

IN AFGHANISTAN, MOSCOW RIDICULES THE U. N.

World attention has shifted away from the craggy, mountainous battlefield, but Soviet troops continue pummeling Afghan resistance forces. In mid-April, Moscow unleashed a spring offensive of unprecedented scope and ferocity. For the first time since the Soviet invasion in December 1979, Moscow dispatched Tu-16 Badger heavy bombers in high altitude saturation bombing attacks on the Afghan countryside. The offensive was launched just days after a special United Nations envoy had left Afghanistan, hinting that peace was at hand. It seems as if Moscow deliberately was insulting and ridiculing the U.N. peace mission.

For 24 months, the U.N. has been insisting that its mediators were 95 percent of the way toward bringing peace to Afghanistan. The truth is that the U.N. has failed completely in its peacemaking efforts in Afghanistan, just as it has failed in almost every peacemaking attempt since 1945. What makes matters worse is that the U.N. gives a cloak of respectability to Soviet aggression in Afghanistan by allowing Moscow to claim that it is involved in the U.N. peace process. Instead of bringing peace to Afghanistan, the U.N. probably is aiding the Soviet invaders by diffusing the condemnation of global opinion that Moscow otherwise would be feeling. Indeed, the U.N. General Assembly resolutions on the Afghan invasion strangely fail to mention the Soviets by name. It is no wonder that Moscow has concluded that it risks little by attacking the Afghans.

The chief victims of the new Soviet offensive undoubtedly are civilians. The warplanes represent yet another escalation in the Soviet scorched-earth effort aimed at draining the Mujahideen (freedom fighters) of their will to fight by depriving them of civilian support.

One of the primary targets of the new Soviet offensive is the strategic Panjshir valley 50 miles north of Kabul, the Afghan capital. The western mouth of the valley flanks the main road from Kabul to the Soviet border. Mujahideen have used the valley as a staging area to harass truck convoys that form the backbone of the Soviet supply system in occupied Afghanistan. A Soviet force of up to 20,000 soldiers, backed by hundreds of tanks, helicopter gunships, and fighter-bombers, has blasted its way into the 70-mile-long valley. The valley's defenders, roughly 5,000 to 7,000 strong, lack the anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons needed to blunt the Soviet advance.

The unprecedented size of the invading force and the extensive use of saturation bombing attacks against villages in the valley have forced a massive evacuation of the local population. The Soviets are bent on transforming the valley into a wasteland by destroying food crops, livestock, and the local infrastructure.

Moscow is aiming at an important political and psychological victory. The Panjshir, as one of the foremost Mujahideen strongholds, has become an international symbol of Afghan resistance. The exploits of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the "Lion of the Panjshir," have received worldwide attention. The new offensive also constitutes an important signal from the Kremlin to the Afghans and others concerned about Afghanistan. By dramatically escalating the annual spring offensive, the new Kremlin regime of Konstantin Chernenko has underscored its determination to prosecute energetically the war it inherited from its predecessors.

For three years, the United Nations has sponsored negotiations on Afghanistan. In February 1982, the U.N. Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar appointed Diego Cordovez, Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs, as his "Personal Representative" to end the Afghan invasion and occupation through negotiations between Pakistan, the Soviet-controlled government in Afghanistan, and Moscow. Just one week before the Soviets launched their latest offensive, Cordovez was in Kabul to negotiate with Shah Mohammed Dost, Foreign Minister of the Moscow-installed Afghan government. What was discussed in these recent talks is still uncertain.

Though U.N. peace efforts appear to be at a dead end, Washington should continue to support them--but only if they provide full protection and guarantees to the Afghan freedom fighters who have resisted, and the refugees who have fled, Soviet aggression. U.S. policy makers should not be lulled into believing that, because a U.N.-sponsored peace is allegedly at hand, American support for the Afghan resistance is not necessary. A just peace, in fact, requires increased support for the freedom fighters. This was true before the new Soviet offensive and is more urgent now.

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For further information:

Hidden War: The Struggle for Afghanistan, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Staff Report, April 1984.

Claude Malhuret, "Report from Afghanistan," Foreign Affairs, Winter 1983/84.