

# Russian board backs clemency in spy case

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia's presidential pardons commission recommended yesterday that President Vladimir Putin free ailing U.S. businessman Edmond Pope, citing the "cruel" 20-year espionage sentence and a wish to stem any return to Russia's totalitarian past.

Pope's sentence for obtaining classified torpedo plans — and the eight months he spent in a Moscow jail leading up to this week's conviction — have cast a pall over U.S.-Russian relations as Putin is trying to revive Moscow's global influence.

In a letter to Putin, the commission said the lengthy prison sentence would bar Pope from bidding farewell to his father, who is dying of cancer. It also said Pope, a former



**Edmond Pope won the backing of Russia's pardons commission yesterday. The Russian president has the power to free the ailing American.**

naval intelligence officer, has already suffered enough during his pretrial detention in prison and that he would not live long in a penal colony.

Pope suffers from a rare form of bone cancer, which was in remission when he was arrested in April, but that his family fears has returned.

"Our common feeling was that the

court decision was rather cruel, sentencing Mr. Pope to the maximal penalty," commission chairman Anatoly Pristavkin said. "Based on the principles of humanism and mercy, we believe that Mr. Pope is a sick man who has gone through a lot . . . and he should be allowed to go free."

President Clinton called Putin last night to urge Pope's release.

Pope, 54, was convicted Wednesday by a Moscow court, after the Federal Security Service accused him of illegally obtaining classified blueprints for a high-speed torpedo.

Pope's lawyer Pavel Astakhov said that according to Russian law, Putin could pardon the prisoner at any time. But he said Kremlin advisers indicated the president was likely to wait until next Thursday, the day after the court verdict takes effect.

Pope's wife, Cheri, said she was "very, very thankful" to the pardons commission, and hoped Putin would act quickly enough for Pope to be able to see his father and receive vital medical care.

Cheri Pope, who has been in Moscow all week, has not been allowed to see her husband since the verdict was read. She said she was not sure whether her husband even knew that the pardons commission had recommended release.

Pope has insisted on his innocence, saying the technology he obtained was not secret because it had already been sold abroad and published in open sources. But he has told his lawyers he will not contest the sentence at a higher court, Astakhov said.