraq.

Lanka seeks identification
of mass grave victims

COLOMBO, June 18: Hundreds of Tamil civilians Friday filed past skeletal remains unearthed from a suspected mass grave in northern Sri Lanka in a bid to try and identify the victims, officials said, reports AFP.

The two skeletons were displayed at a police station in Jaffna, 400 kilometres (250 miles) north of here, a day after they were dug up from a nearby site where some 400 people are believed to have been buried.

Officials said the fragments of clothing were insufficient to make a positive identification and forensic experts would now begin a detailed analysis to try and figure the approximate time and cause of death.

The remains were found during internationally monitored

excavations which began Wednesday at the village of Chemmanai, 11 kilometres (6.8 miles) south of Jaffna town.

The site was pointed out Wednesday by a former soldier, currently facing a death sentence for rape and murder of a teenage Tamil and her family, who claimed three killed people were buried there in 1996.

Jaffna Magistrate Manikkawasagam Ilanchelian ordered the excavations after the soldier, Somaratne Rajapakse, said in open court here he knew 10 grave sites in the area.

"I know of 10 places where people have been definitely buried," Rajapakse said when he was flown here under tight security to help in the investigation into the mass graves.

In Russia
Suspected
gangsters
form party

MOSCOW, June 18: Several organised crime suspects have formed a political movement and given it a name similar to one of Russia's most powerful gangs, a news report said Friday, reports AP.

The Uralsk Public and Political Movement was registered in the city of Yekaterinburg last month. The Moscow Times daily reported.

Uralsk is the name of a well-known machine factory in the city. It is also the name of one of Russia's most powerful gangs. The Moscow Times said.

The report did not comment on the new party's aims and beliefs.

Mahathir brands Islamic
party members as 'fanatics'

KUALA LUMPUR, June 18: In an effort to reassert his ruling party's Islamic credentials, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad branded members of an Islamic opposition party as "fanatics" who espouse "the politics of hate," reports AP.

"They are too fanatical... they do not take into account whether the group they support is good or evil, right or wrong," Mahathir told 2,000 delegates of his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) at their annual convention.

The 73-year-old leader's comments were aimed at the fundamentalist Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which recently formed a coalition with three other opposition groups to challenge Mahathir's rule in upcoming general elections.

The party, which champions the establishment of an Islamic state, is considered the major opposition party in Malaysia and claims a traditional stronghold in rural Malay-populated areas.

Mahathir, who has led Malaysia for 18 years, dismissed the new opposition coalition's sincerity, saying their pact had been a matter of "respective self-interest."

Citing the National Justice Party as an example, he said that the group, launched by former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim's wife, was established merely to fight for the jailed politician's freedom.

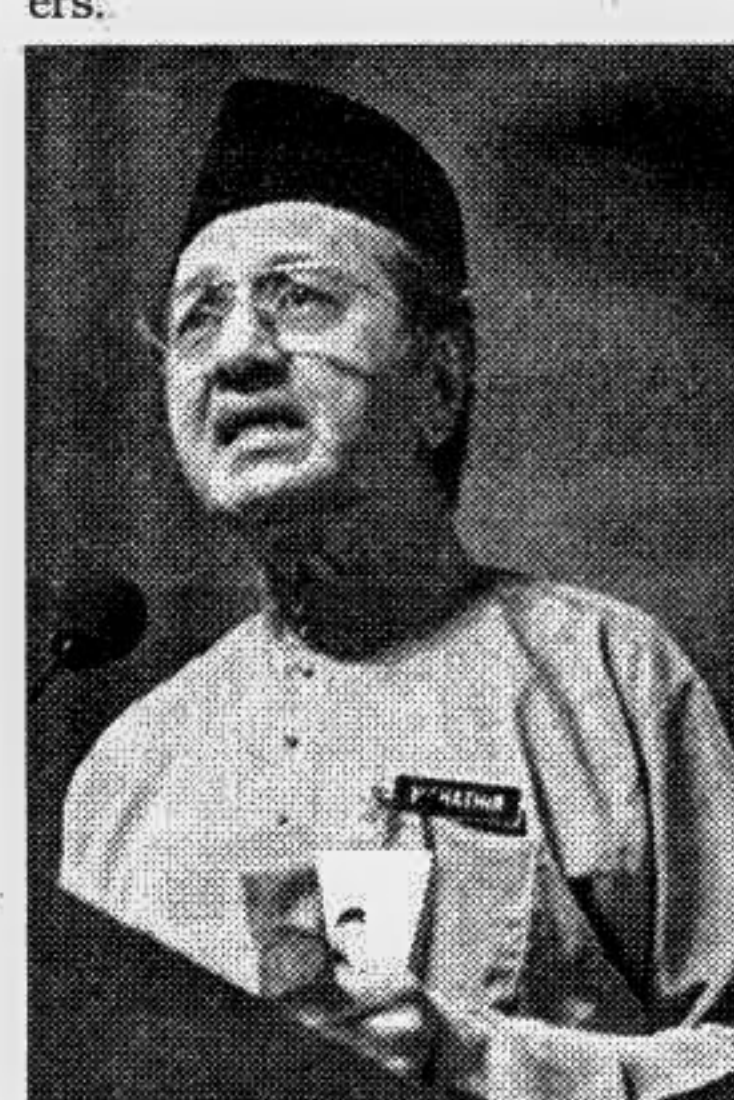
"There is no common struggle or objective in this pact other than self-interest. Each plans to hoodwink the other," he said.

Mahathir's party is facing its biggest political challenge in recent years after the firing and arrest of his popular deputy. The political troubles have coincided with Malaysia's worst economic crisis in more than a decade.

Opposition parties have launched renewed attacks on

the government in recent months, claiming that Mahathir had grown power-crazy and that he should step down.

"UMNO must be wary of the opposition's campaign of hate. We have to know how to deal with them," Asia's longest-serving ruler cautioned his followers.



Malaysian Prime Minister and President of the ruling the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party, Mahathir Mohamad, talks about his reaction to an article about him in a local newspaper. — AFP photo

He said that it did not matter to the opposition whether the country collapsed or voters ended up disappointed.

"What matters to them is winning," he said. Mahathir must dissolve Parliament and hold general elections by July 2000. Many political observers expect him to call for an early poll to capitalise on the recovering economy and disarray among the opposition parties.

India and China no threat
to each other: Jaswant

NEW DELHI, June 18: India and China, two Asian giants with a history of troubled relations, do not pose a threat to each other, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said Friday, reports AP.

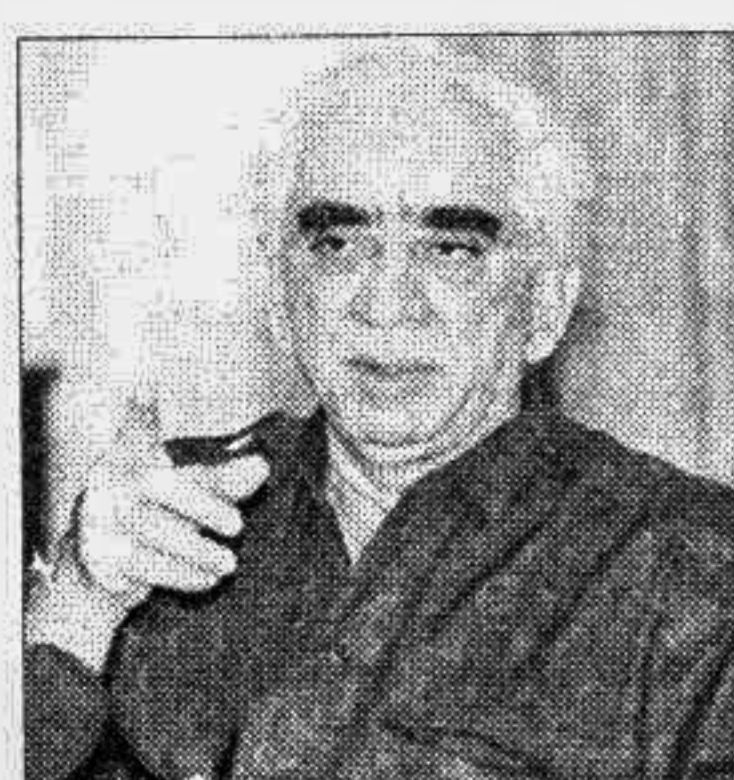
"I have no difficulties to repeat it today: India is not a threat to the People's Republic of China and we do not treat the People's Republic as the threat to India," Singh told a news conference here.

Singh, whose trip to China this week was the first by an Indian foreign minister in eight years, described his meetings with counterpart Tang Jiaxuan and Prime Minister Zhu Rongji as "very cordial and candid."

He said Beijing, a traditional ally of Pakistan, had indicated to him that Islamabad had been advised "to seek a peaceful resolution" of the ongoing Kashmir conflict "directly with India through a process of dialogue."

Singh underlined that though there were disagreements, notably on issues linked to the disputed Indo-Chinese border, there were sufficient foundations to "harmonise our respective positions and move forward."

He said the two countries had agreed to hold a "security dialogue" still to be fleshed out, and added that there would be "im-



Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh addresses a press conference in New Delhi Friday. — AFP photo

mediate consultation" on border issues.

Military and diplomatic experts from both sides will meet either in July or August in Beijing, and formal talks on the border can be held in October, Singh said.

Indian President K.R. Narayanan will visit China but the dates are yet to be decided, Singh said, adding that the 50th anniversary of Indo-Chinese ties next year would be celebrated as a "major event."

Singh visited Beijing just after his Pakistani counterpart Sartaj Aziz.

Low pressure over
Bay of Bengal
intensifies

VISAKHAPATNAM, June 18: The well marked low pressure area over western-central Bay of Bengal intensified into a depression yesterday, according to the cyclone warning centre here, reports PTI.

The depression, which lay centered at about 150 km east of Kalingapatnam in the afternoon, is likely to intensify further and cross Orissa coast near Gopapur tonight, a spokesman of the centre said.

Under its influence, there will be rainfall at most places with heavy rainfall at one or two places over coastal Andhra Pradesh during the next 36 hours, he said.

Squally winds with speed reaching 55 to 60 kmph are likely along the north coastal Andhra Pradesh at the time of the system crossing the coast, the spokesman said.

Strong winds from westerly direction with speed reaching 45 to 50 kmph are likely along and off south coastal Andhra Pradesh during the next 24 hours, he said.

Latest results
of Indonesian
elections

JAKARTA, June 18: Results from the Indonesian general election, giving leading parties among the 48 contestants, according to the latest election commission figures released today, reports AP.

This official tally was released at 07:33 am (0033 GMT) with 51,739,369 votes, about 46 percent of the total votes counted.

Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDP) 19,223,298 (37.15 per cent)

National Awakening Party (PKB) 9,659,857 (18.6 per cent)

Golkar Party 8,906,708 (17.2 per cent)

United Development Party (PPP) 4,987,307 (9.6 per cent)

National Mandate Party (PAN) 3,501,217 (6.8 per cent)

Indonesia's proportional representation system allows parties to share their votes and could play an important role in the allocation of the 462 parliamentary seats at stake.

'Majority of Britons
say Charles can
marry Camilla'

LONDON, June 18: Britain's Prince Charles has won public backing to wed his companion Camilla Parker Bowles and still become king, according to a poll published today, reports AP.

Almost three in five people, 59 per cent, say Charles should not be forced to give up the throne to marry his long-time love, the survey for The Sun newspaper showed.

An overwhelming majority, 76 per cent, said the 51-year-old divorcee blamed by Diana, Princess of Wales, for the break-up of her marriage should never become queen.

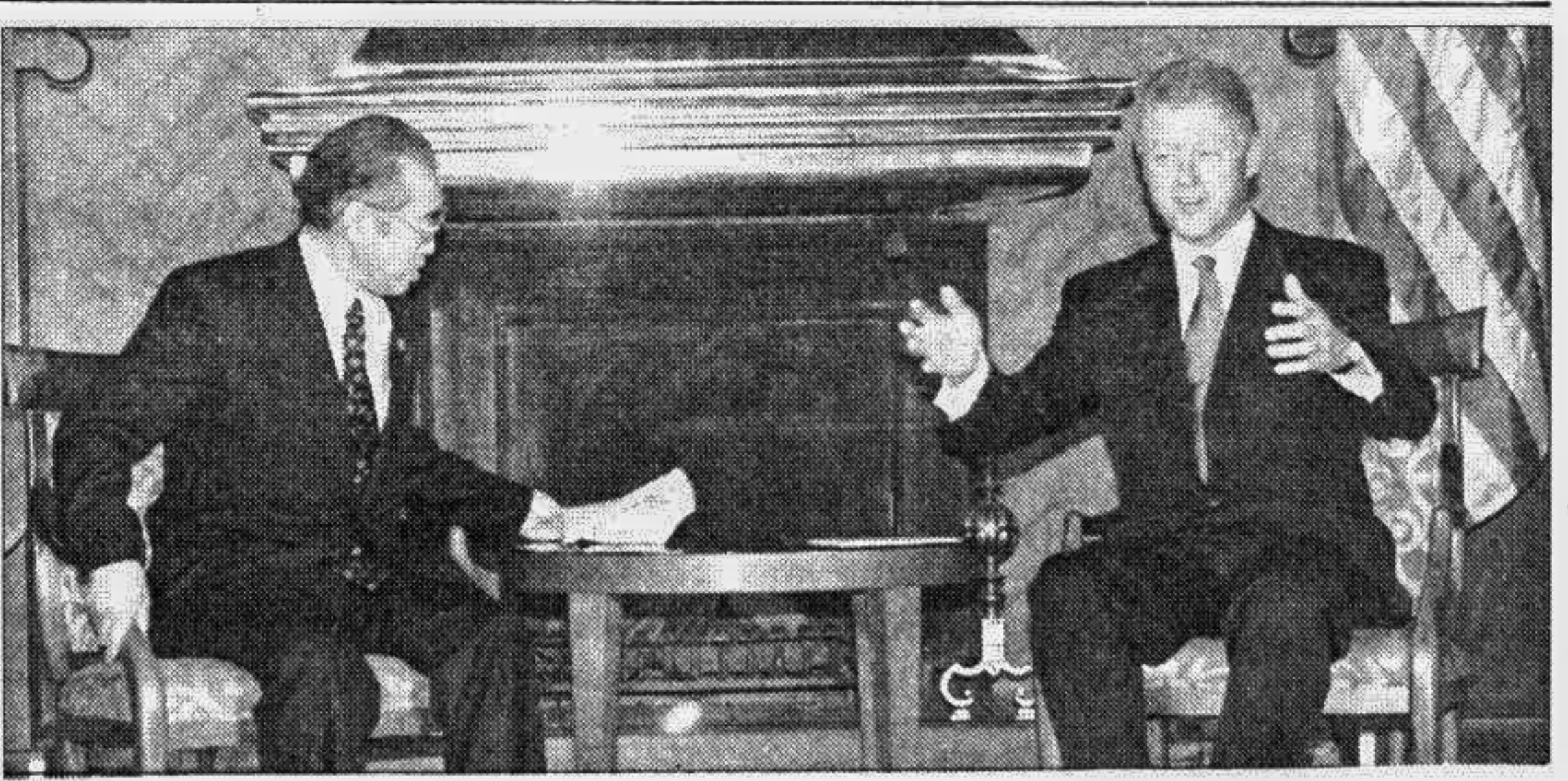
But the findings are still a victory for the couple who have waged a patient public relations campaign to rebuild their popularity following Diana's death.

A poll taken soon after Diana was killed in the Paris tunnel crash in August 1997 found just 28 per cent in favour of the prince becoming king if he made Parker Bowles his wife.

More than half, 53 per cent, said she should be allowed to move into a royal residence with Charles and 63 per cent believe she should spend time with his sons, Princes William and Harry.



US Vice President Al Gore (R), a Democratic candidate for President, greets school children at a rally Thursday across the street from the New York Stock Exchange building in New York City. — AFP photo



Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi (L) checks his notes as US President Bill Clinton greets the media during a meeting in the Library Room of the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Bonn Friday as part of the G8 Economic Summit of the world's wealthiest nations. — AFPphoto