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Bush: No need to defend Lithuania policy

WASHINGTON - President Bush, bitterly criticized by Lithuania, said Wednesday "I don't need any defense" for refusing to penalize the Soviet Union for its economic squeeze on the breakaway Baltic republic.

"The policies, decisions I've taken have had strong support from the American people, and that's who I work for," said Bush. The president did not reply when asked by a reporter how Lithuanians view his decision.

While Bush has won support from some congressional leaders for his strategy, there also were signs of restiveness Wednesday about the lack of a U.S. response.

Senate Democratic Leader George Mitchell said Bush should take some action "to express disapproval and to deter further actions" against Lithuania.

He suggested slowdowns in U.S.-Soviet talks on the environment, taxes, investment or trade but also said Bush was in the best position to decide.

For a second straight day, Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis denounced Bush's refusal to curb

economic ties with the Soviets in reaction to coercion of Lithuania.

"Our people remember how they were abandoned after World War II... relegated to the Stalinist empire. It just saddens us to see Western nations, especially the United States, being misled by the Soviet Union," Landsbergis said in a telephone call with members of Congress.

"The Soviets are strangling (our) nation like a boa constrictor," he said, referring to the mounting pressure from Moscow to force Lithuania to drop its drive to secede from the Soviet Union.

Landsbergis was invoking the infamous memory of French and British appeasement of Nazi Germany that culminated in the 1938 Munich Pact sacrificing much of Czechoslovakia to Germany.

The White House said it took no offense at Landsbergis' remark.

"No, we understand his frustrations and his efforts on behalf of his people," White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater said.

"Mr. Landsbergis is fully aware of the president's concern and interest in freedom in his country," Fitzwater said.

ter said.

During a picture-taking ceremony at the White House, a reporter questioned Bush about Landsbergis' "Munich" comment, asking how he defended himself. "I don't need any defense," Bush said, adding that he enjoyed widespread support for his policies.

On Capitol Hill, Secretary of State James Baker III told a Senate appropriations subcommittee that the Soviet Union must allow Lithuanians to decide their own future.

But Baker said the administration still was not prepared to levy economic sanctions against Moscow to force negotiations with Lithuanian leaders.

"We are involved in quiet diplomacy in an effort to promote such a dialogue -- the only real answer to an effective resolution of this conflict," Baker said.

"The Soviets are going to have to allow the Lithuanians to fully exercise their rights of self-determination," Baker said.

Fitzwater said, "The president has reiterated time and again our support

for freedom of Lithuania and other countries of the world. Indeed, preserving the fragile environment for freedom and self-determination guides our policy."

As Baker testified, Landsbergis told some members of Congress, "It appears that the West doesn't want to help Lithuania.... Our reaction is one of discouragement and disappointment. It feels as if our worst fears are being realized."

Late Tuesday, the Senate Appropriations Committee inserted in a supplemental spending bill a provision setting aside \$10 million to build and staff a U.S. embassy in Lithuania, should the United States formally recognize the Baltic republic's independence.

In criticism less restrained than Mitchell's, Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., issued a statement voicing "mounting outrage and frustration" at the lack of a U.S. response to Moscow's moves. She said, "The Soviets have got to get a message from the free world: You cannot keep your empire by the force of your guns."

Shiite kidnapping mentor criticizes U.S. resolution

BAALBEK, Lebanon - A reputed mentor of pro-Iranian kidnappers urged them to continue holding their Western hostages Wednesday and accused the United States of sabotaging efforts to win the release of other captives.

Shiite Moslem leader Hussein Musawi said a non-binding U.S. House of Representatives resolution Tuesday endorsing a united Jerusalem as Israel's capital complicated efforts to free another hostage.

"The Moslems in Lebanon offered a rose, only to get a stone thrown at them," Musawi told a group of journalists from Western news organizations, including The Associated Press.

Sunday's release of American Robert Polhill after 39 months in captivity raised hopes another Western hostage could be freed. Kidnappers are believed to be holding 17 Western hostages, including seven Americans.

Polhill, who was flown to Wiesbaden, West Germany, after his release, plans to return to the United States with his family today, U.S. military officials said.

Musawi is believed to have played a key role in Polhill's release. The bearded, soft-spoken former teacher alluded to his repeated urgings to the kidnappers to show good will by releasing a hostage.

"So they did and released Polhill," Musawi said. "But upon that release we heard the news of the House of Representatives resolution on Jerusalem. If every release is matched by such a monumentally ill-intentioned American response, why then should any hostage be freed?"

"We hope that no other hostage will be released," said Musawi, reputed mentor of the pro-Iranian group that held Polhill, the Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine.

Polhill, 55, a lecturer on accounting, was kidnapped from the campus of the U.S.-affiliated Beirut University College with two other American educators Jan. 24, 1987. The other two -- Jesse Turner, 42, of Boise, Idaho, and Alann Steen, 51, of Bos-

ton -- are still held by Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine.

Musawi heads the Islamic Amal faction within Hezbollah. Hezbollah is believed to be the umbrella for groups holding hostages.

Asked about persistent reports a second American hostage would be freed during Eid al-Fitr, the three-day feast that begins today and marks the end of the Moslem holy month of Ramadan, Musawi said.

"There is plenty of talk about such a move. I do not think Eid al-Fitr means anything to the Americans, and I don't think there's an atmosphere for such an early release."

Musawi said the release of Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners held by Israel and its militia ally, the South Lebanon Army, was "essential" toward freeing the remaining Westerners in Lebanon.

"The release of the prisoners held by Israel and its surrogates is a foremost issue and should be simultaneous with the release of the hostages," he said.

Officials in Jerusalem had said Israel and the Israeli-allied South Lebanon Army planned prisoner releases this week to mark the end of Ramadan.

But South Lebanon Army leader Antoine Lahd on Wednesday canceled plans to release some of the 300 mostly Shiite prisoners he holds, sources said. In the past two years he had released prisoners on the holiday.

"Releasing them now would be seen as an American payment to the Hezbollah through Israeli agents," he was quoted as telling Israeli radio.

Most of the seven Americans, four Britons, two West Germans, two Swiss, one Italian and one Irishman are believed held by pro-Iranian Shiite factions. The longest-held hostage is American Terry Anderson, chief Middle East correspondent for The Associated Press. He was kidnapped March 16, 1985.

Asked whether the hostages all were alive, Musawi said there was no proof anyone was dead. He also said he believed the various factions holding captives know one another.

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