APRIL 16, 2002

ruesday,

Spy files back under lock and key

BERLIN: East Germuny's secret police archives, forced open a decade ago by hungerstriking protests, have slammed shur, ending a post-Cold War era of openness and possibly protecting those who suppressed a nation for 40 years.

The meticulous note taking of the East German secret police, or Stasi, has provided historians and journalists with an invaluable insight into the workings of a dictatorable that spent US\$1.6 billion a year securing its stranglehold.

The archives have been instrumental in trying the leaders nf feared police operations, ending the careers of politicians tainted with the Stasi brush and breaking up friendships and marriages as former East Gorman cilizens discovered their trusted allies or spouses had informed on them

Many of the 2.4 nullion people tracked by the Stasi, most just normal former East German citizens, have had access to their own files. The Gauck agency which oversees the archives has also allowed historians and jour nalists to peer into the records of so-called "prominent" people of historical interest

That open policy may be coming to an end after former Chancellor Helmut Kohl won a court case to prevent Gauck releasing parts of his 5,000-page dossier.

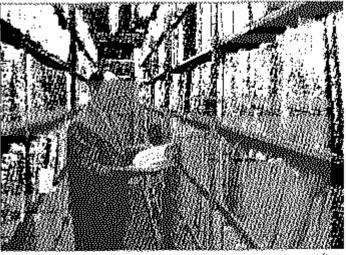
The decision was based on the view that the 72-year-old Kohl, whose telephones were tapped, was a victim of the Stasi regime, and was legally entitled to with hold his file.

"It's a real setback. Many documents are now simply not available... We reckon that about 90 per cent of inquiries from researchers and the media will be affected The documents have been rendered unusable," said Marianne Birthler, head of the archives.

Historians worrled

People will still be able to view their own files, but researchers will now need permission to view the files of others which might be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. The roling could also shield the guilty.

The Stass tailed and tracked



SECRET ARCHIVE: Herbart Ziehm, an employee of the sirch ves of the former East German Ministry For Security or "Stasi", looks into files inside the headquarters in Bertin in this September 24, 1999, file photo. The Gauck agency, which oversees the archives of the former Stasi secret police, seve access to historians and journalists may now be closed after former Chancellor Helmut Kohl won a cour case to prevent the release of his 6,000 page doss er.

political apponents, both actual and perceived, Western politicians and many of East Germany's 16 million citizens. The archive's papers, if lined up flat, would stretch for 180 kilometres.

The Stas, a job was to prop up e government with a siego-like mentality built on Cold Wer parancia which preached equality, but dealt out favours and privileges.

Bernd Schaefer, research fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington who has studied links between the Stasi and the Catholic Church, feare that many files, now with most names blackened out, would luse all meaning.

Plans to fight ruling

In mid-March, Czech Fresident Vaciav Havel signed a law to broaden public access to its files before the former government collapsed.

The Gauck agency, which receives 10,000 new requests a month, says it has been forced to pull down the shutters. For now, it will not release new files except to people seeking their own details and its website it clused as it checks to see if it is compliant with the new riling.

Birthler said they would try

to get the ruling averturned by luow resmeilreq systled ton bib act in the near future.

"It's not a good time for cor sensus politics with the electio approaching We have support ers in almost every party but yo can imagine that the Christia Democrats will not be in favouof change, out of sympathy wit the decision on Kohl," she said

Germany has given research ers acress to the unique file o public figures such as forms chancellors Willy Brandt an Helmut Schmidt, But person; details gleaned from the file: including sexual dalliances, wer not made public

Indeed, Gauck agency lawys Carl-Stephan Schweer has sai that of the 2,500 pages th agency wanted to release o Kohl, all but 10 were banal

Some in the media had be lieved it would shed further ligh on Konl's acceptance of US\$ million in illegal campaign don: tions while in office.

"It is important to remembe that the documents release would not have shed light o possible dispution scandals. Th documents released are onl meant to show the activities the Stast," Birthler said.

Agencies via Xinhua