

been complicated by the unexpected deployment of the Russian peacekeepers to Pristina. What was at the heart of the disagreement between Moscow and the West regarding Russia's participation in KFOR? How did you overcome this disagreement?

The President. Well, first of all, let me say that this entire difficulty in Kosovo has been a great test for the relationship between the United States and Russia, but it is a test, I believe, that both countries have passed—on your part, thanks to the leadership of President Yeltsin and the work that our foreign ministers and defense ministers have done, the work that Prime Minister Stepashin has done.

I don't know that there ever was much disagreement about Russian participation. I said from the beginning that I strongly felt in order for the peacekeeping force to have credibility and full impact, Russia would have to be a very important part of it. And the agreement we have reached regarding Russian involvement in terms of leadership over the airport and being involved here in three different sectors I think will enable all of us to achieve our objectives: to bring the Kosovars home in peace and security, and to make sure that the Serb minority as well as the Kosovo Albanian majority are both treated freely and fairly.

President's Meeting With President Boris Yeltsin of Russia

Mr. Kiselev. Today, Mr. President, you met with Russian President Yeltsin. What questions did you discuss, and what did you manage to agree on?

The President. First of all, we discussed Kosovo. We talked about what a difficult challenge it had been to our relationship, and we both committed to implement our agreement in good faith in a way that will, I think, reflect credit on the leadership and greatness of Russia and the Russian people, and on those of us who are working with Russia in Kosovo.

Secondly, we discussed the importance of continuing our efforts to reduce the nuclear threat and the threat of proliferation of missile technology. And we agreed to work together on that. Among other things, President Yeltsin said that he hoped that START

II would be ratified by the Duma, and that we would begin soon parallel discussions on START III to take our nuclear arsenals down even more and on the ABM Treaty.

Then, the third thing we discussed was the need to do more to try to support economic development in Russia, to get Russia qualified in the IMF program and, of course, that requires some action in the Duma. And I expressed my strong support for IMF assistance to Russia, as well as for help on the Soviet-era debt problem and some other things that can be done, I believe, to boost Russian economic prospects and help the lives of ordinary citizens in Russia, which all of us think is very, very important.

President Yeltsin's Health

Mr. Kiselev. Mr. President, let me ask you this. Both in Russia and in the West, the question of Yeltsin's health, President Yeltsin's health constantly comes up. How did you find Mr. Yeltsin today?

The President. Today he was strong, clear, alert, vigorous. He stated Russia's case very forcefully on every issue, and we did what we have done in all of our meetings—we've now had 17 meetings in the last 6½ years. We had an agenda; we reached agreements; and we committed to go forward. So I would say, today he did very, very well.

He has acknowledged from time to time that he's had some health problems, but in all of my conversations with him about Kosovo, and especially today, I found him to be alert and very much on top of his responsibilities.

Russia-U.S. Relations

Mr. Kiselev. Mr. President, let me ask you about this. NATO's operation in the Balkans has led to manifestations of anti-Western and anti-American sentiments in Russia. What are you planning to do to improve America's image in Russia's eyes, and what kind of specific concrete steps will you take to improve relations between Russia and the U.S.?

The President. Well, first, I hope that this interview will help to some extent by giving me the opportunity to clarify my country's position and our commitment to a strong, successful, democratic Russia, fully participating in world affairs and a leadership role,

and fully integrated into Europe in the major economic and political institutions that will be so important to the welfare of ordinary Russian citizens in the new century.

Second, I think that as we work together in Kosovo and as you are able to bring to the Russian people the facts of the horrible atrocities committed against the Kosovars by Mr. Milosevic's forces, the nightmares that are so much like what we saw in Bosnia before the United States and Russia and others went in there, at least perhaps the Russian people will understand what was behind what we were doing. We sought no political or economic advantage, we sought no change in the balance of power worldwide. We were only trying to reverse ethnic cleansing and genocide. And now it is something we are doing together with the Russian forces. So I hope that will help.

And finally, I think it's very important that we get back to our larger agenda: to reducing the nuclear threat and the burden and—it imposes on Russian as well as American people; to reducing the threat of the proliferation of dangerous weapons technology; and to building up the Russian economy in ways that benefit ordinary Russian citizens. These are things that are in the interest of the American people, things we are deeply committed to.

And I believe as we continue to work on these things together, I would hope that the feeling the Russian people have for the American people in the United States will warm up again, because we strongly want our partnership with Russia to endure and to be felt in the hearts of ordinary citizens in both countries.

Response to Genocide and Minority Oppression

Mr. Kiselev. Mr. President, with regard to NATO's operation in the Balkans, let me ask you this—this question is asked by many people nowadays. Does it not seem to you that the actions of the United States and NATO show some sort of double standard—I mean, that America doesn't act, say, in the Balkans the same way as it does in Kurdistan or Rwanda and other regions of the world, where authorities are conducting a policy of

genocide or national oppression of minorities?

The President. First, let me say——

Mr. Kiselev. Will NATO be just as—I'm sorry to interrupt you——

The President. Yes?

Mr. Kiselev. ——will NATO be just as firm with the KLA, for example, as it has been against Serb forces if they try to take over Kosovo or endanger the Serb population?

The President. The answer to the last question has to be yes—and a strong yes. Our commitment, as I said from the beginning, is a Kosovo in which no innocent civilians were subject to death, uprooting, or oppression. Our commitment, therefore, now must be to give equal protection to all the innocent civilian citizens of Kosovo. And I would just note that KLA has agreed now to demilitarize, to give up its large weapons, to suspend any kind of military operations or training, including even the wearing of the uniforms. So we will have to be vigilant, but I am pleased with the progress of that.

And I want to say again, I am committed to protecting all the people of Kosovo, and one of the reasons that I wanted the Russians to come in and first have a partnership is so that the Serbs, as well as the Kosovar Albanians, would feel that the KFOR force was committed to their protection and that they would all try to live together again. It's going to be hard; a lot of horrible, horrible things have occurred. But we will work with them and we will do our best to help reconcile the civilians who had no role in the wrongdoing, to help them reconcile to one another.

Mr. Kiselev. And as far as the first part of my question?

The President. The first part of your question, I have spoken to quite extensively in America. First, America did actually play a very major role in preserving an area of protection for the Kurds in northern Iraq for several years after the Gulf war. And we have, several times, intervened to try to help protect the Kurds, and will continue to be sensitive to that.

Secondly, I have said repeatedly that the slaughter of the Rwandans, the genocide in Rwanda occurred in the short space of about 100 days, and we were caught flat-footed. I