

The Soviets' Ugly Exit

Do Atrocities in Afghanistan Belie Moscow's PR?

By Rob Schultheis

PAKTIA PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN—With less than two months remaining before Soviet forces in Afghanistan are due to complete their withdrawal, there is disturbing evidence of a new country-wide campaign of terror by the Soviets against Afghan civilians and resistance fighters. Atrocities reported include the indiscriminate deployment of antipersonnel mines, the use of booby-trapped devices against women and children, the poisoning of civilian food supplies, and chem-

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ical warfare attacks against both military and nonmilitary targets.

None of these tactics is new to the Afghan war, but their widespread use now, so close to the conflict's promised end, raises important and disquieting questions about Soviet intentions toward Afghanistan, and the whole moral tenor of Mikhail Gorbachev's Moscow regime.

I have been covering the war in Afghanistan for nearly five years now: seven trips into the ravaged country itself, and two more along the western edge of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province visiting refugee camps and guerrilla staging areas. Like other journalists on the Afghan circuit, I have found evidence of Soviet misconduct in the war—massacres of civilians, indiscriminate bombing, torture, the use of chemical weapons—both convincing and depressingly common. And, like other cor-

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respondents covering the war, I welcomed the beginning of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan as a sign of a new, more enlightened attitude by the Gorbachev regime toward the Soviet Union's small, inoffensive southern neighbor. But I find the manner of that withdrawal deeply troubling as evidence of future Soviet intent toward Afghanistan and the rest of the world.

Wherever they have retreated from areas near Afghanistan's borders, the Soviets and their dwindling Afghan Marxist allies have planted vast numbers of new antipersonnel mines: estimates of the total made by a team headed by a Yale law school professor run to the millions. According to resistance sources, the mujaheddin cleared more than 25,000 mines from just two liberated villages in the Panjshir Valley, northeast of Kabul. More than 50 mujaheddin died in the mine-clearing operations in the two villages. After visiting the area, Panjshiri native Mohammed Es'haq wrote, "Between Rukha and Bazarak there was a pasture . . . Before the war . . . children of the surrounding villages grazed their cows and played games of all sorts . . . Now . . . it is mined . . . Where will the children of the surrounding villages graze their cows and where should they play games when they return?"

I found a similar situation in the Jaji area of Paktia Province when I visited there in November. The Soviets and the Afghan Army had abandoned their big firebase at Jaji five or six months before, and the resistance was in firm control of the area; still, the local villages remained abandoned, in bombed-out ruins,

their inhabitants in refugee camps in Pakistan. The threat of the tens of thousands of mines dotting the countryside made repatriation too dangerous. On July 20 of this year, a 41-year-old Norwegian aid worker, Astrad Norken, died with 11 other people in a land mine explosion in the Jaji area. Dozens of other Afghans—refugees and mujaheddin passing through, locals attempting to return—have been killed by mines in that area this year.

Peshawar-based photojournalist Joe Gaal visited the Barikot area of Kunar Province this summer, immediately after Soviet and Kabul regime forces vacated the region. Before they left, the Soviets and Afghan army troops prepared several booby-trapped sacks of flour. Gaal was in the area when one of those sacks was opened. He describes the accounts he heard from villagers about what happened: "Several refugee women who had come back from Pakistan opened up the flour, trying to find food for their families. Many of them were killed or wounded. Finally the mujaheddin ordered the refugees to go back to the camps in Pakistan—it was just too dangerous in Afghanistan."

Gaal and other Western journalists documented another incident involving sabotaged food near Kandahar, Afghanistan's second-largest city, in late October. Gaal visited a grain silo in the area where local residents claimed that retreating Soviet troops had placed a poisonous chemical. In the silos, Gaal found tubes of an East German chemical labelled "phosphotoxin," with a skull and crossbones on the label. Gaal and other journalists retrieved samples of the poison and turned them over to U.S. diplomats in Pakistan for analysis. A State Department official in Washington said last week he didn't know if tests of these samples had been completed. But ac-

ording to Gaal, Afghans who tried to eat grain from the silos became ill; local mujaheddin told him that wells in the area had also been poisoned by the retreating Soviets.

In the Hazarajat, in central Afghanistan, doctors from two French medical assistance groups reported that Soviet/Kabul forces are scattering hundreds of booby-trapped toys across the countryside. A Dutch physician interviewed this fall in Peshawar, who has been working in the Hazarajat with her husband for close to a year, described the devices as "brightly colored [toy] trucks," and told of performing amputations on several unwary children who had picked up the devices.

Afghans have repeatedly claimed that the Soviets have used such booby-trapped toys. The Soviets have denied the allegations, and no such toys have ever been brought out of Afghanistan for independent study. (Film of a purported booby-trapped doll shown on U.S. television is of questionable authenticity.) But there are many disturbing eyewitness accounts.

The results of these booby-traps are gruesome. Back in 1984, I interviewed and photographed a 14-year-old toy bomb victim in Jegdeleg, in Ningrahar Province. Shortly after Soviet tanks passed through the town, the boy, a shepherd, found what he described as "a red toy truck" on the ground, which he picked up it exploded, shredding and mangling the flesh on his thumb and fingers.

There is also strong circumstantial evidence that Soviet and Kabul forces are using chemical weapons against both military and non-military targets around Jalalabad, Afghanistan's fifth largest city. During the week of November 21, resistance sources reported as many as 35 mujaheddin killed by gas delivered by rocket or artillery shell in one incident; after another gas attack on a village in the area, several villagers reportedly were suffering from skin lesions.

Accounts of Soviet use of chemical weapons

go back to the early years of the war, and are supported by some hard evidence. In June, 1980, Dutch journalist Bernd de Bruin filmed an Mi-24 Hind helicopter gunship dousing a Jalalabad-area village with a cloud of dingy yellowish smoke. Five hours after the attack, he photographed a dead victim of the gas inside the village.

I interviewed several mujaheddin in the Jalalabad area in the summer of 1987 who told of being attacked with a variety of lethal and toxic chemicals. To survive, the mujaheddin said, you had to wet a piece of cloth and breathe through it. One young guerrilla described how, after a Mig-fired missile hit near him, he began to lose consciousness. He poured water from a canteen over his *patou* (blanket) and put it over his mouth and nose before he fell. Carried to a shelter, he lay there for five hours, spitting up what the mujaheddin described as "black fluid," before fully regaining consciousness. Fatalities from this gas, the mujaheddin said, were common.

For their part, the Soviets and the Kabul government have repeatedly accused the mujaheddin of chemical warfare, this despite the fact that no journalist has ever observed the mujaheddin with gas masks, decontamination gear, gas canisters, or any of the accoutrements of chemical warfare. Soviet and Afghan army troops, on the other hand, have frequently been seen with gas masks and other chemical warfare gear. Last November, when this latest round of gas attacks was reported, television reporter Kurt Lohbeck found several dead Soviet soldiers east of Jalalabad equipped with gas masks. Predictably, Kabul Radio accused the mujaheddin of using poison gas during November in the fighting around Jalalabad.

What is particularly disturbing about this current round of atrocity incidents is its timing. Why, if the Soviets are leaving Afghanistan for good on Feb. 15, are they still inflicting such elaborately brutal punishment on the Afghan people?

According to some observers, the Soviets

are hoping against hope to buy time for their beleaguered Kabul ally, Najibullah, and his increasingly fragmented and unpopular regime. The antipersonnel mines will keep the refugees in Pakistan, all staunchly antiregime, from returning. The toy bombs will terrorize civilians already weary from nine years of war. The chemical weapons will weaken the mujaheddin before their final showdown with the disintegrating Afghan army.

If this is Soviet thinking, most observers are not impressed by it: From all reports, Najib's regime is far too weak to be saved by a few "dirty tricks." "The Soviets hope to keep Najib in power a few more months [after they leave]," says resistance political officer Mohammed Shuaib. "But they will fail."

Other observers of the Afghan scene wonder if this last orgy of destruction might not represent something darker: a final act of vengeance against a small, stubborn nation that has frustrated Soviet plans for conquest. A couple of facts lend the theory some credence. The Hazarajat, for instance, is remote, far from the fighting fronts where the war will finally be won or lost. Why main children there, of all places? It seems like cruelty for cruelty's sake.

Another disturbing fact: Many if not most of the antipersonnel mines are plastic, immune to conventional mine detection; hundreds of thousands of them have been scattered randomly across the Afghan countryside. They will be killing people years, decades after the war is over—hardly the kind of thing you deliberately leave behind in a country you hope to have any kind of civilized relationship with. What can the Soviets be thinking of?

Behind these questions, of course, lurks a larger question, monstrous in its implications: Just what is this "new" Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev with its lethal gases, its exploding toys, its poisoned food, its spilling of foreign fields and pastures with deadly fire? Is this "Communism with a human face"?