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Bush Calls on Baltics, Russia to Move On

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President Bush is trying to soothe tensions between Russia and the Baltic states over celebrations marking the anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe.

President Bush began his day in Riga, reviewing troops alongside President Vaira Vike-Freiberga. Mr. Bush was awarded the country's highest honor, and laid a wreath at Latvia's Freedom Monument.

Ceremonial duties complete, President Bush and President Vike-Freiberga met privately, before joining Estonian President Arnold Ruutel and Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus for a working lunch.

The Lithuanian and Estonian leaders are boycotting Monday ceremonies in Moscow marking the Allied defeat of Nazi Germany, because the end of the Second World War in Europe was the beginning of more than four decades of Soviet rule in the Baltics.

At a joint news conference following their lunch, President Bush said Americans will never forget what he called "the Baltics' painful history."

"I recognize that, in the West, the end of the Second World War meant peace, but in the Baltics, it brought occupation and Communist oppression," said George W. Bush.

Russia says Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia willingly joined the Soviet Union, after Soviet troops liberated them from Nazi rule. The president's stop in Latvia, and a visit later in this trip to the former Soviet republic of Georgia, drew a letter of protest from the Kremlin.

President Bush says Monday's anniversary is an opportunity for all involved to look to the future.

"This moment in history will give everybody a chance to recognize what took place in the past, and move on," he said. "I fully understand there is a lot of anger and frustration involved in the three Baltic countries about the occupation. I have expressed that to President Putin, but he didn't need me to tell him. He fully understands there is a lot of frustrations and anger about what took place. My hope is that we are now able to move beyond that phase of history into a phase that is embracing democracy and free societies."

President Bush says he will tell President Putin as clearly as he can that it is in Russia's interest to have democracies on its border, because democracies, Mr. Bush says, are good, peaceful neighbors that do not fight each other.

During their talks in Riga, the four leaders discussed the political situations in the former Soviet republics of Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus.

In interviews before his trip, President Bush called Belarus the "last dictatorship in Europe." Russia backs the country's president, Alexander Lukashenko. At the press conference in Riga, Mr. Bush said the people of Belarus should be allowed to express themselves in free and open and fair elections.

Outside the talks, Latvian police arrested a dozen members of the radical pro-Russian National Bolshevik group, who had earlier staged an authorized protest outside the city center, but then marched on the secure zone around the presidents' meeting, and threw several smoke bombs.

Up next for President Bush on this five-day, four-nation tour is the Netherlands, where he will speak at a cemetery holding the bodies of more than 8,000 Americans killed during the Second World War.

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George W. Bush shakes hands after the conclusion of his press conference at the Riga cultural center President Bush says that Europe, wounded by decades of oppression and conflict, is free and at peace for the first time in its history. In his weekly radio address Saturday, Mr. Bush said armed conflict in Europe ended with the...

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From left: George W. Bush, Laura Bush and Latvia's President Vaira Vike-Freiberga Police in Riga have detained at least 17 people protesting the visit of President Bush to the Latvian capital. The demonstrators, who included supporters of Russia's radical National Bolshevik Party scuffled with police who blocked their...