For Now, Soviet Forces Are More Inviting Targets

Afghan Insurgents Fight Among Themselves, Too

By JAMES P. STERBA

PESHAWAR, Pakistan — Concluding their business at the gun-making village of Darra in Pakistan, eight mujihadeen or Moslem rebels from Afghanistan, each strapped 500 rounds of Enfield 303 rifle ammunition on their backs in makeshift packs and set out, they said, to fight the Russian Communists.

Their route home, they said, would be circuitous because villagers along the direct way belonged to other insurgent groups. They said they would much rather kill Russians than rival Pashtoons, at least for the time being.

Depending on whom you ask, there are between 40 and 160 different armed insurgent groups now balkanized throughout Afghanistan. If they are temporarily refraining from shooting at one another, it is because they have more inviting and hapless targets: the Soviet Army and its crumbling Afghan counterpart. But while Moscow's Christmas invasion has done more to unify Afghan insurgent groups than have years of third-party mediation, that is not saying much. Too many rebel leaders envison themselves as Afghanistan's emerging ayatollah, and they have been unwilling to allow the practical benefits of coordination to cloud their vision.

Most of those leaders with access to mimeograph machines have taken credit for the shopkeeper and worker strikes in Afghan cities and other anti-Soviet protests that continued into last week. But diplomats and other Pakistan-based analysts who have listened to the accounts of travelers from Kabul believe that insurgent disunity remains intact and that it was the Soviet Army's violent response to the strikes — not the rebel leaflets warning Moslem shopkeepers to shut down or have their shops burned — that touched off the anti-Soviet demonstrations.

Border Tribes Are Fiercest

Intelligence analysts in Pakistan have little information about insurgent groups operating in western Afghanistan but believe that Iranians are helping to supply them. In the eastern regions, nearest Pakistan, Pashtoon rebels have lived up to their centuries-old tradition of fractiousness, although as a majority of Afghanistan's population, they stand the most to gain from unifying.

Diplomats in charge of monitoring the Afghan turmoil for their governments say the most stubborn and cohesive rebel groups are operating in north and central Afghanistan. By far the fiercest rebellion against the Kabul Government and the Soviet Army has taken place in the northern provinces of Takhar and Badakhshan, where ethnic Turkomans and Tajiks were on the verge of taking over provincial capitals before Soviet troops poured across the Oxus river.

In terms of longevity and tenacity, the Hazari tribes of central Afghanistan are rated as among the most coordinated and effective. Before the Russian invasion, they had seized and held the provincial capital of Bamiyan twice for several days each time, and the road west of Kabul has been one on which even Soviet tanks have feared to tread.

The best-known and most discredited of the insurgent groups are those with rear bases in Peshawar. Theirs has been a game of king on the mountain that diplomats expect will break into internecine warfare if and when Soviet troops pull out of their homeland. In general, the enmity dates to the overthrow of King Mohammad Zahir Shah in 1973. The rebels, members of rival Islamic groups centered around Kabul University, took up exile in Pakistan or other countries during the ensuing regimes — and crackdowns on dissidents — of Gen. Mohammed Daud and Noor Mohammad Taraki, both now deceased.

Most of the groups want to turn Afghanistan into an orthodox Islamic state. The largest and most fundamentalist of them is Hezbe-i-Islami, the Islamic Party of Afghanistan. It is headed by a former engineering student at Kabul University named Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose piety is manifested in a facial expression that foreigners have never seen creased with a smile. His fighters have recently taken to carrying Super-8 movie cameras to battle to supply the world with visual evidence of their exploits. Back in Peshawar, various committees churn out daily mimeographed "communiqués" of battle reports and disagreements with other rebel leaders.

One rival group, the United Islamic National Revolutionary Council, is headed by Syed Ahmed Gailani. He is noted for having close ties with the ousted King, Zahir Shah; he also owned a Peugeot automobile dealership in Kabul and is highly respected as a pir, or Moslem saint, among his followers. Another pir, Sibghatullah Mujaddedp, controls the Afghan National Liberation Front, which also claims thousands of affiliated mujihadeen in religious combat with the Russians and Afghan Communists across the border. A former Kabul professor named Burhanuddin Rabbani leads a group called Jamiati Islami, which claims rebel affiliations in western-central Afghanistan around the town of Ghazni and is charged by the other groups with being too pro-American.

During the Islamic foreign ministers conference in Islamabad in January, Salem Azzam, secretary-general of the Islamic Conference of Europe, flew into Peshawar and, he says, in 48 hours got the leaders of six groups to agree to unite under something called the Islamic Alliance for the Liberation of Afghanistan. They were given until yesterday to turn verbal promises into concrete coordination — and promised millions of dollars in Islamic aid if they succeeded. But even before their news conference at Flashman's Hotel in Rawalpindi was over, the leaders were disagreeing with one another. One of the six faction leaders wasn't even there. He sent a deputy, saying he had more important things to do.

His name is Younis Khalis. He heads a rebel faction of Hezbi Islami which has been operating between Kabul and Jalalabad in what has become one of the most powerful insurgencies in Afghanistan. He is a mullah, or religious leader, but other than that little is known about him except that his fame is spreading rapidly through the countryside.

Within this motley mix, bandits have been having a field day holding up buses and cars and ambushing convoys all in the name of Allah. While other rebels crave arms and ammunition, many of these less-than-ideological warriors have been doing a brisk business selling captured weapons across the border in Pakistan to middlemen who then sell them back to other rebels for nice profits.

An Afghan rebel transports a machine gun to be used against Russian troops.
The New York Times/Steve McCurry

The New York Times
Published: March 2, 1980
Copyright © The New York Times