

Soviet-organized 'separatist' pressures threaten Pakistan

by Susan Maitra

More than 140 years have passed since the first war between Afghanistan and British East India, yet the struggle for possession of that prized part of Asia, the "Great Game" between the British colonialists and Czarist Russia, continues unchanged, despite the fact that the British have left the Indian subcontinent and Russia has become what is known as the first socialist republic.

In recent years, the entire region, encompassing Iran, Afghanistan, Baluchistan, and the Frontier Province of Pakistan, has been thrown into new turmoil. That the Soviet Union has become adept at the type of communalist, divide-and-conquer policies once the hallmark of the British colonial empire, is one of the more striking features of the situation.

The Russian strategy now includes inciting the fierce tribes of the region to shake off their allegiance to their respective nation-states and assert their claims to independence. If the Russian design succeeds, and there is at this point every indication that it may, then this area will one day join the Syr Darya, the Camir Plateau, and Uzbekistan, conquered by Czarist Russia in the 19th century, and Afghanistan, annexed by Russia in 1979.

The latest outbreak of violence in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan raises ominous signals.

Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, three million Afghans have crossed the Durand Line, the British demarcation boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and have settled in Pakistan, with the hope of returning to their homeland once the Soviet troops withdraw—if ever (Soviet Russia has never occupied land anywhere and then withdrawn). A majority of these Afghans, most of whom are ethnic Pathans, are now ensconced in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan.

The Frontier natives, also Pathans, are known for their trigger-happy dispositions. The settling of Afghan refugees in their barren, impoverished territory has created high social tension. The Pathans claim that the refugees, helped by doles from international organizations and the Pakistan government, are better off than they ever were before, and will not move out of the land unless they are forced.

No doubt, there is an element of truth in such accusations. These refugees—dubbed the Mujahedeens (Islamic Freedom Fighters)—have been provided with ample armaments

through a number of sources, such as Britain's Lord Bethel-run Free Afghanistan Movement (FAN) and the CIA, apparently to fight the Soviet troops. They are also collecting from some Arab nations. The Mujahedeens, it has been alleged, return to Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass to carry out armed sorties against the Afghan troops loyal to the Soviet-backed Karmal regime. The Soviets have complained about this for years.

There is a general fear in Pakistan that if these Afghan refugees, armed to the teeth, are not allowed access to fight against the Soviets, they will turn inward, causing a serious law and order problem in the province. One member of Pakistan's parliament has expressed concern that the capital city of the North West Province, Peshawar, may turn into "another Beirut," in which the various Pathan tribes wage fratricidal war. Pro-Soviet elements in Pakistan have also accused the refugees of aligning with the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami Party of Pakistan.

The Soviet warning

The new element in this is the revelation that the Soviets have succeeded in organizing the Shinwari, Afridi, and Segdi tribes, all of whom live near the Khyber Pass, to intercept the Mujahedeens intrusions and prevent them from entering Afghanistan.

The first news of clashes between armed groups of Segdis and Mujahedeens was reported in New Delhi last December. It has also been reported that the neighboring Pushtoon tribes, who in principle never accepted the state of Pakistan and who have long been nurtured by the Soviet Union, have expressed their solidarity with the Segdis.

Months before these armed clashes were reported, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Kapitsa came to Pakistan to personally convey this threat. "Your country is at war with the Soviet Union. You do not understand the big problem you are in. The 3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan are Pathans. Have you forgotten Abdul Ghassar and Pushtoonistan?" Kapitsa told the editor of the daily *Muslim* in September.

That Kapitsa's threats were not vacuous became clear soon enough. Khan Abdul Wali Khan, son of Abdul Ghassar Khan, the Pushtoon leader to whom Kapitsa had referred, accused the Afghan refugees of joining hands with the Saudi-

backed Muslim fundamentalists, the Jamaat-i-Islami. Wali Khan, an on-and-off separatist who heads the National Democratic Party (NDP), told a gathering at Lahore recently that democratic politics in Pakistan have become irrelevant, and alleged that the Jamaat is preparing a "hit list." Wali Khan said, "If the Jamaat can do that, so can we—the bullet does not know whose skull it is smashing."

Days later, in mid-February, Abdul Khaliq Khan, general-secretary of the NDP, issued a follow-up threat in a newspaper interview. When asked whether troops loyal to the Soviet-installed Afghan President Babrak Karmal might be invited to assist the Pushtoon cause, Khaliq Khan said:

"The inhabitants of the Frontier Province have no other alternative before them. They have to protect their lives and property themselves." Both Wali Khan and Khaliq Khan have accused the United States of projecting Pakistan as a front-line state and engaging the Afghan refugees to bleed the Soviet Union militarily. They have also demanded that President Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan recognize the Karmal regime immediately.

The 'Red Shirts'

Soviet manipulation of the various Baluch and Pathan tribes did not begin with the invasion of Afghanistan; it goes back to 1947 at least. Then, at India's independence, Abdul Ghassar Khan, a leader of the Pushtoon tribe residing in Tirah, Waziristan, and northern Baluchistan, had refused to join Pakistan and negotiated with the British for a separate state called Pakhtoonistan. Although his group, called the Red Shirts, failed to impress the British, Ghassar Khan continued with his pursuit of a separate homeland until 1965, when he left Pakistan and exiled himself in neighboring Afghanistan. He returned to Pakistan in 1972, one year after the late Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto came to power.

Afghanistan leaders, living in the shadow of a Soviet threat, protected Ghassar Khan and his dream all along. In 1955, Afghanistan opposed Pakistan's entry into the South East Asia Treaty Organization, and supported the formation of "Pakhtoonistan," to be carved out of Pakistan. In 1969, Afghanistan issued a postage stamp which showed Pakistani Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province as part of Afghanistan. The Soviet Union similarly has always supported the formation of "Pakhtoonistan" and routinely refers to Abdul Ghassar Khan as a "progressive nationalist." They, however, never clarified to which nation Ghassar is loyal.

Although the recent threats issued by the NDP leaders have made many furious, the party has not yet been accused of involvement in violence. Last November, the Pakistan government reported that the Afridi tribes were involved in throwing bombs which destroyed a railway station near Peshawar. A police station was subsequently destroyed in Ghassar Khan's native village of Charsadda, and a number of shops were gutted in Para China and other places. Afridi Chief Malik Wali Khan Kake Khel countered that Pakistani

troops crossed the Durand and interfered with his followers living along the border.

A number of subsequent skirmishes have resulted in the destruction of small bridges and Mujahedeen camps. Pakistan government officials claim that their sortees were undertaken to destroy large poppy fields on the other side of the border. The officials have also accused the tribes living in the border areas along the Khyber road of bringing narcotics into Pakistan.

This trouble is bound to spill over to the already troubled Baluchistan, since the Afghan refugees have also settled there and the local Pushtoon tribes have already branded them as counterrevolutionaries. "One may or may not believe, but the fact is that we live in an area which falls in a Russian 'influence zone.' The United States cannot play any important role in this area," Baluch leader Sher Mohammad Marri told the daily *Jung* of Quetta last December. "Under these circumstances, we must develop friendship with the Soviet Union."

The assassination of Aman Ullah Khan, an Iranian leader of the Azad-Baluchistan Movement (ABM), and his colleagues in Baluchistan last year in a police attack have further aggravated the unstable situation. Pakistani officials claim that Aman Ullah Khan had recruited armed groups to launch an armed revolution for creation of an independent Baluchistan consisting of Baluch areas in both Iran and Pakistan.

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