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Lithuanian leader at White House to give recognition

WASHINGTON - Lithuanian Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene appealed to President Bush on Thursday to formally recognize her government's independence from Moscow.

"I think he's going to see how events unfold there and he's going to take decisions which are compatible with U.S., Soviet and Lithuanian interests," she said.

Bush said at a news conference shortly before the 45-minute Oval Office meeting that he sees no role for the United States as a mediator between Lithuania and Moscow.

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said Bush told Prunskiene to take back to Lithuania this message:

"I am personally, and the United States government, is committed to the self-determination of the people of Lithuania."

The White House has said Prunskiene's visit was unofficial, but Fitzwater said Bush was pleased to get a first-hand account of the conditions in Lithuania.

British Conservatives lose

LONDON - Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party lost heavily to the socialist Labor Party in early results in local elections Thursday.

With an unpopular new local tax -- the poll tax -- the key issue, Conservative fared badly in areas ranging from some of their heartlands in the prosperous south to northern industrial cities.

But initial Labor gains were less than the massive victory predicted by opinion polls, which give the socialists a lead of some 20 points.

With results declared early today from nearly half the 201 councils being contested, Labor had gained control of seven councils, while the Conservatives had lost four, including the key northern city of Bradford.

The elections were the first comprehensive opinion test since Thatcher won a third successive term in 1987.

The Conservatives bolstered their majority in the south London borough of Wandsworth, a focus of national attention after setting the lowest poll tax in the nation. The tax helps fund local spending.

Wandsworth's Labor leader, Fiona McTaggart, said, "It's a one-off bribe that's worked for them."

A tally of seats by the British news agency, Press Association, after 110 councils were declared showed the Conservatives lost 143 seats and gained 24, while Labor

gained 195 seats and lost just 14.

The centrist Social and Liberal Democratic Party gained 50 seats and lost 87, in a better performance than the trouncing forecast in polls.

Some 5,000 seats were at stake. A BBC computer prediction early today showed a swing of 12 percent against the government.

BBC analyst Peter Kellner called the Conservatives' performance the

seen the sort of collapse that had been predicted."

Tories cheered wildly when the result was declared in Wandsworth, where the \$243 poll tax is the lowest in the country. The average poll tax levied by local authorities is \$580.

Problems began a year ago as inflation started rising and the government's attempt to curb it by hiking interest rates began hurting millions of new homeowners. Inflation is now headed toward 10 percent while interest rates are a high 15 percent.

The new tax was imposed April 1. Thatcher hoped it would turn voters against high-spending Labor-controlled authorities.

But instead, most families are paying more and blaming the government. The tax is also perceived as unfair because everyone in a district pays the same, regardless of income.

The government argues the fuss is largely because under the old system of property taxes, only the 17 million homeowners paid. Now all 38 million adult Britons have to pay, with rebates for the 9.5 million poorest.

In the House of Commons on Thursday, Labor Party leader Neil Kinnock said losers outnumbered gainers 3-1 under the new tax.

"If that is so, the enemy is not the community charge. It is high-spending Labor councils," Thatcher retorted.

This is something we can learn from, but there's no reason to panic.

*Biffen
Conservative Legislator*

"worst since modern politics began. The Tories really are in deep trouble."

"This is something we can learn from, but there's no reason to panic," said Conservative legislator John Biffen, the party's former leader in the House of Commons.

Labor's campaign manager Bryan Gould declared, "We're delighted."

In polls taken in the past month, the Labor lead averaged a huge 19 points.

Conservative Party chairman Kenneth Baker said: "We have not

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Iran calls U.S. 'frustrated child'

NICOSIA, Cyprus - President Hashemi Rafsanjani of Iran said Thursday the groups holding hostages in Lebanon released two Americans at Iran's prodding, but that the United States was still acting like a spoiled child.

He also said Iran is not restoring diplomatic ties with the United States.

Robert Polhill, 55, of New York, was freed April 22 and eight days later a second U.S. educator held hostage, Frank Reed, 57, of Malden, Mass., was freed.

Rafsanjani said the kidnapers released the two "at our suggestion. They could have ... rejected our advice. But they accepted our advice."

In his speech to a group of teachers in Tehran, Iran's capital, Rafsanjani compared the U.S. response to that of "a stubborn, frustrated child."

The speech was carried by Tehran Radio and monitored in Nicosia.

President Bush told a news conference in Washington Thursday he was cheered by the release of Polhill and Reed, but was unwilling to make any conciliatory gestures toward Iran at this time.

Bush has repeatedly declared he will not negotiate with Iran or the Lebanese Shiite Moslem kidnapers for the release of hostages.

But he did promise to help Iran get details on the fate of four Iranian diplomats kidnapped in Lebanon in 1982, calling it a goodwill gesture and not an attempt to bargain for U.S. hostages.

"This is something they feel very strongly about," Bush said. "They've mentioned it to us several different times."

Sixteen Westerners, including six Americans, are missing in Lebanon. Most are believed held by groups controlled by Hezbollah, the Iranian-financed Party of God. Longest held is Terry Anderson, chief Middle East correspondent of The Associated Press, kidnapped March 16, 1985.

In London, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on Thursday welcomed Syria's and Iran's role in gaining freedom for Polhill and Reed, but said Britain will not deal with hostage-takers.

She is under pressure to secure the release of British hostages in Lebanon. Three Britons and an Irishman with dual British and Irish citizenship are held, including Terry Waite, special envoy of Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie.

Rafsanjani said Thursday that "an angry, revolutionary, enraged group, after it released

one hostage without pre-conditions, and was confronted with America's irresponsible reaction, should reasonably have taken revenge.

"But they still showed decency and showed their extreme goodwill" by freeing Reed as well.

"American bullies, instead of being impressed by the move, reiterated their previous stance."

Rafsanjani acknowledged that Bush expressed appreciation publicly to Iran and Syria for their role, but said his administration "on the other hand ... started a vile propaganda move, stating 'We will not normalize ties until Iran releases all hostages.'"

Rafsanjani said Iran was not interested in restoring relations and denied Western press reports that Tehran helped secure the two recent releases because it needs to resume diplomatic ties with the United States.

"Iran does not want relations with the United States, and we welcomed severing ties," he said. "We are not prepared to talk to America."

A dispatch Thursday from Iran's official Islamic Republic News Agency said arbitration talks between America and Iran in the Netherlands were focusing only on legal issues.

The two sides have been working for nine years to settle financial disputes stemming from the 1979 Islamic revolution. IRNA said a statement from the delegation stressed that "no other topics, either political or economic, have been or will be discussed."

Rafsanjani's comments Thursday appeared to rule out a possible dialogue with the United States to end 11 years of hostility.

But they also indicated that Rafsanjani, leader of those seeking broader contacts for Iran, was under mounting pressure from anti-Westerners angered at Iran's role in the release of the two Americans.

Rafsanjani praised the groups in Lebanon for taking the initiative on the releases and castigated Washington, saying, "Instead of giving an appropriate reward for this initiative, the U.S. reacted by saying it will not negotiate with kidnapers, as if Israel and the (Lebanese) Phalangists are not kidnapers."

He was referring to Arabs held by Israel, including Hezbollah leader Sheik Abdul-Karim Obeid, who was seized in Lebanon on July 28. Lebanese Christian militiamen, the armed wing of the Phalangist Party, seized the four missing Iranians in July 1982.