

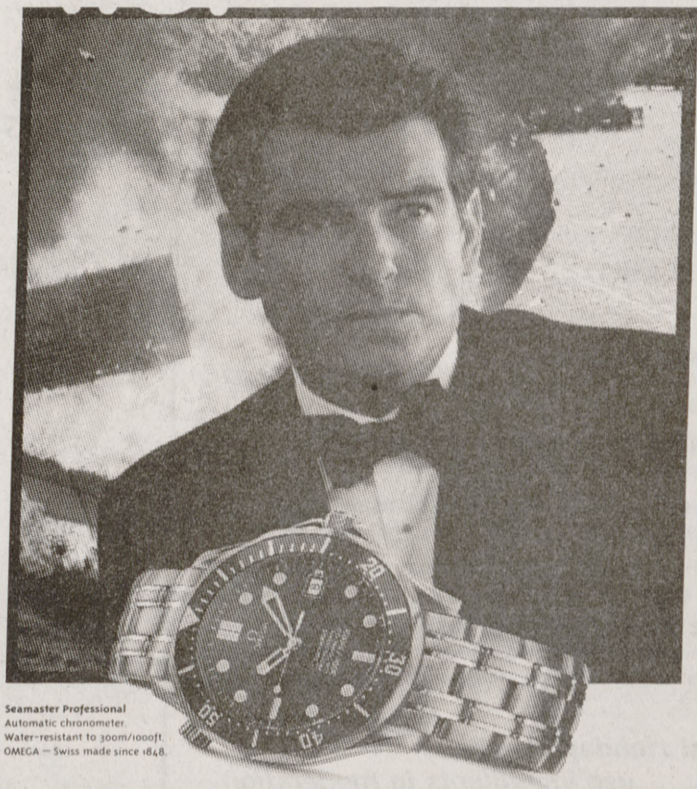
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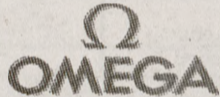
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Forces raise Russian flag in town outside Chechen capital

GEKHI-CHU, Russia (AP) — Russian forces yesterday hoisted their flag over the key Chechen town of Urus-Martan after weeks of heavy fighting, and moved to consolidate their hold on the approaches to Chechnya's capital.

The Russian military said it has encircled the capital Grozny, and while it does not plan to storm the heavily defended city, it has told civilians to leave by Saturday to avoid massive air and artillery strikes.

President Clinton and other Western leaders have strongly protested the Russian ultimatum and criticized the overall offensive, which has produced large numbers of civilian casualties and driven more than 240,000 civilians from the territory.

"I don't agree with what's going on there, and I think I have an obligation to say so," Clinton said in Washington.

In Chechnya, the Russians and the militants battled for weeks in and around Urus-Martan, which is 12 miles southwest of Grozny and part of an important supply line for the rebels.



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— PRESIDENT CLINTON

The Russians raised their red, white and blue flag yesterday after defeating a force of about 900 militants, which included some Muslims from Arab countries and Bosnia, according to the military.

About 300 militants were killed, and the rest retreated into the southern mountains of Chechnya, according to Maj. Gen. Vladimir Shamanov, the Russian commander.

The Russians also claimed they had taken control of roads and crossing points south of Grozny, where the militants have been resisting in an attempt to keep supply lines open.

The south of Chechnya is dominated by the Caucasus Mountains, and the rebels traditionally retreat to the

U.S. officials await Cuban response to request for interview with father

HAVANA (AP) — Tens of thousands of Cubans marched along Havana's main coastal highway yesterday, thrusting their fists in the air and demanding the return of a 6-year-old boy who was rescued off the Florida coast two weeks ago.

Calling the government-organized demonstration the "March of the Combatant Nation" the communist daily Granma promised a turnout of at least 300,000.

The chief of the U.S. mission in Cuba, meanwhile, said she was awaiting a response from Cuban officials to a request by U.S. immigration officials for an interview with Elian's Gonzalez's father, who wants the child returned to the communist island.

"They said they would not have an answer for us until this

evening," Vicki Huddleston, head of the U.S. Interests Section, the American diplomatic mission, in Havana said.

"The ball is in their court," she said. "We are on standby."

U.S. officials said the letter from American immigration authorities was delivered to the Cuban Foreign Ministry on Wednesday night following a mass demonstration outside the American mission.

The one-page letter indicated the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) wanted to interview Juan Miguel Gonzalez, the boy's father, at the U.S. mission in Havana to determine "whether he has an ability to prove that in fact he is the father of the child" and other basic facts, Deputy Attorney Gen-

eral Eric Holder told a news conference in Washington.

Holder said INS officials would make the final decision on whether to return the child to Cuba.

A U.S. consular officer in Cuba would deliver the letter by hand to Gonzalez yesterday, Justice Department spokesperson Carol Florman said. Telephone calls placed yesterday to the Gonzalez home in the city of Cardenas, about a two-hour drive east of Havana, rang busy.

The letter asked the father to bring along any birth, baptismal, medical or school records, family photographs or testimony of neighbors to establish his parenthood and any divorce or other records to establish his claim to exercise parental rights, Florman said.

Yeltsin gains Chinese support

BEIJING (AP) — Russian President Boris Yeltsin yesterday criticized the war in Chechnya, blaming the Clinton administration for nuclear power.

"It seems Mr. Clinton has forgotten Russia is a great power and that possesses a nuclear arsenal," Yeltsin said at a news conference with Chinese legislators.

Asked why he had a job, Yeltsin said he was still looking for a position.

"I want to tell President Clinton that he alone cannot solve the world's problems," Yeltsin said. "It is us who will solve them."

Yeltsin's outburst came in front of reporters, as he secured Chinese backing for Russia's campaign to oust separatists in Chechnya. Clinton, meanwhile, had back off his criticism of the Russian offensive, which produced large numbers of civilian casualties and more than 240,000 civilian deaths in Chechnya.

"I don't agree with what's going on there, and I have an obligation to say so," Clinton told reporters.

Clinton told reporters he sought to avoid a war of words with Yeltsin, saying, "I mean, you can't get too serious about what we're saying and all the words of criticism."

Both Chinese President Zemin and Li, No. 2 in the Communist Party, were seen in Yeltsin to Beijing with Jiang, who studied car production in Moscow 44 years ago, Yeltsin in Russian, calling "old friend."

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