

Crackdown in Lithuania spurs outrage, blame

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The Soviet crackdown in Lithuania prompted outrage among Lithuanian-American Catholic leaders and quick criticism from the U.S. bishops.

Father Casimir Pugevicius, executive director of Lithuanian Catholic Religious Aid in Brooklyn, told Catholic News Service in a Jan. 15 telephone interview that he was "appalled by the crackdown" and blamed it in part on President Bush's failure to recognize the democratically elected government of Lithuania.

Eleven months ago, Lithuania's government became the republic's first popularly elected legislature in a half century.

Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the U.S. bishops were "deeply saddened and profoundly dismayed" by the crackdown.

Stating that "many innocent people have been unjustly killed or wounded," Archbishop Pilarczyk said the U.S. bishops "implore the Soviet authorities to end the violence and repression."

He made the comments in a Jan. 14 letter to Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevicius of Kaunas, Lithuania, president of the Lithuanian bishops' conference.

The letter was sent the same day 13 Lithuanians were killed in an early morning attack by Soviet troops. Some 160 people were wounded in the attacks in which Soviet troops — backed by tanks and armored vehicles — seized the republic's radio and television complex in the city of Vilnius.

Archbishop John R. Roach, chairman of the U.S. bishops' International Policy Committee, expressed his displeasure in letters to U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and Alexander Bessmertnykh, then Soviet ambassador to the United States.

Bessmertnykh has since been appointed new Soviet foreign minister to replace Eduard A. Shevardnadze, who resigned unexpectedly Dec. 20.

In his letter to Baker, Archbishop Roach urged the Bush administration to "use all available political and diplomatic means, including the United Nations, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in



AP/Wide World Photos
Lithuanians mourn outside the Lithuanian Parliament in Vilnius Jan. 15, just two days after 14 people were killed during an attack on a broadcasting center.

Europe and other international bodies, to resolve this crisis through dialogue and negotiation, not further violence."

In the interview, Father Pugevicius said that "as an American citizen and being American-born myself, my reaction is one of bitterness at the administration at its blindness for refusing to accept" Lithuania's democratically elected government.

If the United States had recognized Lithuania as a nation "that would have saved the day," he said.

The U.S. government should already be calling for sanctions against the Soviet Union and have complained to the U.N. National Security Council, the priest said.

As for Lithuania's future, "I'm very pessimistic," Father Pugevicius said. "It's very difficult to read Washington's mind, and even harder to read the Kremlin's. ... But I'm afraid it will be another East European country goes down swinging."

"It's ironic considering what's happened in the rest of East Europe in the last year. There's no reason the Baltic states should have to be the sacrificial lamb," he continued.

"What does it say about justice, about international law, about America's commitment to self determination in the Baltic states, and about our involvement in the Persian Gulf — where we claim to be because a little country was overrun?" the

priest asked.

Using donations collected from Lithuanian-Americans, Father Pugevicius' group had begun steps to send an airlift of emergency medical supplies by way of Poland to Lithuania Caritas, a Catholic relief organization. The airlift was to leave the country by Jan. 17.

Rasa Razzgaitis, director of special projects for Lithuanian Catholic Religious Aid, told CNS Jan. 15 that the container sent would hold antibiotics, syringes, needles, surgical gloves and other materials the Lithuanian Ministry of Health had requested.

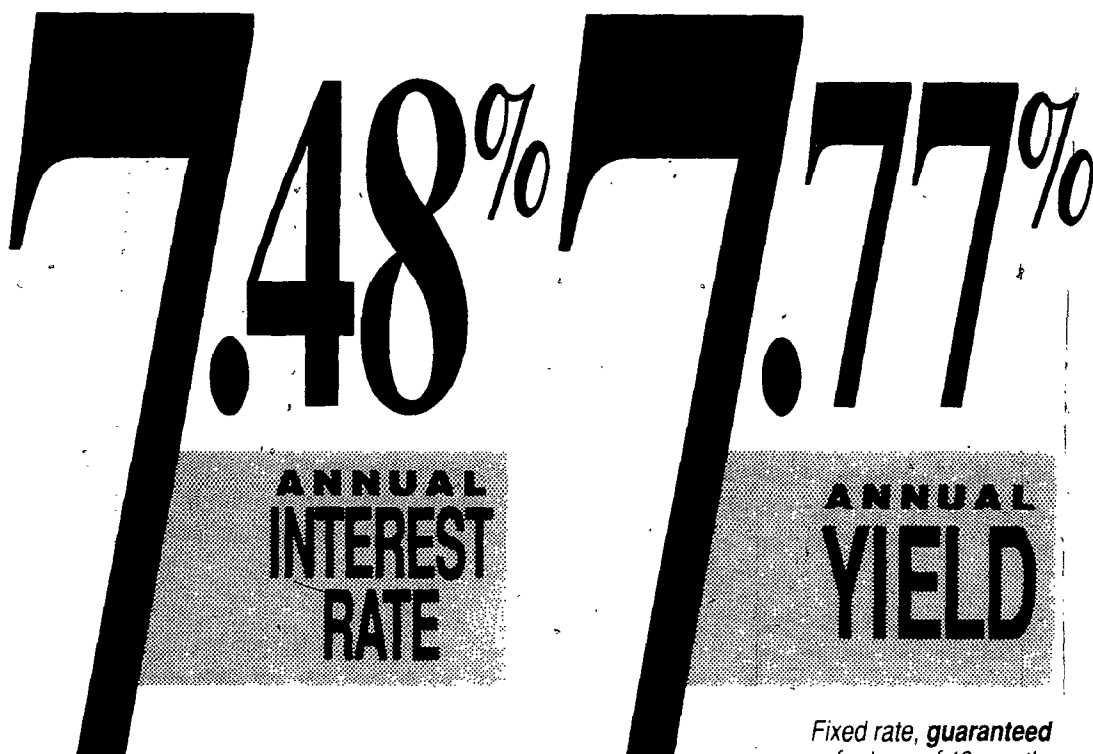
"We're attempting to respond. We don't know if we'll be successful" in getting the goods into Lithuania, she said.

Razzgaitis said she had learned Jan. 15 from the head of Lithuania Caritas that Lithuanian Red Cross personnel had been denied access to various floors of the television tower and radio station taken over by Soviet troops.

Red Cross personnel requested entry to check for wounded radio and TV personnel.

Ginte Damusis, director of the Lithuanian Information Center in Brooklyn, told CNS Jan. 15 that Lithuanian radio and TV journalists not allowed into their old offices were broadcasting news over loudspeakers in the streets of Vilnius.

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