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Lithuanians defy Kremlin's warnings

VILNIUS, U.S.S.R. - Hundreds of Lithuanian youths volunteered Tuesday to serve as the breakaway republic's customs and frontier guards despite a Kremlin warning not to change border security operations.

Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis said the warning from Moscow actually marked the beginning of negotiations on the Baltic republic's demand for independence. He said Lithuania agreed with much of the Kremlin statement, including the order to maintain trade ties.

Lithuania declared itself independent on March 11, 50 years after it was

occupied by the Red Army and annexed by the Soviet Union. The Soviet Parliament declared the decree invalid but did not say what steps it would take to stop the republic from seceding.

In a stern warning to Lithuania on Monday, the Kremlin ordered its own ministries to ensure there were no interruptions in customs and frontier procedures and in trade, transport and communications.

Lithuania on Tuesday moved ahead with plans to take charge of its borders, however, and youths volunteered to help.

"I served two years in the occupying army, and now I want to serve in my own country's," said a young man as he rushed to turn in his application in a cramped office in the Lithuanian capital's center.

Lithuanian officials said there were no plans to arm the border force.

The symbolic value of the force may help convince other governments that Lithuania is controlling its territory and should be formally recognized as a full-fledged country, said Edward Tuskenis of the republic parliament's information center.

Lithuania, on the Soviet Union's Western front line, contains eight military bases and tens, if not hundreds of thousands of troops, according to emigre sources.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev has said he does not intend to use force against the rebellious republic.

Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, speaking Tuesday in Windhoek, Namibia, reiterated that position. "We are against the use of force in any region, and particularly against the use of force domestically," he said.

The White House voiced concern about Soviet troop movements on Lithuania's borders, but spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said Gorbachev had offered assurances the Kremlin would not resort to force.

Lithuanian officials said the border force was intended largely to keep Soviet shoppers from stripping Lithuanian shelves bare in case of shortages.

Many of the hundreds of youths who signed up to serve on the force are recent deserters from the Red Army, said Ludwiga Pociuniene, who was taking the applications at the Lithuanian Parliament building.

Lithuanian Deputy Prime Minister Kazimieras Motieka said the Lithuanian government was registering the deserters in hopes of protecting them from forcible return to their units. However, he said military authorities had warned the government that steps would be taken to arrest the soldiers and return them to the army beginning on Saturday.

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