

Soviet coup prompts fear of civil war

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — U.S. church leaders, including those representing Catholics from republics under Soviet domination, said they feared a backslide in reforms and violence after the abrupt ouster of Mikhail Gorbachev as Soviet leader.

Archbishop Stephen Sulyk of Philadelphia, spiritual leader of U.S. Ukrainian Catholics, said his greatest fear was that the takeover would result in "a bloody civil war."

"I don't think the army would shoot its own people, but the KGB would," Archbishop Sulyk remarked in an Aug. 19 telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

"There are too many diehard Stalinists in power yet," and several million Soviets depending on the hard-liners for their jobs, he said. "It's quite a machine."

In 1935-39, Soviet leader Josef Stalin ordered bloody purges and executions of hundreds of thousands of Soviet "enemies of the people."

In a statement released Aug. 19, Jesuit Father Drew Christiansen, director of the U.S. bishops' Office of International Justice and Peace, said reports of Gorbachev's removal were "a sore disappointment for all who hoped for a peaceful evolution of the Soviet Union to democratic government and a reformed economy."

The current state of emergency in the Soviet Union, he said, "naturally raises questions about the future of East-West relations."

But he expressed hope that the coup would not "impede final approval and implementation" of recently signed START and conventional forces agreements.

Two major arms treaties have been signed but not yet ratified. START is the historic strategic arms-reduction treaty



AP/Wide World Photos

The policies of deposed Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev frequently were attacked by hard-line communists and reform factions alike. Here, in July of 1988, Polish Catholic intellectuals challenged Gorbachev about the Soviet position on Warsaw Pact reforms.

calling for unprecedented nuclear arms cuts. The conventional forces treaty, or CFE, mandates dramatic cuts in conventional forces in Europe. The Bush administration hoped to get Senate approval of these accords this fall.

Gorbachev was abruptly removed from power Aug. 19 and replaced by a KGB- and army-managed committee. The same day Russian President Boris Yeltsin, once considered Gorbachev's archrival, called for a nationwide general strike to resist the hard-liners who ousted Gorbachev.

Thousands of angry demonstrators converged outside the Moscow parliament building in a show of support for Yeltsin, who read an appeal to the Russian people urging "the immediate return of Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev to his post."

Headed by former Soviet Vice President Gennady Yanayev, the eight-member leadership committee that took power de-

nied that a coup had taken place and said said Gorbachev was recovering from illness. As the new regime declared a six-month state of emergency, Yanayev assumed the title of acting Soviet president.

Calling Gorbachev "farsighted" in the role he envisioned for the United Nations, Father Christiansen said it would be a "great loss" if his ouster meant "diminished Soviet cooperation on the international scene."

He expressed hope that the Soviet Union "would continue its positive collaboration with other permanent members of the Security Council in resolving regional conflicts especially those in the Middle East."

In addition, he said he hoped the internal changes would not alter new Soviet policies of religious liberty or aggravate religious tensions in the Soviet Union.

In a statement issued Aug. 19, Archbishop Sulyk said that the Gorbachev ouster

had "caused freedom-loving people throughout the world great apprehension and concern."

He warned that the declared state of emergency "may signal the end to the democratic reforms" in the Soviet Union.

Archbishop Sulyk noted in the telephone interview that the Ukrainian Catholic Church "is legalized completely. Of course, that can be reversed at any time," he added.

Archbishop Sulyk said that he personally didn't think a change in church status would take place. "All the (Soviet) population and all the free world would be against" anyone who tried to outlaw the Ukrainian church again, he said.

Bishop Paul Baltakis, spiritual adviser to Lithuanian Catholics outside of Lithuania, said in an Aug. 19 telephone interview from Brooklyn, N.Y., that he disagreed with any suggestion that the coup was the result of Baltic states' independence aspirations.

"If you spend 50 years in prison, you try anything to get out. It's natural," said Bishop Baltakis.

He said he was not sure whether Soviets would accept Yeltsin's appeal for massive strikes.

"The people still remember the hard times under Stalin. They may be afraid to do anything," said Bishop Baltakis.

Bishop Baltakis said he believed Gorbachev "was sincere in his reforms" but remained unpopular in the Soviet Union because people "thought reforms should happen overnight." The hard-liners, he said, "took advantage" of his unpopularity.

He said he did not know how the people would react to the toppling of Gorbachev. "He was not very popular there, you know. If something happens to Yeltsin, the people will be very angry," said Bishop Baltakis.

Gorbachev's fall imperils religious freedom

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — With the removal of Mikhail Gorbachev as president of the Soviet Union, the Vatican lost a key ally in the struggle to bring full religious freedom to Soviet Catholics.

Gorbachev's abrupt departure from power Aug. 19 and his replacement by a KGB- and army-managed committee was in many ways a nightmare scenario for top church officials.

The developments threatened to close a six-year chapter of religious reform in the Soviet Union. Those reforms came in under the wing of Gorbachev's "perestroika" program of social restructuring, and reflected his view that religion was no longer an enemy.

Gorbachev's ouster also placed a cloud over religious affairs in Eastern Europe, where the fall of communism in former Soviet satellites has given local churches a

new lease on life.

Pope John Paul II met with Gorbachev twice at the Vatican, greeting the former Soviet leader both times as a man who could be trusted to deliver on his promises and who deserved public support.

The pope could point to a number of concrete gains for the church under Gorbachev's leadership:

- A freedom of religion law in 1990 which rolled back decades of communist restrictions on churches, including those against religious instruction and freedom of association.
- The legalization of the 5-million-member Ukrainian Catholic Church, along with the restitution of some of its churches and other properties.
- The exchange of diplomatic representatives, which allowed the Vatican to undertake a much-needed census of the church in Soviet lands and begin reorganizing its hierarchy there.
- The naming of several bishops in So-

viet republics — including a resident bishop for Moscow this year — with no interference from the government.

- An invitation for the pope to visit the country — a trip that had been foreseen for 1992 or 1993.

- Growing recognition in policy statements by Soviet officials that religion represents a cultural strength.

For these and other reasons, the pope and the Vatican were some of Gorbachev's loudest cheerleaders, even when he was under fire at home for failed domestic policies.

In 1985, reacting to Gorbachev's election as head of the Soviet communist party, the Vatican newspaper said the move opened "a new era for the Soviet Union."

This optimism — shared by few observers at the time — was borne out as Gorbachev introduced dramatic social changes, especially in the area of human rights.

A breakthrough occurred in 1988, when Gorbachev welcomed a top-level church

delegation to Moscow for ceremonies commemorating the millennium of Christianity in what is now the Soviet Union.

Early 1989 saw the restoration of the Lithuanian hierarchy, the return of the Vilnius cathedral and the freeing of a Lithuanian archbishop from house arrest.

In that period, the then-Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, summed up the opportunity Gorbachev offered to the church: "We are always ready to dialogue. What was lacking was a partner. Now a partner exists."

In his first meeting with Gorbachev in late 1989, the pope in effect blessed the "perestroika" program and said the church wanted to take full advantage of the new reforms. He emphasized the importance of the proposed law on freedom of conscience, which was passed the following spring.

The two leaders greeted each other warmly, spoke a little Russian and gave the impression that a friendship was formed. On a policy level, the pope's hope for a united Europe seemed to harmonize with Gorbachev's vision of a "common European house" that would include the Soviet Union.

Their next meeting a year later was an important boost for Gorbachev, who was under attack at home over a struggling economy and charges that he had taken too much power. The Vatican newspaper earlier had given Gorbachev a significant endorsement, saying the Soviet leader and his program still deserved support.

Yet throughout Gorbachev's term in office, Vatican officials were aware that his hold on power was tenuous; they would sometimes privately express apprehensions that so much progress seemed to depend on one man.

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