

## U.S. AID FOR AFGHAN FREEDOM FIGHTERS OVERDUE

Four years after the invasion of Afghanistan, over 100,000 Soviet troops are waging a systematic scorched earth war that has driven one-fourth of Afghanistan's population into exile. While the Soviets sustain a relatively low level of casualties, estimated at 1,000 to 5,000 dead per year, they inflict much higher casualties on the vastly out-gunned Mujahideen Freedom Fighters and their civilian supporters. As such, Moscow has little incentive to surrender the strategic benefits of occupying Afghanistan: a potential steppingstone to the Persian Gulf, bases from which Soviet tactical air power can dominate the strategic Strait of Hormuz, and staging grounds for the subversion or even invasion of neighboring Pakistan and Iran.

The United States has a geopolitical interest in halting the southern expansion of the Soviet Empire and preventing Moscow from establishing a land bridge to the Persian Gulf. Yet substantial U.S. aid is long overdue. Afghan resistance leaders remain disappointed by the insignificant trickle of foreign--particularly American--aid for their cause. The Afghans have no realistic chance of frustrating Soviet designs on their country unless they receive the military tools they need to force Moscow into meaningful negotiations. This will not happen until bureaucratic resistance within the U.S. government is overcome.

Furnishing aid to the Mujahideen would send a reassuring signal to nearby states that Washington is able to recognize and safeguard its own interests as well as those of its friends. It would alter the Soviet cost/benefit calculus regarding their Afghanistan venture, increase their incentives for negotiating a withdrawal, and raise the perceived risks of Soviet involvement in Iran and Pakistan.

The Mujahideen have mounted a fierce resistance to the Soviet Army, but their will to fight is not matched by their military capabilities. The U.S. can increase these capabilities by providing:

- Shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles--to counter the Soviets' single most effective weapon, the heavily armored Mi-24 "Hind" helicopter gunship.
- Light anti-tank weapons--to threaten Soviet troops who rarely leave the protection of their armored vehicles, where they are all but immune to Afghan firepower. Rocket launchers, recoilless rifles, and anti-tank mines would help remedy this deficiency.
- Mortars--to supplement the inaccurate and short-range 82mm mortars captured by the Freedom Fighters from the Afghan Army or provided by Egypt and the People's Republic of China.

- Medical equipment and training--to prevent Afghan casualties from bleeding to death or dying of gangrene. (Most Freedom Fighters die from these causes.) Improving battlefield medical care would cut losses and raise morale.
- Radios--for an improved communications network to coordinate military operations and disseminate information to civilian supporters.

Opponents of significant American aid to the Afghans argue that it may lead to a deterioration of Soviet-American relations. This ignores the fact that if the Soviets were truly interested in "good" relations with Washington they would not have invaded Afghanistan in the first place. Moscow, moreover, did not shrink from providing the weapons that killed 54,000 Americans in the Korean War and 57,000 in Vietnam. Washington should not fear aiding this genuine war of national liberation.

Another weak argument is that aiding Afghans would jeopardize negotiations on Soviet withdrawal. After three sessions of U.N.-sponsored talks in Geneva, negotiations remain deadlocked due to Soviet unwillingness to provide a timetable for troop withdrawal and Soviet demands that a "friendly" government remain in power in Kabul. Moscow uses the U.N. talks as a diplomatic figleaf to defuse international criticism, discourage aid to the Afghan resistance, undermine the morale of Afghans, and buy time to crush the Mujahideen.

Proponents of a negotiated settlement based on the "Finlandization" of Afghanistan forget that the Finns were able to negotiate an acceptable settlement with Moscow only after they had bloodied the Soviet Army in a 1939-1940 war and demonstrated the high costs of Soviet occupation. An agreement acceptable to the Afghans will only be reached once the Soviets have been convinced that the costs of holding Afghanistan outweigh the strategic benefits.

The strongest argument against supplying substantial supplies to the Afghans is that this may lead to an escalation of Soviet military or subversive pressures against Pakistan. But it is far from certain that the Soviets are not doing this now anyway. In fact, if the Soviets consolidate their grip on Afghanistan, the Pakistanis undoubtedly will face even stronger Soviet pressures. The Afghan Minister of Defense hinted in January 1982 that the Afghan Army would play a "significant role" in the future "like that played by the Cuban and Vietnamese armies." This is ominous, given Kabul's support for a "Greater Pushtunistan" to be carved out of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province and the presence of separatists from Pakistan's Baluchistan province in Afghan base camps. In the long run, the Pakistanis know that the Mujahideen are Pakistan's first line of defense.

James A. Phillips  
Senior Policy Analyst

For further information:

Roger Brooks, "The U.N. and Afghanistan: Stalemated Peacemaking," Heritage Foundation Background No. 296, October 11, 1983.

David Kline, "The Conceding of Afghanistan," Washington Quarterly, Spring 1983.

James Phillips, "Afghanistan Three Years Later: More U.S. Help Needed," Heritage Foundation Background No. 236, December 27, 1982.