

Russians protest higher prices, advocate revival of Soviet Union

Hard-liners desire return to socialism to rescue economy

MOSCOW — Thousands of people angered by soaring prices waved red Soviet flags and portraits of Josef Stalin on Sunday during rallies organized by pro-Communist groups to protest the policies of Boris Yeltsin.

In another sign of growing concern over economic problems in the former Soviet Union, the news agency Tass reported that leaders of the fledgling Commonwealth of Independent States would meet Jan. 24 to discuss the pace of reforms.

Protesters in Moscow's central Manezh Square demanded resurrection of the Soviet Union, power "in the hands of the working people," and a return of prices to previous state-subsidized levels, Russian television reported.

AP photographers said about 5,000 people participated, covering a small portion of the huge square next to the Kremlin. Russian television and Tass estimated as many as 55,000 took part in the rally organized by pro-Communist groups such as Trudovaya Moskva (Moscow Labor) and Nashi (Our).

In St. Petersburg, about 100 people picketed in front of the Winter Palace, holding signs that read "Take the Country's Traitors to Court," the Russian Information Agency reported.

The "Vesti" television news show said "similar mass meetings of



Brian Shellito/DN

Bolsheviks" were held in the Russian cities of Rostov and Chelyabinsk as well as in the Turkmen capital of Ashkabad.

The rally in Moscow was about the same size as similar pro-Communist demonstrations in recent weeks to denounce Yeltsin, the president of the Russian Federation. But the reports of rallies in other cities indicated the small hard-line groups might be gaining support as a result of the soaring prices that have accompanied his plan for a "necessary but painful" transition to a market economy.

Since controls were lifted Jan. 2, prices for food, clothing, cars and other consumer goods have as much as quadrupled. Yeltsin says the increases will encourage producers to get more goods to stores, but he has warned that results might not be seen for six months.

The anti-Yeltsin rallies have not attracted near the numbers of pro-

reform demonstrations that flooded cities across Russia before and during the August coup attempt.

Leaders of other former Soviet republics also let prices rise to avoid having Russians flowing in to cart off cheaper goods. But officials in some cities already have cut regulated prices on some staple items to head off public unrest.

Economic reforms are the next major hurdle for the 11 republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States. On Saturday, Russia and Ukraine agreed to divide the prized Black Sea Fleet and soothed at least temporarily a dispute that had threatened to unglue the group and break up the former Soviet military.

Yeltsin has shown some sensitivity to the despair. In the Russian city of Ulyanovsk, southeast of Moscow, officials said Saturday that they would lower prices of bread, dairy products and other items after Yeltsin traveled there and became enraged when he found prices on many items were far beyond the reach of the average consumer.

In the republic of Turkmenistan, President Saparmurad Niyazov halved the prices of butter and some meat products, Radio Moscow said Sunday. Butter was cut from 41 rubles a pound to 21 rubles, and sausage from between 27 and 34 rubles a pound to 17 rubles, the Russian Information Agency said.

Russian labor officials said Wednesday that the average monthly wage is now 960 rubles.

Algeria cancels elections to prevent Muslim victory

ALGIERS, Algeria — Seeking to shut out the fundamentalist Muslims who were poised to take power, Algeria's government prepared Sunday to scrap last month's election results, put off a new vote and revamp itself, reports said.

A day after the surprise resignation of President Chadli Bendjedid, the army - which opposes the fundamentalists - kept a tight lid on the capital, with tanks in position at key buildings.

Algiers and other large cities were calm Sunday, but in recent months, the government has blamed the fundamentalists for sparking bloody riots, and it apparently feared an angry reaction to the latest developments.

Some such anger was already apparent. The fundamentalists, who overwhelmingly defeated Bendjedid's ruling party in the first-round parliamentary elections two weeks ago, bitterly objected to the government's reported plans to put off the second-round elections scheduled Thursday.

In a statement, the fundamentalist party, the Islamic Salvation Front, said it "insists on the continuation of the electoral process ... the only guarantee of stability and the everlastingness of the people and the country."

But the government appeared determined to halt the fundamentalists' march to power - even though it means putting an abrupt end to the transition to democracy.

Reports of the government's plans came from the French television network Antenne-2 and the Algerian newspaper Le Matin.

Without citing its sources, Antenne-2 said the second round of parliamentary voting would be put off and the

first-round balloting invalidated. Le Matin also said without attribution that Thursday's election would be canceled.

The network also said elections for a new president would be postponed well beyond the 45-day period set by the Constitution, possibly taking place between June and September. It also said a new government body, the State Council, would be formed and would include Prime Minister Sid Ahmed Ghozali and the military chief of staff.

The Antenne-2 report said an announcement would be made later Sunday following a meeting of the Constitutional Council, whose president Abdelmalek Benhabyles has been named interim head of state.

A fundamentalist victory in Thursday's elections, which had been widely expected, would have paved the way for the first Islamic republic in North Africa.

The military was loyal to Bendjedid and sympathetic to his democratic goals, but some elements in the army had been pressuring him to intervene to prevent a take-over.

Following Bendjedid's resignation announcement on Saturday, the military quickly took up positions around government and communications buildings in the capital.

However, the Defense Ministry said in a statement early Sunday that the army "reaffirms its loyalty to the Constitution and its confidence in the existing constitutional institutions."

The interim leader could declare a state of emergency, virtual martial law under which rallies would be banned and the military given wide-ranging powers of search and arrest.

Japan trip defended by White House

WASHINGTON — Top Bush administration officials denied Sunday that President Bush's trade mission to Japan was a flop, with the secretary of commerce describing it as the economic equivalent of Operation Desert Storm.

But Bush challenger Patrick Buchanan decided it as "a fiasco" and Sen. Lloyd Bentsen, D-Texas, called it "obviously a political trip to assist (Bush) in his re-election campaign."

Bentsen announced that his Senate Finance Committee would hold hearings next week to examine the Japanese trade concessions that Bush has said will create at least 200,000 American jobs.

National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft sought to sidestep the criticisms, saying he didn't believe "anything really negative happened" on Bush's controversial journey to Asia with U.S. automakers and other executives in tow.

"The trip as a whole was really a definite success," Scowcroft said on CBS' "Face the Nation."

Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher, who quits the Cabinet this week to become general chairman of Bush's re-election drive, said the president "was supporting the economic security of this country as he did in Desert Storm for our military security."

Mosbacher, on CNN's "Newsmaker Sunday," said Bush "was out there selling jobs and getting business overseas."

Much of the criticism at home and in Tokyo zeroed in on the high-paid auto executives in

Bush's party, who despite their criticisms of Japanese trade practices appear to have made few efforts to design cars for Japanese consumers.

Asked if the auto executives should have been left home, Mosbacher said: "We talked about that but you couldn't ... because the autos were one-half of our total trade deficit with Japan."

Scowcroft acknowledged that taking the businessmen on the presidential trip was highly controversial.

"I don't think it ought to be a normal practice," he said, but added that it did develop "a better understanding between business and government ... (on) how they could cooperate."

Buchanan, who hopes to wrest the GOP nomination from Bush, described the trip as "a fiasco." Bush "got a reality check in Tokyo" on his vision of a new world order, Buchanan said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

Bentsen said the \$41 billion trade deficit with Japan defies economic logic, because it's declined by only \$5 billion in the last six years while the dollar has fallen more than 50 percent against the yen in the same period.

Bentsen, also on "Face the Nation," questioned why Bush took his national security adviser to Tokyo, but not his trade representative, Carla Hills.

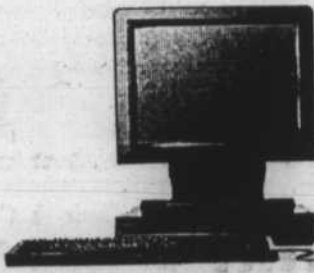
"The fact is that trade has always been an afterthought for this administration and the previous one," said Bentsen, the 1988 Democratic vice presidential candidate.



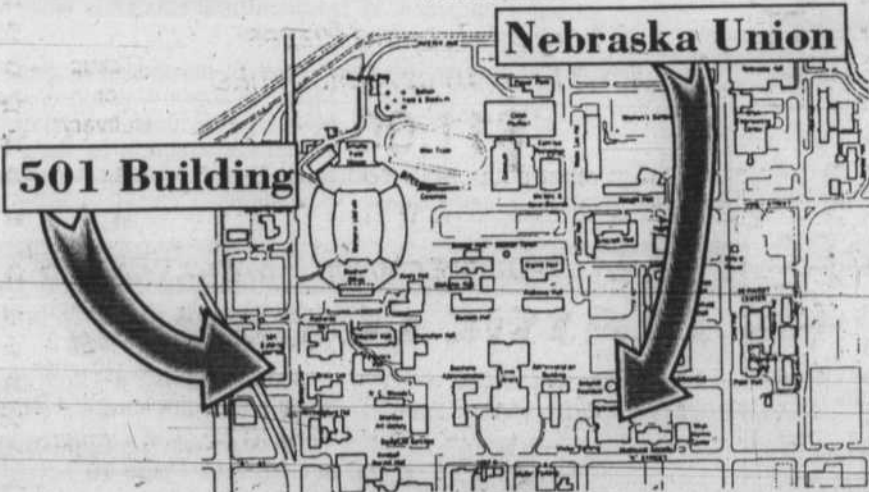
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