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Soviet Prisoners in Afghanistan

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The Afghan insurgents apparently hold 50 to 100 Soviet prisoners. We believe most were captured; a smaller number deserted or defected.

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there is increasing reluctance among the insurgents to release their captives to any foreign agency or organization. The guerrillas believe that they have received no tangible benefits from those freed previously, and they have been unable to negotiate any prisoner exchanges with the Soviets. We believe they will continue to retain their captives, but increasing frustrations or greater military pressure in those areas where captives are held could cause the insurgents to resume executions of Soviet prisoners, a common practice among most groups during the first two years of the Afghan conflict.

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Numbers of Prisoners

Reported numbers of Soviet prisoners held by Afghan resistance groups range from 30 to several hundred.

[Large Redacted Area]

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The number of prisoners fluctuates. Soviet captives were routinely killed by most groups during the first two years of the conflict. Insurgents then began to retain their prisoners in hopes of negotiating exchanges or gaining propaganda benefits. In 1981 the Soviets approached the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to arrange an exchange after a MIG pilot was captured. This channel was formalized in 1982, and the insurgents have since released 10 prisoners to Switzerland via the ICRC. A few were also released to Pakistan, which quickly turned them over to the Soviet Embassy, and in late 1983 two were given to a private

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human rights organization, [redacted]  
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The insurgents may be attempting to rid themselves of some of their prisoners before the Soviets resume large-scale military operations this spring. The number and cooperativeness of prisoners affects the mobility of insurgent groups and increases the risk of being spotted in the countryside. Should one escape, camps and personnel could be identified. Captives also use precious food and transportation resources. [redacted]

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Prisoners, Deserters, or Defectors?

We believe most Soviets in insurgent hands are legitimate prisoners. A smaller number are defectors who have become alienated from Soviet society or deserters who fled their units because of personal problems, general weariness with the harsh life of a Soviet enlisted man, or a wish to escape punishment. The last category includes some who have become drug addicts while in Afghanistan.

-- Western academicians and journalists traveling in Afghanistan regularly report that most Soviet captives say they are deserters or defectors. These claims gain them good treatment by the insurgents and increase their chances of being released to other parties.

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-- Although there are occasional references to captured Soviet officers, [redacted] almost all of the Soviets now in insurgent hands are conscripts.

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-- [redacted] those captured are normally seized while they are scrounging for food or drugs in a village.

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-- Earlier this year Soviet commanders stopped allowing troops to leave their bases singly or in pairs and ordered that they depart only in groups. [redacted] this action was taken to reduce the possibility of capture and desertion.

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-- Few prisoners are taken in combat because the Soviets normally remain in their vehicles, and most engagements are conducted at long range.

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-- A small proportion of Soviets have voluntarily left their units and joined the insurgents against their former comrades. Most of these soldiers profess to be Muslims (many are Tajiks and Uzbeks) who have a sense of religious and ethnic affinity with the insurgents. [REDACTED]

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#### Location of Prisoners

Soviets being held by insurgents are dispersed throughout Afghanistan and the Afghan refugee areas in Pakistan. Prisoners usually travel with the group that captured them and are not transferred to a central holding area. During the first year of ICRC involvement in this issue, insurgents kept the prisoners they were willing to release in Peshawar, according to an ICRC official. One captive escaped in early 1983 and was later spotted in the Soviet Embassy in Islamabad. The prisoners were subsequently relocated to remote areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan. [REDACTED]

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#### Insurgent Perceptions

A number of factors influence the insurgents' decision to retain or kill their captives. Currently, insurgents tend to retain prisoners primarily because it brings the group prestige from their peers. International recognition often comes to those groups with Soviet prisoners since they prompt more visits from foreigners. The Afghan resistance improved its world image when it began to retain, and subsequently release to the ICRC, some prisoners in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Some groups also keep prisoners in hopes that the Soviets will begin to exchange captured resistance fighters. [REDACTED]

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Nonetheless, the factors that influence the insurgents to execute Soviet prisoners appear to be gaining strength. The Soviets generally have refused to negotiate prisoner swaps directly with the insurgent groups or through the ICRC. Insurgents fear that any person whose name appears on a trade list and is being held in Afghan prisons will be killed. ICRC inspections of Afghan prisons, a key factor in the insurgents' willingness to turn over captives to the ICRC, have not occurred since mid-1982. The insurgents also believe that the West has not taken full advantage of the propaganda opportunities presented by prisoners released to the ICRC. Some insurgent groups unconditionally require that those released not be allowed to return to the USSR. Pakistan, Switzerland, and the ICRC do not accept this stipulation. Increasing Afghan and Soviet

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military pressure, moreover, could force the insurgents to kill captives rather than risk losing them to the Soviets.

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International Attitudes

Pakistan is especially sensitive to possible Soviet reprisals and is reluctant to take a strong public position on the issue. Nonetheless,

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[Redacted] Pakistan has reacted favorably to a proposed multilateral approach to the resettlement issue.

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-- Switzerland is quietly cooperating with the ICRC, citing the Geneva convention as its reason for providing humane treatment for prisoners of war. The Geneva convention, however, makes no promises for deserters or defectors.

-- We believe that private human rights groups will attempt to remove an increasing number of Soviet "defectors" from Afghanistan and Pakistan, either unilaterally or by pressing Western governments into action.

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