

**Statement by Antanas Valionis
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania**

Lithuania welcomes and supports the clear commitment of George W. Bush, the President of the United States, together with the allies to continue NATO enlargement for creating a whole, prosperous and free new Europe.

Lithuania is convinced that the invitation of the US President to "extend our hands and open our hearts to new members, to build security for all of Europe" will be realised by inviting Lithuania to join the Alliance in autumn 2002 in Prague.

The United States of America and the European states have never recognised the occupation of Lithuania and the other Baltic nations. We are pleased that the United States continues its leadership in eliminating all remaining or artificially drawn dividing "red lines" in Europe.

While seeking membership in the Alliance, Lithuania continues to fulfill its obligations to the international community and to implement the Membership Action Plan.

By taking active part in international peacekeeping operations and developing good neighbourly relations, we strengthen security and stability in Europe.

As it creates modern military forces, which can effectively contribute to NATO collective defence and meet other new challenges, Lithuania will assign 2 per cent of its GDP for defence in 2002.

The consensus of our parliamentary parties on defence issues and growing public support show that Lithuania has chosen the right way towards a Europe secure and free. We are pleased that our transatlantic partners increasingly understand this aspiration of Lithuania.