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WORLD & NATION

Thursday, April 5, 1990 Page 17

Baker opens talks with Soviet Foreign Minister USSR considers plan for Lithuanian future

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State James A. Baker III said Wednesday he was encouraged that the Soviet Union seems to be considering a referendum in Lithuania to determine the future of the independence-minded Baltic republic.

"A referendum is, of course, one way for parties to press self-determination," Baker said as he opened three days of talks with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze on such diverse issues as Lithuania, arms control and the Soviet economy.

"We will be exploring the question of the degree to which there is, in fact, the beginning of some dialogue in Moscow," Baker said.

Talking to reporters, Baker said he intended to ask Shevardnadze about the cancellation of scheduled meetings between Lithuanians and officials of the Soviet Interior ministry. Shevardnadze, however, seemed to be unaware of such scheduled meetings.

"What happened today I have no information yet," the foreign minister said through an interpreter.

Responding to another question, Shevardnadze indicated the Soviets had not used force to deal with the secession movement in Lithuania.

"Of course," he said, "in any country, in any state, measures are taken in order to have order, in order to have a normal situation. And this is this elementary order that is being established."

The State Department lobby was cordoned off and dozens of uniformed guards and security agents in civilian garb kept watch. A guard with a German Shepherd dog stood at the entrance.

Lithuania is expected to be high on the agenda when Shevardnadze meets Friday with President Bush.

"It is a matter where we want the Soviets to know our views," said White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater.

On Capitol Hill, lawmakers pushed Bush to take a stronger stand on Lithuania.

House members voted 416-3 to approve a resolution urging the president to reaffirm his commitment to an independent Lithuania and take steps to normalize diplomatic relations between Washington and Lithuania.

The resolution, which carries no legal weight, is similar to one passed earlier by the Senate.

Meanwhile, 31 senators told Bush in a letter that U.S. warnings against the use of military force in Lithuania have not been effective. The administration, the letter said, must spell out the consequences Moscow will face if more force is used.

Gennadi Gerasimov, the Soviet foreign ministry spokesman, told Mutual NBC Radio News on Wednesday that under no circumstances would force be used to keep Lithuania within the Soviet Union.

Ryan named S&L regulator amid conflict

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate confirmed T. Timothy Ryan Jr. as the nation's chief savings and loan regulator Wednesday despite Democrats' complaints that he lacked banking experience.

President Bush's nominee, a 44-year-old labor law attorney, won approval on a 62-37 vote to begin a five-year term as director of the Treasury Department's Office of Thrift Supervision.

He will regulate the industry during a period that analysts believe will be crucial to its survival. S&Ls lost a record \$19 billion last year. Ryan will administer the rules deciding which institutions stay in business.

Seventeen Democrats joined all 45 Republicans in voting to confirm Ryan, who was nominated less than two weeks ago. Thirty-seven Democrats were opposed.

The administration lobbied hard for Ryan, with Treasury Secretary Nicholas F. Brady making daily calls on his behalf. The victory margin was wider than both Democrats and Republicans predicted.

English government refuses to give up tax

LONDON (AP) — Recognizing it is in serious political trouble, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government has moved to blunt the impact of its unpopular new local government tax.

But even though the so-called poll tax has provoked protest and a demonstration that turned into a riot Saturday, the government shows no sign of backing down.

Instead, Thatcher is taking a gamble that she can make the tax palatable by the mid-1992 deadline for the next election. And that, even close aides acknowledge, is an uncertain prospect.

"That's the question, and I don't know the answer," said a Thatcher aide, speaking on condition of anonymity. "It is not easy to be popular when you are taxing 17 million more people."

On Tuesday, Environment Secretary Chris Patten ordered 20 high-spending local authorities to impose lower taxes and cut their budgets for the current fiscal year. He said the move would reduce the bills of 4 million people by \$50-\$160 a year.

The tax that took effect April 1 averages \$592 a person a year, about one-third higher than the government target. It must be paid by most of the 38 million adult Britons. Previously, only some 12 million property owners paid local government taxes.

But the immediate effect of Patten's "capping" of the high-spenders was to exacerbate the controversy.

The opposition Labor Party was angered that no authorities ruled by Thatcher's Conservative Party were on the list.

The targeted authorities claimed they would have to cut services and accused the government of being vindictive. Some threatened to fight the measure in court.

Patten, who is in charge of the tax, is dropping hints of further fine-tuning. But Thatcher says she will not abandon the community charge, as the tax is officially called.

She introduced the reform believing a head tax was fairer than a property tax because it would net everybody, not just homeowners.

She also believed that once the bills came in, taxpayers would blame them on Labor high-spenders.

Instead, the blame is falling on her. And the Patten refinements appear to consist largely of spending more central government money to bring down the levels of the poll tax.

That's precisely what Thatcher did not want. It smacks of a retreat and prevents her from cutting income tax and boosting old-age pensions, health spending and other pre-election favorites.

Two killed as ship goes down; fake distress call causes anger

BOSTON (AP) — The call, on a marine hailing frequency, was urgent and chilling: A ship somewhere on the freezing waters off Massachusetts was transmitting a last-ditch plea for help.

"This is the fishing vessel Sol E Mar," a male voice shouted in frenzy. "We're sinkin'. We need help now!"

The plea rose into a scream. The transmission was abruptly cut. Then, there was only crackling static.

Coast Guard radio monitors on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard tried desperately to get the caller back to locate the ship and send help.

But just over a minute after the first call, another distress signal came in.

"SOS, I'm sinking," a male voice said. And then he laughed.

The Coast Guard officers didn't dispatch rescue planes or boats. The calls, they thought, were just part of the rising number of hoaxes.

Last Friday, five days later, they discovered they were wrong. The Sol E Mar was reported missing and the Coast Guard began a search for the father and son who manned the 50-foot fishing vessel.

By then, it was too late.

The Sol E Mar and the two men were presumed lost at sea somewhere south of Martha's Vineyard. The search was called off Sunday night.

The family grieved, fishermen along the New England coast mourned the loss of more of their own and the Coast Guard was left wondering how to deal with hoaxers who think they are being clever by faking a call for help.

"Things might have been different," Lt. Paul Wolf, the Coast Guard spokesman in Boston, said. "I can't say the fake call killed them. But it certainly lessened their chances."

Bogus distress calls were once just a nuisance to Coast Guard rescuers. Now they are considered a serious problem.

"This is the first case that I know of where it was a factor in a rescue," Wolf said. "It definitely influenced the way we responded."

In 1989, 16 hoaxes were recorded on the coast from Canada to New Jersey, and the Coast Guard responded to most of the calls, Coast Guard Cmdr. Bill Armstrong said.

This year, there already have been 11 known hoaxes.

"We have limited resources, and every time we respond to a hoax, those resources aren't there for someone who may need them," Armstrong said.

In 1986, a man was sentenced to a year in prison af-

ter he broadcast a bogus distress signal that triggered a massive sea-and-air search for a sinking yacht with 10 people aboard.

Emergency responses often are hampered because of the constant chatter on radios, largely by inexperienced boaters. The problem is so acute in the Boston area that the Coast Guard and the Federal Communications Commission will experiment with an additional distress frequency beginning next year, Armstrong said.

Lost with the Sol E Mar were William Hokanson Sr., 44, and his 19-year-old son, William Jr. The two Fairhaven men set out March 22 from Kelley's Landing for Cape Cod, hoping for a large flounder catch.

Manuel Aguiar, William Sr.'s brother-in-law, said he had heard the Coast Guard tapes. He said the first call was clearly from the son, and the second was a different voice. He said the family was angry at the Coast Guard.

"They're out there to serve the public, fake call or not," he said.

Wolf said the Coast Guard was reviewing its actions. More detailed instructions on how to distinguish hoaxes from authentic calls are being sent to radio monitors with added urgency because of the Sol E Mar sinking, he said.

Even if the fake call had not come in, the Hokansons might never have been rescued, since their boat apparently sank before they could radio their location, Wolf said.

"If I could change anything, I would have given them five more seconds on the radio," he said.

"The Coast Guard saved 6,000 people last year. I just wish we could have rescued two more."

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