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AFGHAN FREEDOM FIGHTERS STILL NEED U.S. HELP

(Updating Backgrounder No. 236, "Afghanistan Three Years Later: More U.S. Help Needed," December 27, 1982, and Backgrounder No. 101, "Afghanistan: The Soviet Quagmire," October 25, 1979.)

Moscow has waged a brutal war of attrition against the Afghan people for six years, a conflict longer than World War II. Since Soviet troops rolled into Afghanistan in December 1979 nearly one million Afghans have died and four million have been driven into exile. Yet resistance to the Soviet occupation continues unabated. The Mujahideen Freedom Fighters steadily have improved their military effectiveness. In May 1985, the seven chief resistance groups forged a coalition that has improved battlefield coordination. Despite the growing strength of the Mujahideen, the balance in Afghanistan has been tilting in the Soviets' favor. Their 120,000 troops in Afghanistan have launched increasingly aggressive campaigns against resistance strongholds. Moscow has escalated the air war and made greater use of elite units such as the spetznaz (special forces). Soviet scorched earth tactics seek to depopulate the Afghan countryside, disrupt food production, and strangle the resistance by isolating it from a civilian population terrorized into submission.

To defuse international criticism and forestall external support for the Mujahideen, the Soviet Union has hinted at the possibility of a negotiated settlement. Moscow has used indirect talks held at Geneva under U.N. auspices as a diplomatic figleaf to help mask naked Soviet aggression. These talks have been deadlocked since June 1983 by Soviet refusal to propose a timetable for withdrawal of their forces. Despite Soviet footdragging, Western speculation about Moscow's desire for a negotiated settlement reached new peaks following the November superpower summit where the Soviets hinted at greater willingness to negotiate a withdrawal. It now seems likely that Afghanistan will become the first practical post-summit test of Soviet behavior. The U.N.-sponsored indirect talks reconvened on December 16. It is there that the Soviets can back up their hinting rhetoric with solid concessions.

Washington should press Moscow to follow through on its hints but should watch what the Soviets do more than what they say. The Soviet peace offensive in Afghanistan, like the Soviet peace offensive in Western Europe, is a public relations exercise aimed at driving a wedge between natural allies to preclude an effective countermove to a Soviet buildup. The Soviets' aim is to deprive the Afghans of foreign support by claiming that ongoing "negotiations" would be jeopardized by "external interference." Washington should test Soviet intentions but should not compromise its determination to help the Afghans regain their sovereign rights. While it is true that Mikhail Gorbachev has not foreclosed the option of a negotiated settlement to the war that he inherited, it is also true that he has presided over intensified fighting since coming to power. Moreover, Gorbachev has sought to pressure Pakistan into abandoning the Afghans by launching air strikes against Pakistani border villages.

Washington should make it clear to Gorbachev that it will not allow him to coerce Pakistan. It should reaffirm its commitment to Islamabad's security and privately inform Moscow that any future military attacks on Pakistan will be answered with a direct U.S. air supply to the Afghans, among other responses. Given recent advances in Remotely Piloted Vehicle (RPV) technology this could be a low-risk venture that would not require manned overflights of Afghan airspace. Washington also should put Moscow on notice that a Soviet refusal to negotiate in good faith by developing a timetable for withdrawal will result in increased Western support for the beleaguered Afghans. Moscow has three upcoming opportunities to follow through on its proclaimed willingness to negotiate: 1) the December round of U.N. talks; 2) the February 1986 Congress of the Soviet Communist Party; and 3) the spring military campaign season inside Afghanistan.

The U.S. should work on several fronts to raise the cost of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Washington should increase its coverage of the war in Voice of America and Radio Liberty radio broadcasts to the Soviet people to keep them informed of the casualties their armed forces are suffering in Afghanistan as well as the atrocities they are committing against the Afghan people. The U.S. Information Agency should boost its efforts to disseminate information on the war to the non-communist world. Most important, the U.S. should increase the effectiveness of the aid extended to the Afghans. The Mujahideen desperately need man-portable anti-aircraft missiles, mortars and anti-tank mines. Medical supplies, doctors and food supplies are also scarce. The Soviets believe that time is on their side in Afghanistan. They are not likely to negotiate a political settlement until they are convinced otherwise.

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