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U.S. troops arrive in Lithuania amid Ukraine tensions

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The United States deployed 150 paratroopers to Lithuania on Saturday, part of efforts by Washington to reassure its eastern European allies, worried by events in Ukraine, that NATO would offer protection if they face Russian aggression.

A total of 600 U.S. troops are to be deployed to Poland and the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for infantry exercises. They are expected to remain in the region on rotation until the end of the year.

"As threats emerged, we see who our real friends are," Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite said as she greeted the troops at the Siauliai air base.

"The Baltic states and Poland are on the border of NATO, so more security measures are urgently needed. This U.S. troop addition is very timely and very necessary," she said.

Without mentioning Russia, she said the presence of U.S. troops would "repel those who encroach on stability in Europe and peace in the region," as an invasion of Lithuania would now entangle the Americans.

"The numbers are not important. If just one of our guests is harmed, this would mean an open confrontation, not with Lithuania but with the United States of America," Grybauskaite told reporters.

Additional to the U.S. paratroopers, from the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team based in Italy, NATO has said it will triple its usual number of fighter jets patrolling over the Baltics next month to enhance its eastern European defenses.

The Baltic states have been members of NATO since 2004, but have not had a persistent presence of foreign troops on their soil before, partly to avoid antagonizing Russia.

NATO prepared plans for their defense only in 2010, after Russia invaded Georgia, according to U.S. diplomatic cables leaked by the whistle-blowing website Wikileaks.

"I don't think the deployment of troops is meant to be a message to Russia," Richard C. Longo, Deputy Commanding General of U.S. Army Europe, told reporters in Siauliai.

"It's a message to anyone who will listen, and the message is that the United States of America will honor its commitments to Lithuania.

"Let me make this clear: should Lithuania need NATO, I guarantee NATO will be there," he said.