

Independent Lithuania asks for Vatican recognition

EDITOR'S NOTE: John Thavis, a correspondent in the Catholic News Service Rome bureau, traveled to Lithuania in late March and was one of a handful of Western reporters still filing from the Lithuanian capital after Soviet authorities expelled several foreign journalists the weekend of April 1.

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VILNIUS, Lithuania — As Lithuania survived a shaky third week of self-declared independence, its leaders rejected a new demand by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to back down in their challenge to Moscow.

Gorbachev warned March 31 that the breakaway republic was taking a path to "ruin." He said its officials should carefully consider their own people's security and welfare, world stability and the fate of democracy in the Soviet Union.

Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis termed Gorbachev's statement an "ultimatum" that appeared to contain "open threats" against the Baltic state.

The day before, Landsbergis asked for Vatican recognition of his government and an exchange of ambassadors in a two-page message handed to Lithuania's leading Catholic churchman, Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevicius, archbishop of Kaunas.

On March 25, two weeks after Lithuania's Parliament declared in-

dependence, Pope John Paul II called for a "just and peaceful solution" to the confrontation between Moscow and Vilnius.

As of April 2, the Landsbergis message had not arrived at the Vatican, according to a Vatican official involved in East European affairs.

The official said the Vatican recognizes the right to independence, but that he did not expect any immediate reaction to the appeal because of the complexity of the current situation.

The Vatican has never recognized the 1940 Soviet annexation of Lithuania, but was being cautious in its statements on the contest of wills. The Vatican's chief diplomat, Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, counseled cool heads for both sides and said in an Italian newspaper interview published March 27 that he and the pope were "following the events in order to have an exact idea of the situation."

The Lithuanian Catholic Church figured prominently in the confrontation with the Soviets when individual churches gave sanctuary to Lithuanian deserters from the Red Army.

But Archbishop Julijonas Steponavicius of Vilnius told Catholic News Service March 28 that he thought the independence government leaders had made a mistake by urging desertion and seeking church assistance in sheltering the young soldiers.

The government's call was "hasty" and exposed the young men to danger, he said.

"Maybe our president does not know the Red Army as well as I do — he's too young," the 78-year-old prelate said. The archbishop said he remembered Soviet troops raiding a church in 1944 to seize Lithuanians avoiding the draft.

On the issue of independence, however, the church hierarchy placed itself solidly behind the Landsbergis government in a March 31 statement which also condemned forces "threatening our nation and seeking to enslave it once again."

Little was being heard from the East bloc nations which have thrown off their communist governments in the past few months.

In Washington April 2, Deputy Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia Jan Carnogursky told Catholic News Service his government is "busy with our own problems" and wants to stay on the "outside" of the Lithuanian confrontation. However, the official, himself a Catholic, said Czechoslovakia's President Vaclav Havel had sent Gorbachev a message asking the Soviet leader to avoid using violence.

Moscow continued to tighten its grip on institutions in the capital of Vilnius, sending in soldiers to install its own national prosecutor and occupy newspaper head-

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AP/Wide World Photos
Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis gestures to reporters at a press conference March 30. Landsbergis said he would negotiate with Moscow on any issue except that of Lithuanian independence.

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