

Vatican plans to send diplomat to Lithuania

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II said he was "suffering and praying" for Lithuanians in the wake of a bloody Soviet army crackdown on the Baltic republic.

The pope made the impromptu comment during a blessing in St. Peter's Square Jan. 13, where a group of Lithuanian Catholics had joined thousands of others to pray for world peace beneath the papal apartment.

Meanwhile, sources said the Vatican was sending a diplomat to Lithuania on a fact-finding mission — the first such visit since the Vatican and the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations last year.

A Vatican official of the Secretariat of State, Monsignor Antonio Franco, was scheduled to leave for Vilnius Jan. 15 to be briefed by church leaders on the situation, a Vatican source said. The visit was planned weeks ago but has taken on new importance with the news of the crackdown, the source said.

The source said it was too early to determine what effect the Kremlin's actions in Lithuania would have on relations between Moscow and the Holy See, which have grown increasingly friendly during the last two years.

According to press reports from Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, Soviet tanks and troops moved in on the national broadcasting facilities there early Jan. 13, killing 14 people and leaving more than 140 wounded. Some of the victims were said to have been run over by tanks, while others were reportedly shot.

Breaking a silence following the incidents, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev said Jan. 14 the local Soviet military commander had ordered the assault. But Gorbachev appeared to support the action, according to news reports.

It was the first major episode of violence following Lithuania's declaration of independence last year, and it came after Moscow sent about 1,000 paratroopers into the capital. Thousands of independence supporters were said to remain outside the Parliament, where President Vytautas Landsbergis issued appeals for international help.

One Lithuanian bishop said he was afraid much of the world would ignore events in Lithuania because of the attention focused on the Persian Gulf crisis.

Bishop Vladas Michelevicius, auxiliary bishop of Kaunas, said that "the Americans are occupied with Saddam Hussein and so are paying less attention to what's happening in Lithuania." He was interviewed in Moscow by the Rome newspaper *Il Messaggero* Jan. 11 — two days before the violent takeover of the broadcasting station in Vilnius.

Bishop Michelevicius said Lithuanian church leaders had not made direct appeals to Gorbachev and were generally keeping a low political profile in the current crisis.

"The church should not meddle in political affairs. It should always be a little removed from political passions," he said.

Lithuania is the only Soviet republic with a predominantly Catholic population.

The bishop added that, even if Lithuanian independence suffers a setback now, "we would ask for it again in two or three years. Our will to gain independence is written on our hearts."

The use of troops to take public buildings was ordered after Gorbachev demanded that Lithuanian leaders apply the Soviet constitution or face the prospect of direct rule from the Kremlin. Lithuanian leaders refused to back down.

Moscow has also reportedly sent troops to Latvia and Estonia, also absorbed by the Soviet Union after World War II, which recently declared their independence.

The pope on Jan. 11 sent a telegram to Lithuania's ranking churchman, Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevicius of Kaunas, expressing his solidarity with Lithuanians.

He urged the republic to press for a just solution with "tenacious patience" and through "respectful and comprehensive dialogue."

"As word arrives of new difficulties, I want to express to Your Eminence my renewed solidarity with the sufferings and apprehensions of the beloved Lithuanian people," the pope said.

"I express my firm wish that past experience will inspire everyone to seek a just solution to the present problems with tenacious patience," he said.

Dialogue between Moscow and Vilnius was agreed upon last spring, when Gorbachev lifted an economic embargo against Lithuania and the republic's leaders agreed to put their moves toward independence on hold. Since then, negotiations have failed to get off the ground, however.

Lithuania's diplomatic representative to the Vatican, Stasys Lozoraitis, said developments in Lithuania showed that Gor-

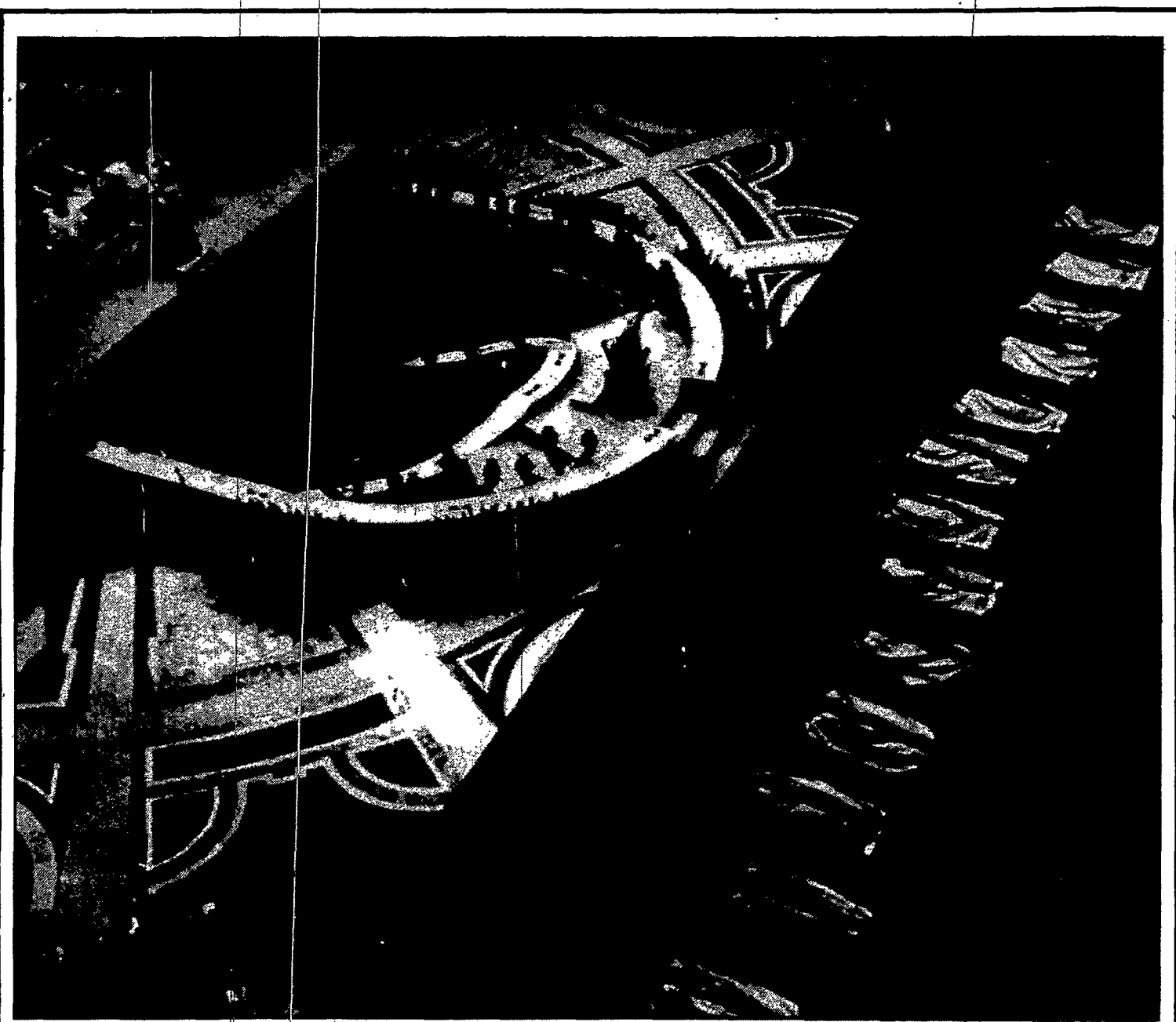
bachev may have lost real control at the Kremlin — or that he was pretending to have lost control to avoid responsibility in the eyes of the West.

Interviewed by Italy's Communist Party daily *L'Unita* the day before the violence in Vilnius, Lozoraitis said he feared that a Soviet armed intervention in Lithuania might delay independence by a generation and result in "a great and chaotic exodus toward the West" if Soviet borders open on schedule in 1992.

"The desire for independence cannot ever be completely suffocated, however," he said.

Lozoraitis faulted Western countries for seeing Gorbachev as their only possible dialogue partner in the Soviet Union.

He said the break-up of the Soviets' internal "empire" is "only a question of time." Use of the army will not resolve these issues, but "can only provoke tragedies," he said.



PRELATES ORDAINED — Thirteen new bishops prostrate themselves in front of Pope John Paul II during a Jan. 6 consecration ceremony in St. Peter's Basilica. AP/Wide World Photos

Pope urges continued talks, withdrawal of Iraqi troops

By Agostino Bono
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — As the Persian Gulf crisis swiftly moved toward war, Pope John Paul II proposed that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait and its opponents arrange an international peace conference on the Middle East.

The pope capped several days of hectic diplomatic activity by urging Iraq and its U.S.-led opposition to reach a last-minute solution through "generous proposals for peace."

The pope offered his peace plan Jan. 13 during his midday Angelus talk. The proposal came as the Jan. 15 U.N. deadline for Iraq's withdrawal approached without any sign that Iraq would comply or that the United States would reconsider its plan of using force to dislodge Iraqi troops from

oil-rich Kuwait.

A U.N. Security Council resolution authorizes use of military force if Iraq fails to meet the deadline.

In related activities, the pope sent a telegram encouraging efforts by U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar to defuse the crisis in direct talks with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and made a strong peace appeal to more than 100 ambassadors representing countries with diplomatic ties to the Vatican.

However, Perez de Cuellar, who had been instrumental in negotiating an end to the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, said that his two-and-one-half hour talk with Saddam Jan. 13 had failed to achieve a peaceful agreement. He said on his return to U.N. headquarters in New York Jan. 14 that he had nearly given up hope for peace and that

Saddam remained adamant about keeping Kuwait.

Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, in charge of Vatican relations with states, met separately Jan. 11 with the U.S. and Iraqi ambassadors. All sides confirmed the meeting without saying what was discussed.

The activities came as Iraq and the United States hardened their positions.

Saddam has threatened to use chemical and biological weapons if his troops are attacked. U.S. President George Bush has said U.S. military action would be massive, aimed at ending the conflict quickly.

"A war would not resolve the problems, only aggravate them," the pope said Jan. 13 from his apartment balcony window overlooking St. Peter's Square.

"How many civilians, how many babies,

how many women, how many elderly people would be innocent victims?" he asked.

The pope asked Iraq to "make an act of peace which would do it honor before history."

He asked the U.S.-led coalition "in turn, to organize a peace conference contributing to the resolution of all the problems of living peacefully in the Middle East.

"Save humanity the tragic experience of a new war," the pope remarked.

About 30,000 people filled the square in response to a call by the Italian bishops to pray for peace with the pope. The bishops declared Jan. 13 a national day of prayer for peace. Similar prayer days were organized by hierarchies in the Holy Land, the United States and Europe.

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