

Lifting the Curtain on Afghanistan's Horror

By ROSANNE KLASS

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Since the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan three years ago, Moscow and the government it installed in Kabul have clamped a news blackout on events in that country. Independent journalists were thrown out a month or two after the invasion; aside from a handpicked few, only those reporters willing to risk their necks to go in with the resistance forces have been able to cover the story at all, and they get only a fleeting, limited view.

The International Red Cross was also thrown out soon after the invasion, and has not been allowed to function there since—nor is any other human rights organization allowed in. The diplomatic community is effectively limited to official circles in Kabul; an Afghan in contact with non-communist foreigners risks prison or worse. The stories coming out through competing resistance factions and refugees in Pakistan can seldom be checked, and reporters are understandably dubious about them.

Thus the world is effectively ignorant about what is happening in Afghanistan—which is, of course, the way the Soviets want it. And for good reason—for in Afghanistan, the Soviets are conducting a massive terror campaign against the civilian population.

The aim is to terrorize and crush the Afghan people into submission, eliminate the nation-wide base of support for the resistance and consolidate the Soviet grip on this highly strategic territory, the key to many of Moscow's future ambitions in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Nazi-like Atrocities

The Soviet campaign bears comparison with the atrocities of the Nazis, Idi Amin, Cambodia, and—perhaps not accidentally—with those of Genghis Khan, whose slaughter of the Afghan people in the 13th century is well-known to every Russian school child.

Though reports of Soviet atrocities in Afghanistan have leaked out, starting with the Kerala massacre in 1979, it has seldom been possible to verify them, thanks to the new Iron Curtain around Afghanistan. But last month in Paris a stream of witnesses, including some who arrived at the last moment from deep inside Afghanistan, lifted that curtain for a moment to reveal a scene of sheer horror: a people facing exe-

cutation for the crime of defending their freedom.

The circumstances were particularly embarrassing to the Soviets and their apologists: The revelations and condemnations in Paris came from the left. Three days of hearings culminating in a press conference on Dec. 20 were conducted by the Permanent Tribunal of the Peoples, the successor organization to the old Bertrand Russell war crimes tribunal which put America in the dock for Vietnam, and which has generally been more notable for its attention to the warts of the West than to those of the Soviet bloc and Third World. The panel of judges—French, Swiss, Belgian, Yugoslav, Mexican, Indian—ranged from socialist humanitarians to lifelong fellow-travelers.

This was not the first time that the tribunal had met to consider Afghanistan: In

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Stockholm in 1980, its judges condemned Moscow for violations of the U.N. charter and the right of self-determination, as well as for aggression. But, although the Stockholm hearings included extensive testimony on torture, mass executions, rape and civilian massacres, the panel there passed no judgment on violations of human rights.

That omission was rectified in Paris, where the second hearing on Afghanistan was devoted entirely to atrocities and human rights violations.

For three days, dozens of witnesses—journalists, doctors, experts on weaponry, representatives of humanitarian groups who had visited Afghanistan secretly, Afghan victims and eyewitnesses—piled up horrors in their testimony and evidence on the table—weapons, photographs, films, documents, fragments of chemical-seared rock. There were the outlawed weapons used in violations of treaties the Soviets were signatories to: dum-dum bullets, disguised booby-trap mines, chemical weapons, contaminated grain.

The Dutch freelance journalist Bernd de Bruin showed films he had taken of a chemical attack on an Afghan farm village, and of the ebony-black, bloated

corpse of a man he had seen alive in that village less than 24 hours earlier; later, in a cafe, de Bruin rolled up his sleeve to display the red patches that have marked his skin since he was caught on the edge of a gas attack 18 months earlier.

Ricardo Fraile, a French expert on arms control, carefully outlined his assessment of chemical weapons used on sites he had just visited during a secret trip into Afghanistan, showing slides and samples of scorched rock from a village in the Logar Valley near Kabul where, on Sept. 13, 1982, more than 100 villagers—a dozen of them children under 10—were sealed up and deliberately burned to death in an underground irrigation tunnel in which they had taken shelter when Soviet forces rolled into the village.

French doctors detailed the pinpoint bombing of their hospitals in Afghanistan,

stan to verify atrocity stories, had located them, and brought them to Paris; they had been delayed in Pakistan, and a special Saturday night session had been called to hear their testimony.

Three of them were men from the village in Logar. They were the village's mayor, a mullah and a village elder. They described, to the audience of several hundred, how the Soviet troops methodically prepared the explosive chemical inferno in an irrigation tunnel in their village last fall, and then applauded its success before climbing into their vehicles and departing. They read the list of the dead, many of them their relatives, and told of bringing the bodies out and trying to identify them.

Torture, Maiming, Rape

Another was a medical student, a tiny young woman of 22, who had to sit during her testimony; she told of her arrest and torture in Afghanistan, of the maimings and electric shocks and sexual attacks in the cells of the prime ministry, the secret police and Pul-i-Charkhu prison, and she shook sometimes, or stopped and seemed to lose her train of thought.

Then there was the witness from a northern province, telling of two boys, ages eight and 10, who refused to reveal to Soviet troops the hiding place of their resistance-commander father, and were doused with gasoline and set on fire.

An audience that had thought itself numb with ghastly testimony sat riveted till nearly 1 a.m. Then the judges retired, to spend a day considering the evidence.

The detailed 33-page verdict was announced at a press conference covered by both print and broadcast media in Europe. The Tribunal of the Peoples, in its Second Session on Afghanistan, condemned the Soviet Union for violations of the established rules of war, of the fundamental rights of the Afghan people and of basic, elementary human values.

The six Afghans who testified at the end of the tribunal plan to fly into New York this week for a brief stay in the U.S. They are coming from London, where they met last Thursday with Britain's prime minister, Margaret Thatcher.

Rosanne Klass is director of the Afghanistan Information Center at Freedom House (New York City).