

Zuroff blasts Vilnius for allowing neo-Nazi march

Nazi hunter demands harsh punishments for participants

• By ETGAR LEFKOVITS

The chief Nazi hunter of the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center has condemned the Lithuanian government for allowing hundreds of Neo-Nazis to march through the streets of the capital, the group said Wednesday.

The Lithuanian police's response to last week's march in Vilnius, in which hundreds of Neo-Nazis chanted anti-Semitic slogans in the city center, raises "serious questions" about the Lithuanian authorities'

willingness to take the necessary measures to prevent such cases in the future, Dr. Efraim Zuroff, the organization's Israel director, wrote in a letter to Lithuania's Ambassador to Israel Asta Skalsgiryte-Liauskiene.

"The Wiesenthal Center would therefore request that you transmit to Vilnius not only the sense of shock and outrage felt by Jews the world over, but our demand that those responsible for this outrage be prosecuted and punished in an expeditious manner," Zuroff wrote in the letter.

The Lithuanian police have pressed charges against two participants in the march, while others are being questioned as witnesses, Lithuanian media reported Wednesday.

The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry has conceded that "some [mistakes]" were made by police in dealing with the march, but that overall, according to local media reports, the police acted "correctly."

Inciting ethnic discord in Lithuania is punishable by a monetary fine or up to two years in prison.

At the same time, a public opinion poll published in a Lithuanian daily found that 32 percent of the respondents approved of the anti-Semitic and racist slogans chanted by the neo-Nazi demonstrators, and another 22% approved of the march.

The poll, published in

Lietuvos Rytas, is indicative of the lack of Holocaust education in Lithuania, but is not surprising in a country in which not a single one of its suspected Nazi war criminals has ever been prosecuted or punished for his crimes, Zuroff said.

The Holocaust in Lithuania was unique in that most of the Jews there were murdered by local citizens. The "Order Police" began to massacre Jews as soon as the Soviets left in 1941, even before the German occupation.

Out of a prewar Jewish population of 220,000, only a few thousand survived the war in Lithuania, representing the largest percentage of Jews murdered in a single country during the Holocaust.

Earlier this month, Yad Vashem launched an official protest with the Lithuanian foreign minister over his country's intention to pursue a criminal investigation into the wartime activities of a Holocaust partisan and historian who formerly served as a chairman of Israel's Holocaust memorial.