

Afghan crisis takes an ominous turn

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

The ambush of 30 field commanders belonging to the Jamiati-Islami by a rival rebel group, Hezbe Islami, on July 9 inside

Afghanistan is expected to further weaken the rickety coalition of the Afghan Mujahideen based in Pakistan. Expanded internecine warfare among the Mujahideen, now a distinct possibility, puts a question mark on the rebels' capability to oust the Soviet-backed Kabul regime in the near future, and may spell chaos in the already-disturbed border areas of Pakistan.

On July 9, according to reports from Pakistan, Jamiati-Islami field commanders driving through a narrow gorge of the Farkhar River Valley were ambushed by men answering to Sayed Jamal, a northern rebel commander with the Hezbe Islami led by the Afghan interim government's Foreign Minister and Islamic fundamentalist Gulbuddin Hikmatyar. The

A call to defuse the Afghan crisis now

This statement was released by the Schiller Institute on July 27:

Over more than a decade now, Afghanistan has been turned into a massive graveyard where on an average, more than 300 Afghans are killed and buried every day in a fratricidal war which as yet has shown no signs of abating. Due to the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the Red Army's subsequent stay for more than eight years in Afghanistan, more than 1 million Afghans have been killed and another 5 million have left the country, seeking shelter in neighboring Iran and Pakistan. The Kabul regime, propped up by the Red Army for eight years, is an unpopular government, and its control is confined to a few major Afghan cities. It is evident that the regime is trying its best to hold on to power and has little interest in stopping the fratricidal warfare. In effect, the Kabul regime has resorted to exploiting the superpowers' game at the expense of millions of Afghans' lives. The decade of barbarism has failed to resolve the differences that brought about the conflict in the first place. If anything, these differences have widened.

Afghanistan borders Pakistan, Iran, and the Soviet Union. Neither Pakistan nor Iran ever had the economic or military clout which could be considered a match for the Soviet Union's geopolitical and imperialist machinations. In effect, historically one Kabul regime after another had remained subservient to the Soviet Union—not so much by choice, but because of compelling circumstances. The United States government, particularly since the 1950s, has shown no interest in seeing Afghanistan become anything but a wasteland re-

plete with warring tribes. The essentials that could have made Afghanistan a stable republic, allowing the country to move out of its dependence on the Soviet Union, were denied. Instead, the U.S. government saw in Afghanistan a conveniently located chess piece on the geopolitical board which could be used cleverly to irritate and even hurt the contending power, the Soviet Union. The plan was to use Afghanistan as a "bargaining chip" for making future adjustments which may eventually lead to a global U.S.-Soviet condominium. The implementation of this unreal thinking has led to the near-destruction of not only Afghanistan, but also of Pakistan—the nation which bore the brunt of the decade-long Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

The flight of 3 million Afghan refugees into Pakistan, and another 2 million into Iran, has created a serious instability in the region. While Iran, with its strong centralized regime, could manage to contain the incoming refugees in the border areas and effectively insulate Iranian society from the impact of the refugee flow, Pakistan's social fabric was torn apart by this huge influx. A much poorer nation compared to Iran, Pakistan possessed neither the financial capability nor the necessary political clout to deal with this unwanted burden. As a result, Pakistan had to accept foreign assistance to help feed the refugees and shelter the Afghan Mujahideen, who were fighting the Soviet Army. Along with the financial and arms assistance, came the international drug mafia and gun-runners, militant Islamic fundamentalists—brainwashed to fight for Islam against the Godless Communists—and also a horde of geopoliticians and intelligence agents seeking to make the "bargaining chip" safe—all without a thought as to the impact on either Pakistan or Afghanistan. This sordid development has overtly jeopardized the national security of Pakistan.

The fraud of the Geneva Accord

The 1988 Geneva Accord was a document drawn up not for the purpose of converting Afghanistan into a republic, nor even to stop the bloodbath, but merely to allow the beleaguered Red Army to retreat to where it came from. It was a

ambushed commanders, fighting under guerrilla leader Ahmad Shah Massoud and politically aligned with the former Islamic Law Professor of Kabul University and Reconstruction Minister in the Afghan interim government, Burhanuddin Rabbani, were returning from a strategy meeting in northern Afghanistan.

When the killing took place, Professor Rabbani was in Teheran for meetings with the Shia Afghan rebels and Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati. Professor Rabbani returned forthwith and strongly condemned the killings. Hezbe Islami leader Hikmatyar, in a statement issued from Peshawar in Pakistan, expressed anguish but sidestepped Rabbani's demand for trial of the culprits by an Islamic court.

clever move initiated by the administrators of the condominium. It gave the impression that the tough, no-nonsense United States had pushed back the Soviet military might after "bleeding" it for almost a decade. It also helped to project the image of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov as a "man of peace" and a "man with a mission." Pakistan, on the other hand, burdened with ethnic tensions and social chaos caused largely by the invasion of the international drug- and gun-running mafia, had become an economic wasteland, largely irrelevant to the geopoliticians. Pakistan's feeble opposition to the Geneva Accord was sneered at as a sign of a self-destructive instinct.

The period that followed the Soviet troop withdrawal on Feb. 15, 1989 has fully confirmed the hollowness of the accord. Loss of lives has continued as before. The difference now, as opposed to earlier, is that the Afghans themselves are killing each other, using the Soviet and Western weapons. While talk about a "new" Afghan policy is heard often, nothing on the ground has changed or shown any sign of changing. It is evident that all that the Afghan conflict could contribute toward the creation of the new superpower condominium has been extracted. Neither the Soviet Union nor the United States wants to waste any more time on the issue.

It is abundantly clear that this regional conflict will come to an end only when policies aimed toward stopping it are based upon recognizing the sovereign rights of both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The process will consume time, but it is essential that a real process, for the first time, begin now.

To ease and defuse the tensions that exist between Pakistan and Afghanistan, it is imperative that a climate be created that is conducive to the return and rehabilitation of the Afghan refugees. Such a task can only be accomplished through utmost cooperation between the Pakistan and Afghanistan governments. It is, therefore, a necessary condition that the future Kabul government be friendly to Pakistan.

Urgent measures

As immediate measures to defuse the tension and stop further bloodshed, we suggest the following:

Strain on rebel alliance

Hikmatyar's move will certainly not defuse the tension building up among the rebel groups, and will most likely widen the growing rift between local field commanders operating on the ground in Afghanistan and the Mujahideen leaders based in Peshawar. The latter have long been divided along ethnic and religious lines, and wheel and deal according to preferential allegiances to various Islamic nations—Iran and Saudi Arabia in particular. Demands from the local field commanders to dismantle the interim government and dump the Peshawar-based leaders may well escalate in the near future.

The Afghan interim government, a loosely knit unit based

1) An immediate end of hostilities between the warring parties, the Kabul regime and the Afghan Mujahideen, must be signed. Simultaneously, arms supply by both the Soviet Union and the West must come to an end. Pakistan, Iran, and the Soviet Union might take responsibility for this disengagement.

2) The Kabul regime will step down following the truce and will be replaced within 30 days by an interim government consisting of the Mujahideen, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, pro-royalists, various religious leaders representing different ethnic groups, and non-partisan professionals. In forming the interim government, the Kabul regime, the Afghan Mujahideen, Iran, and Pakistan will participate in discussions. The prime responsibility of the interim government will be to prepare the country for general elections based on a multi-party system. The election will be held within six months of formation of the interim government.

3) The plains of Afghanistan are strewn with millions of anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines which were placed by the Soviet Union and the Kabul regime to keep the Mujahideen out of the way. These mines are preventing the Afghan refugees from resettling. The Soviet Union will be exclusively responsible for removing these mines.

4) Afghanistan's roads, water supplies, and agricultural lands are in a devastated state because of the decade-long war. Rebuilding of these has to start as soon as the interim government takes over. The interim government will be responsible for procuring funds as outright grants. This will involve discussion among Pakistan, Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

5) Sufficient foodgrain supplies will be stockpiled to sustain the returning refugees until the lands become arable again and sufficient quantities of grains are harvested.

We believe these measures, when implemented, will provide the necessary confidence to the 5 million Afghan refugees to go back to the home they left behind 10 years ago. There is no doubt that the return of the refugees will provide the democratic government of Pakistan the conditions to begin rebuilding its own social fabric, torn apart by the war.

in Peshawar and formed a few days before the Soviet troops pulled out on Feb. 15, has been virtually paralyzed by internal feuding from the outset. Eyewitnesses report that during the failed Mujahideen campaign to capture Jalalabad, an important Afghan city located 50 miles west of the Pakistan border, constituent groups of the interim government betrayed one another on more than one occasion.

The differences among the various rebel groups, based mostly on the leaders' intolerance of one another, never seemed truly unbridgeable, however, and there were expectations that the rebel government leaders would be able to join to oust the Najibullah regime in Kabul. But the failure to capture Jalalabad and Khowst—a difficult city to defend, according to one Pakistani military observer—has set one rebel group against another, and the Kabul regime has begun to look militarily immovable.

Regional politics intrude

Besides the personality conflicts among the Mujahideen rebel leaders, regional politics has contributed in blunting their efforts. For example, the Teheran Eight—as the Iran-based coalition of eight Afghan Shia groups are called—has insisted all along that it be granted a larger representation in the council of Iran- and Pakistan-based rebels than warranted by demography. The Iranian government, influenced by Soviet overtures and its own hatred toward the Saudi- and Western-backed rebels, has fanned this dispute. The Saudis, for their part, actively promote fundamentalist leaders such as Hikmatyar and Sayyaf, and make no bones about their preference to keep the Teheran Eight at bay. There are confirmed reports of one Saudi prince's weekly visit to the Pakistani capital Islamabad to meet the preferred Afghan leaders and channel substantial amounts of cash to them.

The Soviet-backed Afghan President, Dr. Najibullah, with help from the Soviet Ambassador to Kabul Yuli Vorontsov, has exploited this spat to the full. Besides keeping the warring rebel factions from joining hands, Kabul has offered an autonomous status to the Shias, who hail mostly from the Hazarajat area of central Afghanistan, and has offered the status of Afghan army general to many field commanders provided they stop fighting Kabul. It has been reported that such offers have been made to Massoud, who has not accepted the offer but kept the negotiations open, and Sayyad Mansur Nadiri, a leader of the minority Ismaili sect located along the Salang Tunnel—an important area to control in order to keep the convoys coming from the Soviet border uninterrupted. Najibullah has met with similar success in the area around Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan close to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan.

In the past two months Iran has joined voice with Pakistan to bring about a political settlement and drop the military solution to the complex problem. Iranian Foreign Minister Akbar Velayati's unannounced visit to Islamabad in June, Pakistan Foreign Minister Yaqub Khan's subsequent visit to Teheran, and Velayati's second visit to Islamabad in late July

indicate that a consensus has been reached within Pakistan and Iran to go about solving the Afghan crisis in some other way, leaving behind the old formula of arming the disunited Mujahideen and trying to capture some Afghan cities against heavy odds.

During his meeting with Yaqub Khan, Iranian Prime Minister Hussein Moussavi also categorically stated that countries bordering Afghanistan—Iran and Pakistan, that is—should be exclusively involved in solving the Afghan imbroglio.

There are indications, beside Professor Rabbani's recent visit to Teheran, that Iran and Pakistan's push for a political settlement has had an impact within the rebel groups. For example, Mir Sayyad Ahmad Gaylani, a moderate rebel leader in the coalition government, said on July 13 that the Mujahideen would agree to immediate negotiations if the Soviet Union would set up a neutral transitional government in Kabul.

The split among the Afghan rebels supported by Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and Iran, on the other, portends a serious danger to Pakistan. The Hezbe Islami attack on fellow rebels in Farkhar will not only push the rebels toward negotiations for a political settlement, at any cost, but may also unleash internecine tribal and sectarian warfare with incalculable consequences. Three million Afghan refugees, based along the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders, are becoming impatient and the refugee camps are overflowing with lethal weapons. The taking of sides, based on ethnic differences and allegiance to Iran or Saudi Arabia, may also engulf the Pakistanis living in that area. One cannot forget the size and veracity of demonstrations that took place in the Kurram Agency following assassination of Allama Al-Husseini, the Shia leader, in early August last year.

The U.S. non-policy factor

Hikmatyar's act of internecine violence, and the subsequent enhancement of tension within Afghan rebel ranks, must be seen against the background of the lack of policy direction exhibited by Washington. The absence of U.S. policy has given rise to flexing of muscle and a show of strength by both the Saudis and Iranians. Pakistan is caught in the middle and affected most. It is inconceivable that the cycle of violence unleashed by the Saudi-Iran rivalry can be stopped at this time without a positive policy response from the United States. In this context, while China will remain a bystander, the Soviets can be expected to mount political and military pressure to keep the Kabul regime intact and treat the Mujahideen as non-entities.

Washington has called for the removal of the Soviet-backed Kabul regime and creation of a more pluralistic system with Mujahideen playing a significant role. But there are other signs that Washington is trying to weave the Iran-Soviet rapprochement into the Afghan settlement. The U.S.-Soviet experts' discussion on Iran and Afghanistan in Stockholm on July 31 may shed more light on the details of the non-policy.