

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 Sergeyev and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.

They were joined within minutes by 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."

But 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."

Sergeyev 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 Sergeyev-Cohen meeting broke up.

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

In another sign of detente, the Russia's 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 armoured 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. — AFP photo

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 military duels along the disputed frontier.

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 weekend will at least make a similar appeal to Clinton's.

India's national security advisor 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.

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

conflict. 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.

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