

Afghan settlement in the works?

by Susan Maitra

Were it simply a matter of the great Gorbachov "troop pullout" show of October, one would have to conclude that the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was as far as away as ever. The sleight of hand was not taken seriously by anyone in India. However, Gorbachov's statements in New Delhi during his recent visit were taken seriously—from his cautious even-handedness on Pakistan, to a vow to leave Afghanistan, and above all, his refusal to get into details on the matter since delicate, substantive moves were under way. The past months have shown there is something more to it than words.

From Moscow's standpoint, a troop withdrawal which allowed the Soviets to keep control of Afghanistan, would solve several problems. It would help pave the way for full normalization of ties with the People's Republic of China, and it would help smooth relations with India, whose concern over the Soviet presence in Moscow surfaced publicly during Gorbachov's trip here. Additionally, it would enhance the flagging credibility of Moscow's pro-Yalta partners in the West, the faction centered around Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger.

Diplomatic preparation

On Dec. 3, United Nations mediator Diego Cordóvez announced in Islamabad that his latest shuttle run between Islamabad, Kabul, and Teheran had succeeded in producing an agreement for U.N. supervision of a Soviet pullout. The Soviets had so far opposed this, since it would grant jurisdiction to the U.N. in the Afghanistan matter. Only one point of a complete settlement now remains outstanding—namely, the withdrawal timetable.

Within days of the Cordóvez announcement, a seminar on Indo-Pakistani relations in Islamabad heard former Foreign Minister Aga Shahi state that Pakistan should reciprocate the gestures Gorbachov made during his Indian visit, in particular by abandoning insistence on a three-month withdrawal timetable "and consider even a year and a half as a reasonable time-frame." Shahi said Pakistan should not drag out the war in Afghanistan, just to keep getting American aid.

Perhaps even more significant, the Pakistani Secretary

General of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), Mr. Shariffudin Pirzada, also a former foreign minister, returned from a visit to Moscow with the report from unnamed Soviet officials that they had no intention of "staying on forever" in Afghanistan—nor would the Afghans want it, the official had added, in what is viewed as the first Soviet admission of popular Afghan hostility to their presence. Other reports have cited top Soviet officials to the effect that Moscow would not insist on a presence in Kabul after settlement.

Interestingly, on the seminar circuit and in broader discussions in Pakistan, the link between an Afghan settlement and the improved relations with India is also being emphasized. Diplomatic appearances notwithstanding, Indian anxiety to get the Soviet occupation troops out of a strategic neighboring country is no secret.

The mid-December diplomacy between Islamabad and Moscow tells another part of the story. Pakistan Foreign Secretary Abdul Sattar spent Dec. 8-12 in Moscow (reportedly in response to a Soviet initiative) meeting with top brass, including First Deputy Foreign Minister Yuli Vorontsov and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze. A follow-up visit to Pakistan by a high-ranking Soviet official and plans for a later high-level delegation visit followed the probe. While it is publicly admitted that an Afghanistan settlement was the top item on Sattar's agenda, unconfirmed reports in India indicate that Pakistan has couped an Afghanistan compromise with the demand that the Soviet Union take a neutral stance on the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan in order to facilitate an all-round improvement of relations.

The Soviets have also made offers to Pakistan of economic assistance, if Pakistan were to cut the channel of aid to the Afghan rebels. The offer was underlined in public statements by the Kremlin's ambassador in Islamabad, Mr. Abdur Rehman Vazirov, following the Sattar visit. Vazirov also went on record with optimism about an early pullout of Russian troops and the assurance that Moscow wanted an "independent" Afghanistan.

Significantly, just a day after Sattar's return to Islamabad, Afghan chief Najibullah was entertained in Moscow and announced in his dinner speech that Afghan forces outside the country that wanted to contribute to the renovation of Afghan life would be welcome in a new "government of national unity."

Meanwhile, a series of developments in Kabul gives cumulative credence to Soviet pretensions about a settlement. The removal of Babrak Karmal as titular president of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), and his replacement by Hazi Mohammed Tsamkani—a traditional Afghan Pushtun-speaking tribal chief who is *not* a member of the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan—in November is cited in this connection. Similarly, the mid-December replacement of Foreign Minister Mohammed Dost by another non-party member.

The elevation of M. Najibullah to Afghan Communist Party chief and head of the Kabul regime last May can be

seen as a harbinger of moves to broaden the regime's face in the direction of the Mujaheddin and refugees. As head of the Afghan secret service, KHAD, which many view as the only Soviet success in institution-building during their seven-year occupation, Najibullah is adept and utterly reliable, but more, he is a native of Peshawar, the main refugee center in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, with many links among the tribal groups and their brethren on the Pakistani side of the border.

Pakistani officials attribute the sharp rise in incidence of terrorism and sabotage in Peshawar and other refugee centers last year to Najibullah's operational capabilities. Indeed, Pakistani Prime Minister Junejo has charged "foreign-trained saboteurs" with exploiting ethnic tensions that led to the recent riots in Karachi that took several hundred lives—and several sources say that KHAD had a hand in the turmoil.

At the same time, Najibullah has no doubt played a critical role in the series of overtures to refugees and Mujaheddin groups in Pakistan and abroad, which will culminate in dispatch of a tribal *jirga* (council) from Peshawar to Kabul in February to mediate between the Afghan government and the refugees. The controversial tribal chief Wali Khan Kukikhel reflects the drift. Kukikhel has suddenly returned to Pakistan after a two-month sojourn in Kabul, and is reported to be engaged in the mediation.

Earlier, unconfirmed reports indicated that the Kremlin had renewed contacts with exiled tribal chieftains in Italy and

elsewhere, and more recent reports point to active efforts led by Najibullah to woo Muslim clergy and village elders onto a "national reconciliation bandwagon."

Behind the national unity tactic is a military stalemate. Najibullah's backing of Afghan Defense Minister Mazar Mammad and his replacement by the Soviet-trained and trusted Brig.-Gen. Mohammed Rafi was accompanied by rumors that a shake-up and purge of a score of senior officers charged with being "Mujaheddin sympathizers" had taken place a month earlier. It is well known that, by contract with the KHAD, the Afghan military is demoralized and factionalized. This has become a serious liability in the face of increasingly better-armed Mujaheddin, a liability that can be only partly recouped through the type of "special act" in which Najibullah's KHAD apparently excels.

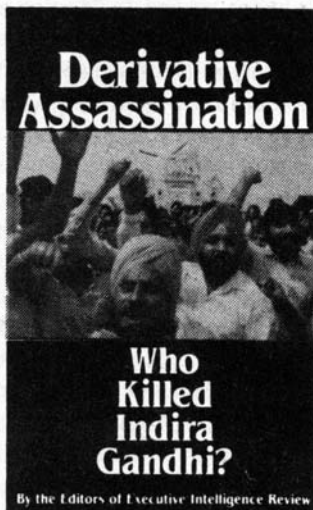
Whether or not the KHAD had a hand in it, the Karachi riots of December—in which the Pathan emigrants from Afghanistan joined hands with the Pakistan Pathan against the Indian-Muslim defenders, Mujahirs—have undoubtedly sent up a warning signal to the Pakistan government. It was a reminder to Pakistan of the high price of failing to find a political settlement in Afghanistan soon, one which permits the rapid return of the more than 3 million refugees now spilling over Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. The Radio Moscow-hailed "Pathan uprising" in Karachi is widely believed to have played a significant role in moving President Zia's government to act in negotiations.

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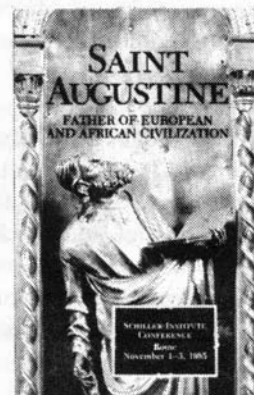
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