

Eye on Washington by William Jones

Latvian activists seek U.S. support

Members of the Latvian Popular Front are in Washington urging Bush not to back Gorbachov.

A delegation from the Latvian Popular Front (LTF) and the National Independence Movement of Latvia (LNNK) arrived in Washington early this month to seek support from the Bush regime for their strivings for independence.

The Latvian Popular Front has over 250,000 dues-paying members. Unlike the other Baltic states, Latvia, as a result of Stalin's forced migration policy, is only inhabited by a relatively small minority of Latvians (20-25%), with a large Russian population and some 19 other nationalities living within its borders. The LTF claims to have members among all nationalities.

During the March 1988 Soviet elections, LTF-supported candidates won 25 of 29 contested seats to the U.S.S.R. Congress of Peoples' Deputies. The smaller, 10,500-member LNNK was publicly denounced as unconstitutional in March 1989 by the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party. But on June 22, following an extensive investigation of LNNK activities, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian Socialist Republic adopted a resolution granting the LNNK the right to exist, and concluding that its program was in no way unconstitutional.

Many LNNK members are also members of the Popular Front, and some serve on the council of the Popular Front.

The broader-based Popular Front had initially adopted a program calling for Latvia's "sovereignty" within

the U.S.S.R., but were soon forced by popular pressure to call for total political and economic independence.

The delegates made clear, however, that the institutions of repression have by no means been dismantled, and the independence movements are walking a tightrope in their attempt to cast aside 40 years of domination by the Soviet Empire.

This correspondent asked Eduards Berklavs, a board member of the LNNK and a council member of the Popular Front, about the dangers of a political crackdown by Moscow. He referred to a communiqué by the assistant of the KGB chief in Riga, the capital of Latvia, which assured that there would be "no repression against movements, but we do have cases against individuals which could be used in the future." Berklavs himself had received two warnings because of his activity, and had been accused of stirring up ethnic tension.

"If we give them a chance, they will crack down," said Vladien Dzorzev, an ethnic Russian who is vice-chairman of the board of the Popular Front. "We realize that our secession may lead to a chain reaction of the disintegration of the Russian Empire. We shall try to extend this process so that it can be orderly and as painless as possible."

On the weekend of Dec. 9, there will be local elections in Latvia. The Popular Front is attempting to get a majority of their members elected, in order to build up momentum for the big elections in March to the repub-

lic's parliament.

Berklavs said that they would work together with the Supreme Soviet on the question of independence. "Independence," he emphasized, "would not be a gift from Moscow." He also noted that the Communist Party is collapsing throughout the entire Soviet Union. In Latvia, with 260 seats in the new parliament, Berklavs predicted that the Communist Party would only get 10 seats.

Another delegation member, Mavriks Vulfsons, himself a delegate to the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union from Latvia, noted that there is strong opposition to Gorbachov, especially by "people in charge of big management and the leaders of the *kol-khozes* (collective farms). But also from "a part of the intelligentsia who see *perestroika* as a retreat from Russian culture and values, people like Belov. But also among workers there is a growing opposition."

"Initially the working class supported Gorbachov," said Vulfsons. "I suppose they still do today. But portions of the working class are thinking in terms of syndicalism. This is not Gorbachov's way of thinking. There is a division between Gorbachov and the workers. They expected that, with *perestroika*, things would change for the better in two to three years, but they have changed for the worse. Social conditions in the U.S.S.R. are not good."

Although Vulfsons saw no alternative to Gorbachov, he said that the "people who brought down the Wall and people on the streets of Prague are not thinking of Gorbachov."

As for what possibilities open up for the Latvians, it was clear that the reaction in the West would be a decisive factor. "If there is a crackdown on popular movements," said Berklavs, "I hope the West will not provide economic aid to the Soviets."