

Monday, March 19, 1990

Free elections held in Latvia, Estonia

MOSCOW (AP) — Latvians and Estonians voted in their first free elections in 50 years Sunday to choose republic parliaments that activists hope will press for independence from the Soviet Union.

Crucial runoff elections in local and republic races were also held in Russia, Byelorussia and the Ukraine, the Soviet Union's Slavic heartland that makes up some 80 percent of its territory and two-thirds of its population.

From Moscow to Vorkuta in northern Russia, reformists confronted party and government officials. A former political prisoner faced a KGB officer in a runoff in Moscow. No election results were expected before Monday.

In the two Baltic republics, annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, backers of independence hoped their candidates would emerge victorious, following the example of nearby Lithuania.

Lithuania's parliament was taken over by independence supporters in elections in February and early March. It promptly declared the republic independent on March 11.

"I think people want to participate, because they believe that things would change for the best, that these are the first democratic elections. For the first time, we have alternative candidates (for the republic and local councils)."

—Ivan Petrov, electoral committee chairman

The Soviet Congress declared the move illegal and Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev gave the republic three days to respond.

The deadline expires Monday, but Gorbachev repeated his offer to hold talks with the Lithuanians.

In Moscow, officials reported a 57 percent turnout after the polls closed.

"I think people want to participate, because they believe that things would change for the best, that these are the first democratic elections. For the first time, we have alternative candidates" for the republic and local councils, Ivan Petrov, chairman

of the electoral committee at a polling station in Moscow's Kievsky district, said.

Latvia legalized alternative political parties several months ago, following the lead of Lithuania. Estonia has not removed the Communist Party's constitutional guarantee on power, but a variety of political parties put forward candidates without interference.

The Soviet Parliament legalized multiple political parties for the entire country last Tuesday, but that was too late for strong, republican movements to form in the heartland of Russia, Byelorussia and

the Ukraine.

In Latvia, average voter turnout was 75 percent, the republic's Electoral Commission said. The pro-independence Latvian People's Front nominated 185 candidates out of the total 390 competing for the 201 parliament seats.

Election officials said 69 percent of the contenders there are Communists, including some People's Front members, the official Soviet news agency Tass said.

People Front's spokeswoman Anda Anspoka says the front hopes to gain a two-thirds parliamentary majority "to fight for independence."

Thousands of Popular Front supporters rallied in the Latvian capital of Riga Sunday, urging voters to support their movement. At least five other parties, including the Green or environmental party, competed in the Latvian elections, Tass said.

Estonian journalist Michael Taro predicted the People's Front would win about 35 of the 105 seats in Estonia, with 15 or 20 more going to other pro-independence groups.

Gorbachev urges Lithuania to return to fold

MOSCOW (AP) — Soviet military jets repeatedly flew over the capital of Lithuania during military maneuvers Sunday, one day before a Moscow deadline demanding that the Baltic republic renounce its declaration of independence.

At the same time, however, Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev struck a conciliatory tone, saying he still planned to talk with the Lithuanians about returning to the Soviet fold. And he said there had been no ultimatums.

"We will carry on the dialogue," Gorbachev told reporters Sunday after voting in runoff elections, which were held in Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union's Slavic heartland.

Also Sunday, 50,000 to 100,000 Lithuanians demonstrated against independence at a rally in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital. Soviet television said the demonstration included calls for civil disobedience and for the creation of workers' squads to secure order and defend socialist property against the secessionist government.

The size of the protest, shown on television, damaged the Lithuanian government's claim that the population fully supports secession. Gorbachev has said he is concerned for the rights of non-native residents and fears that splitting the Soviet Union would prompt hundreds of thousands to migrate.

Bush administration conflicts raise defense budget questions

WASHINGTON (AP) — Disagreement inside the Bush administration over the possibility that drastic changes in the Soviet Union will be reversed is raising new questions about the size of the U.S. defense budget.

While CIA Director William Webster testified earlier this month the political changes in the Soviet Bloc are irreversible, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney has maintained that Moscow could reassume its former confrontational pose.

Treasury Secretary Nicholas S. Brady said Sunday that the administration is still sticking with Cheney's proposed \$3.2 billion cut in inflation-adjusted defense spending for fiscal 1991 beginning next Oct. 1.

"Three billion dollars is it; that's what Secretary Cheney says; that's what it is," Brady said on CBS-TV's "Face the Nation" program. "That's our position at this point in time."

Webster's testimony, however, is one indication of disagreement within the administration, particularly between Cheney and White House Budget Director

Richard Darman, over whether bigger defense cuts might be acceptable.

A senior White House official who refused to allow his name to be used was quoted by the New York Times on Sunday as saying the "irreversibility" of changes in the Soviet Union makes deeper military spending cuts possible.

The newspaper quoted senior administration officials as saying they were willing to acquiesce to total cuts of \$10 billion to \$11 billion but adding that Cheney was still fighting "the emerging consensus."

A cut of \$10 billion to \$11 billion would produce a fiscal 1991 defense budget of \$296 billion to \$297 billion, roughly the same as this year, compared to the \$303 billion Pentagon spending plan that Bush submitted to Congress in January.

Brady called the Times story inaccurate, saying, "I've sat in all of these discussions, and there has been no talk about a \$10 billion cut."

Heavy rainfall triggers two-day flood

ELBA, Ala. (AP) — Two days of flooding across south Alabama left at least 3,500 people homeless and killed eight others by Sunday, and one town remained a muddy pond a day after its levee failed.

"I cannot begin to imagine everything that's been lost or damaged," said U.S. Rep. Bill Dickinson after taking a helicopter tour of Elba, where 1,500 people were evacuated after the Pea River levee ruptured Saturday. Sixteen inches of rain had fallen in the area in the two days before the earthen barrier gave way.

About 45 miles downstream in Geneva, emergency workers shored up another levee and continued evacuating residents, who started leaving their homes Friday night.

Margaret Mixon, emergency

management director for Geneva County, where about 450 people had fled, said officials believed the Geneva levee would hold. But she added: "I guess Elba was pretty confident, too."

Rivers throughout southern Alabama swelled to as much as 21 feet above flood levels Sunday as the water from the nearly non-stop rains drained toward the Gulf of Mexico.

State troopers said six people drowned Friday night in Covington County when a car fell into a rain-swollen creek where a bridge had washed out, and two more people died the same way Saturday night in neighboring Escambia County. About 200 people were forced to leave their homes in Escambia.

In the Montgomery area, about

80 miles northwest of Elba, some 500 people had to be evacuated as the muddy Alabama River rose to 19 feet above flood stage, with an even higher crest expected Monday.

The Choctawhatchee River was 21 feet above flood stage in the southeast Alabama town of Newton, about 30 miles east of Elba, and sheriff's deputies said some 500 people had been evacuated since Friday in Newton and surrounding Dale County. Evacuations in Covington, Houston and Dallas counties brought the total number of evacuations to about 3,500.

Most people were staying with friends or in motels and very few were in shelters, said Lawrence Bowden of the Alabama Emergency Management Agency.



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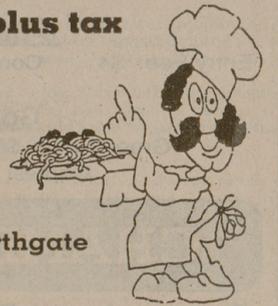
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