

**June 19, 1991**

## **USSR: Continuing Violence in the Baltics**

### **Contents**

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>OMON: "On our balance sheet only"</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Review of the January Events</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Lithuania</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Latvia</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Responsibility of the Soviet Government</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Violence Since the January Events</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Detentions, Beatings and Shootings in Lithuania</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Attacks on Customs Posts</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Lithuania</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Latvia</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Estonia</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Explosions</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Recommendations to the Soviet Government</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Recommendations to the U.S. Government</b> .....	<b>8</b>

### **Introduction**

Nearly five months after the crackdown in Lithuania and Latvia, the Soviet government still has not adequately explained its role in those events or denounced the methods used by Soviet troops that led to deaths and injuries of civilians. The only word from the central government has been an "Informational Note," a preliminary report on an investigation into the deaths in January in the Baltics that was released on June 3, 1991, by the Soviet Prosecutor, General Nikolai Trubin. The statement absolved the Soviet troops of responsibility in the deaths that resulted from the January events. Such claims contradict eyewitness accounts.

Meanwhile, the crackdown in the Baltics continues, in new form, as the central Soviet government dances between mention of possible talks with the republic governments on the terms of independence and small-scale attacks on civilians and buildings. Soviet forces continue to arrest and beat civilians arbitrarily, and to attack customs

posts, causing deaths and injuries to guards and unarmed civilians.

The black berets, or OMON units, which are responsible to the USSR Interior Ministry and were the prime actors in the January events in Latvia, have been identified by many sources as the main instigators of several of these recent attacks. Although they were established by the Interior Ministry of the USSR, it is unclear whether the black berets are still under the actual control of the central government.

Helsinki Watch calls on the Soviet government to investigate the incidents that resulted in harm to unarmed civilians or guards, to denounce violent acts committed by forces under its jurisdiction and to penalize those OMON officials responsible. Helsinki Watch also appeals to the U.S. government to make Soviet adherence to international human rights law an important part of the normalization of relations with the Soviet Union.

### **OMON: "On our balance sheet only"**

The OMON—the black berets—were created in each republic by the Interior Ministry to enforce the Law on Demonstrations ratified by the Supreme Soviet in September 1987. Their mandate was to "preserve public order." Weapons were not to be used by them "on crowded streets, squares and in other public places where innocent bystanders could be harmed." OMON were, however, granted special powers in case of "massive unrest." The law neither defines the nature of these special powers nor what constitutes "massive unrest."

After the May 23rd attacks on customs posts in Latvia, described below, Deputy Interior Minister Trushin said that the OMON were acting on their own: "How could you even think that the USSR Interior Ministry could give the Riga OMON an order to attack your customs posts, and besides—we don't give OMON orders. They are on our balance sheet only." On May 30, Soviet Prosecutor Trubin ordered an investigation of OMON attacks on customs posts in Latvia and Lithuania. Trubin posited that the attacks were ordered "by someone from the leadership of the force," and he asked the procurator of Latvia to investigate charges of abuse of power by the OMON. On June 1, Trubin was quoted in *Vremya*: "OMON acted without authorization. . . exceeding its competence. There must not be such a situation in our country, in a law-governed state."

There has been no official report explaining the OMON's activities in the Baltics and the status of the relationship between the OMON and the central government. So long as the OMON remain on the "balance sheet" of the Interior Ministry, the Soviet government must answer for the actions of the OMON forces.

## **Review of the January Events**

### **Lithuania**

#### **Dead: 16**

On January 13, 1991, at 1:30 am, armed Soviet forces encircled and stormed the television tower in Vilnius, Lithuania. In the process, Soviet tanks drove over cars and people, and soldiers shot into the crowd of unarmed civilians who surrounded the building. One of those whose legs were crushed by the advancing tanks, Antonas Sakalauskas, reported to Helsinki Watch that the Soviet troops appeared determined to force themselves through anything or anyone in their way, including the eight rings of people around the television tower:

**I heard shooting and saw smoke. . . I saw tanks coming and surrounding the tower and, between us and the tanks, we saw soldiers. We stood and shouted, "Lithuania! Freedom! No to Fascism!" There were shootings; window glass fell. We moved away from the tower. Then I turned and saw the tank was inside the crowd moving slowly. I saw people at the corners of the tank pushing it to stop, but it didn't stop. When I saw that it wouldn't stop, I decided to turn to the side. Now I can't say what happened to me . . . I fell down at the corner of the tank. When I felt the tank on my legs, I noticed three others beside me. We were in pain, shouting.**

Another eyewitness, 25-year-old Arunas Rumanavicius, told Helsinki Watch that the paratroopers were carrying metal sticks and rifles. He saw the paratroopers beating people with the rifles and testified that one soldier hit an elderly woman with a grenade thrower.

Three of the 14 who died during or immediately after the events were crushed by tanks: Loreta Asanaviciute, Algimantas Kavaliukas and Rolandas Jankauskas. Another victim, Alvydas Kanapinskas, died as the result of injuries sustained during an explosion, and 60-year-old Alvydas Makulka died of a heart attack. The remaining nine, who died from gunshot wounds, were Vytautas Vaitkus, Titas Masiulis, Ignas Simulionis, Vidas Maciulevicius, Darius Gerbutavicius, Virginijus Druskis, Apolinaras Povilaitis, Rimantas Juknevičius and Viktor Sackich. Sackich was a Soviet paratrooper who is believed to have been shot accidentally by another Soviet soldier. Two of those hospitalized after the events died later: Jonas Tautkus on January 30 of a bullet lodged in the brain and Vytautas Kancevicius on February 18 from bullet wounds to the stomach.

#### **Wounded: at least 508**

Following the January 13 incident, the Ministry of Health reported treating 508 people, more than half for eardrum injuries from the blasts. Forty-five people sustained gunshot wounds; 186 had a combination of gunshot and other injuries; and 11 people were burned. Seventy-four of the injured people were admitted to hospitals.

### **Latvia**

#### **Dead: 6**

#### **Wounded: 10**

On Sunday, January 20, 1991, the black berets attacked and took over the Interior Ministry in Riga, Latvia.

Five people were killed, all by gunfire, and ten were wounded. Three of the dead were killed in a park near the Ministry, apparently by sharpshooters. The three were Andris Slapins and Gvido Zvaigzne, two Latvian members of a film crew working for the well-known Soviet film director Juris Podnieks, and Edijs Riekstins, a high school student, who was shot in the abdomen. Vladimir Gomonovich, a Senior Lieutenant of Police, was shot in the neck, and Sergei Kanonenko, a police inspector, was shot in the head.

The sixth fatal casualty in Latvia occurred earlier in the week, on January 16, when 39-year-old Roberts

**Murnieks, chauffeur for the Latvian Minister of Transportation, was stopped for unknown reasons by Soviet troops. He died after being shot in the back of the head.**

**Arrested: 5**

**Before the attack on the Interior Ministry building, Soviet troops arrested five people, charging them with possession of weapons. The five, Aigars Teperis, Agris Kreismanis, Gatis Jurkans, Kaspars Grinbergs, and Haralds Steinbergs, were volunteer public order guards, performing patrol duty in a mini-bus. They were held in a KGB prison in Riga for nine days, where they reportedly were beaten, and then moved outside of Latvia, to Vitebsk, ostensibly because there was no room for political detainees in the KGB cells. After widespread public protest, including an appeal by Helsinki Watch, the five volunteer guards were released on February 10.**

### **Responsibility of the Soviet Government**

**A report published in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* on January 29, 1991, cited a secret memo dated August 29, 1990, and signed by CPSU Politburo member and Central Committee Secretary Oleg Shenin, that described the plan of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) to invade Lithuania. The memo said: "The State and Legal Department of the CPSU Central Committee, through Communists in leadership positions of the country's law enforcement agencies, should organize actions by which the leaders of various nationalist and anti-Soviet political organizations, extremists and deserters who have violated Soviet law can have criminal and administrative proceedings instituted against them." The CPSU has not reacted publicly to its publication. The memo suggests direct control, at least at the time that the memo was written, by the central Soviet government over the forces that acted in the Baltics.**

**Until June 1991, the central government was silent about the events of January 1991. The Soviet prosecutor's office, headed by General Nikolai Trubin, issued a statement on June 3, 1991, that denied all reports that victims of the January 13 attack were crushed by tanks or shot by Soviet troops. All other reports, including eyewitness accounts backed up by photographs and video tapes, the *Shchit* report, and the Lithuanian Procurator's report, indicate that the Soviet troops were responsible for the violent deaths of civilians during the attack on January 13.**

## **Violence Since the January Events<sup>1</sup>**

### **Detentions, Beatings and Shootings in Lithuania**

**From January 24 to March 20, 1991, in Lithuania, Soviet forces, most often the black berets, reportedly have detained, without substantive criminal charges, at least 21 people in ten separate incidents; of those, six reportedly were beaten in detention. Three others were injured by gunfire, one fatally. Descriptions of several of the incidents follow:**

**• On Thursday, January 24, en route to Kaunas from Vilnius, a volunteer on the security staff of the Lithuanian parliament was detained by Soviet soldiers. Another three people were taken when they went back four hours later to investigate the disappearances. Upon release, the four were hospitalized and treated for head injuries. One of the men who was detained related the details of his ordeal to Helsinki Watch:**

**I was stopped by patrolling soldiers who demanded that I get out and lie down. They searched me for guns, then began kicking me on the ground and threatened to shoot if I moved. They locked me in the truck and took us to a military camp. Everything was taken, and we were beaten.**

**Then the investigation began. They wanted us to say we had been shooting at the soldiers. We were beaten again and told to clean the blood spots from the ground with our scarves. Then we were taken to a military prison. They let me go on Friday evening. I had to sign a paper saying we had no complaints.**

**• Reports of physical abuse by Soviet soldiers on January 24 are confirmed by three British journalists, Anatole Levin from *The London Times*, Brian Killen from *Reuters*, and Marcus Warren from *The Daily Telegraph*, who were detained the same day when they went to the scene of the detentions to look into the incident. While in detention, according to Levin, the journalists watched the Soviet soldiers slap and punch the Lithuanians and kick them in the face. The journalists were then moved to a separate room but could still hear beatings and groans through the walls; they later saw someone being dragged in a semi-conscious state. All the prisoners were released the same or the following day.**

**• On January 29, a 20-year-old man, Jonas Tautkus, refused to stop at a checkpoint outside of Vilnius and was shot in the back of the head by a Soviet soldier, as he drove away. He was the 17th to die as a result of Soviet actions in Lithuania.**

**• On February 12, three members of *Shchit* (Shield), a Soviet military reform group which had just completed an investigation of the January events in Vilnius, were arrested with their driver at the Vilnius train station. The group had just held a news conference announcing the findings of the *Shchit* report, which describes the January crackdown as an attempted coup by the Central Committee of the Communist Party and says that President Gorbachev and other high-level officials in the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense undoubtedly were aware of or active in the organization of the attack. The *Shchit* members, Captain Aleksandr Yevstigneyev, Captain Gennadii Melkov, and Lieutenant Colonel Ivan Bychkov, and their driver, Kestutis Balciunas, were charged with transporting illegal arms and**

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<sup>1</sup> Sources on these incidents in the Baltics, aside from Helsinki Watch's own mission in January, include reports issued by the Lithuanian Information Center, the Latvian American Association, FBIS, and Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty.

transporting or possessing gold and drugs. According to a report issued by *Shchit*, eyewitnesses reported that two of the three were beaten. All were released on February 14, and charges were dropped.

- On March 11, OMON troops detained and disarmed six Lithuanian law enforcement officials, in two separate incidents.

- On March 18, OMON troops detained Audrius Butkevicius, Lithuanian National Defense Department head, and his driver for more than 12 hours.

- On March 20, OMON troops opened fire in Vilnius on a bus carrying seven unarmed Lithuanian border guards. OMON claims the bus contained weapons, but, according to reports to Helsinki Watch, none were found. Three people were injured, one with serious head wounds and a rib fracture. Two were detained and held for seven hours. In response to statements by the Lithuanian government, Soviet Interior Minister Boris Pugo agreed to investigate the incident. No report has been issued.

### **Attacks on Customs Posts**

Since the events of January 1991, OMON units and other Soviet forces have attacked, occupied, destroyed or closed down twenty customs posts set up by the Lithuanian government along the Latvian and Belorussian borders, burned down eight border posts in Latvia, and attacked four posts in Estonia. Two people were killed as a result of these attacks, and at least 21 were injured. The Soviet forces bombed and burned the customs posts and, in the process, took no apparent action to assure the safety of guards and civilians.

The destruction of the customs posts is apparently an effort to enforce a Soviet law passed on March 26 by the USSR Supreme Soviet<sup>2</sup> that deems border posts set up independently by the republics to be illegal. The law states that a Union-wide customs system upholds the notion of a unified country. The law authorizes the Customs Board of the USSR to take charge of the "creation, reorganization and elimination of regional customs administrative boards of the USSR and customs posts." (Section 1:2:3) The methods for "reorganization" and "elimination" are not defined. V. Dauskis, the Latvian SSR prosecutor stated the perceived alternatives for dealing with the illegal customs posts in Latvia as "destroy the facilities, demolish them or burn them down."

The central Soviet government's attacks on the border posts in the Baltics also constitute selective application of the customs law. Other republics, including Azerbaidzhan and Moldavia, have passed laws restricting the flow of goods out of the republics and have set up posts and other bodies to administer these laws. In no other republic has the Soviet government used force to resolve the issue of control over customs.

In the incidents cited below, all of which took place during 1991, Soviet soldiers used force, firing shots randomly, setting fires or using explosives to destroy customs posts and often causing injuries to civilians or guards:

#### *Lithuania*

- January 27, Lavoriskiai (Belorussian border): At least 10 black berets took a customs station, firing shots, breaking windows, and confiscating documents.

- March 11, Salcininkai (Belorussian border): A customs building was blown up.

- April 19, Medininkai (Belorussian border): Fifteen Soviet paratroopers with automatic weapons occupied a

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<sup>2</sup> The customs law was printed in *Izvestia*, April 18, 1991.

customs post for five hours. They surrounded the post, which consisted of a hut and a trailer, destroyed the hut, broke customs barriers, and seized equipment. The six customs officials present were not harmed.

- **May 16, Druskininkai (Belorussian border):** Soviet soldiers threw explosives at and destroyed a border post. A Lithuanian border captain was injured.
- **May 17, Kalvariju (Belorussian border):** About 30 Soviet soldiers set a customs post on fire. Two guards were injured.
- **May 18, Salcininkai (Belorussian border):** Aleksandr Fijan, a Soviet officer in civilian clothing, shot at border guards. The guards returned fire, killing the officer.
- **May 19, Krakunai (Belorussian border):** Lithuanian Captain Gintaras Zagunis was shot and killed when he went to check his post after all border guards had been told to leave offices following the May 18th incident.
- **May 19, Salcininkai region (Belorussian border):** Two border posts were found riddled with bullets.
- **May 23, Vegeriai, Germaniskis, Salciai, Smelynes (Latvian border):** OMON troops and Soviet paratroopers attacked and burned down four customs posts. They beat up guards, two of whom were hospitalized.
- **May 24, Kalviai, Salociai (Latvian border); Lavoriskes, Medininkai, Sumsko (Belorussian border):** OMON and other Soviet troops burned down five customs posts.
- **May 28, Lavoriskes (Belorussian border):** Soldiers arrived at a customs post in a Soviet truck, beat up the four guards, and set fire to the building. Two of the guards were hospitalized, one for a broken rib and head injuries and the other for severe head and body injuries.

#### *Latvia*

- **May 23, Lithuanian and Belorussian borders:** In a five-hour period, OMON forces attacked five customs posts; four were burned down. Fifteen border guards were beaten up by OMON; one man was seriously injured.
- **May 24, Eleja (Lithuanian border), Aluksne:** A customs post was attacked.
- **June 8, near Karsave in the Ludze region (Russian border):** OMON beat up the guards at the post, then undressed them and burned their uniforms. The OMON forces took money and equipment from the guards and buildings and set fire to the building.

#### *Estonia*

- **May 19, Luhamaa region (Latvian border):** Two customs posts were attacked by armed men who were driving a car with Lithuanian plates. They beat up the guards and threatened them with automatic weapons. One guard was hospitalized.
- **May 21, Murati:** A customs post was attacked.
- **June 8, Luhamaa (Russian border):** Fifteen men in civilian clothes destroyed a border post and threatened to destroy a post 20 kilometers away.

## **Explosions**

Explosions have been reported in several locations in the Baltics during 1991. However, several—February 12 and 16 and March 6 in Latvia; March 8 and 14 in Lithuania; and April 26 in Estonia—were aimed at Communist Party buildings. The governments of Latvia and Lithuania, which have maintained that a policy of non-violence is their best defense, have claimed that the bombs were set by a group of Union loyalists who want to provide justification for even greater Soviet presence in the Baltics. They cite as evidence the similarity of methods and devices used in the explosions. No proof of this has been established. Helsinki Watch calls on the Soviet government to investigate the explosions.

On May 3, a bus stop in Ukmerge in Lithuania was destroyed by an explosion. Lithuanian police detained four people; two were members of OMON. All were released within hours. OMON announced that it had fired the two black berets who were suspects in the explosion.

### **Recommendations to the Soviet Government**

Helsinki Watch calls on the Soviet government to:

- Clarify its role in the planning of the January attacks.
- Acknowledge the violent acts committed by its forces in January in Latvia and Lithuania.
- Clarify extent of its control over the OMON forces in their recent activity; condemn OMON actions as beyond its mandate; penalize authorities responsible.
- Investigate all incidents of arbitrary detentions, beatings and shootings and use of unnecessary force and violence by regular Soviet troops as well as OMON; and
- Employ legal procedure to enforce its customs laws.

### **Recommendations to the U.S. Government**

Helsinki Watch calls on the U.S. government to promote Soviet adherence to international human rights law as it engages in discussion of economic and political agreements with the USSR. The effort to promote normalization of relations between the U.S. and the USSR should be accompanied by measures to ensure that the Soviet government takes steps to protect civilians and to act under the rule of law.



*This report was written by Sarai Brachman. It includes information gathered by Jeri Laber and Jonathan Fanton on a mission to the Baltics in January 1991. News From Helsinki Watch is a publication of Helsinki Watch, an independent organization created in 1979 to monitor domestic and international compliance with the human rights provisions of the 1975 Helsinki Accords. The Chair is Robert L. Bernstein; Vice Chairs, Jonathan Fanton and Alice Henkin; Executive Director, Jeri Laber; Deputy Director, Lois Whitman; Washington Representative, Catherine Cosman; Staff Counsel, Holly Cartner; Orville Schell Intern, Robert Kushen; Associates, Sarai Brachman, Mia Nitchun and Elisabeth Socolow.*

*Helsinki Watch is a component of Human Rights Watch, which includes Americas Watch, Asia Watch, Africa Watch, and Middle East Watch. The Chair is Robert L. Bernstein and the Vice Chair is Adrian W. DeWind. Aryeh Neier is Executive Director; Kenneth Roth, Deputy Director; Holly J. Burkhalter, Washington Director; Susan Osnos, Press Director.*

*Helsinki Watch is affiliated with the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, which is based in Vienna.*