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ROBERT MacNEIL: Good evening.

Tonight we have a new look at Afghanistan, where resistance forces have been battling Soviet invaders for nearly three years. The 100,000 Soviet soldiers, with tanks, jets and helicopter gunships, have been unable to crush the resistance offered by thousands of Afghan tribesmen, moved by equally fierce nationalism and Islamic faith.

Western reporters, who've returned recently from long trips with the rebel forces, have brought back a picture of increasing military stalemate. On the official level, the U. S. State Department says there's no evidence to indicate that the Soviets have changed their position on Afghanistan. Yet other Western observers have picked up faint hints that the Soviets might like to find a face-saving way out of a situation many have likened to the U. S. quagmire in Vietnam.

Tonight, with fresh eyewitness accounts of the fighting, "Are the Soviets warring of the Afghan struggle.

Jim Lehrer is off tonight. Charlayne Hunter-Gault's in Washington. Charlayne?

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Robin, in May, the Soviets launched another offensive against one of the toughest centers of rebel resistance, the Panjshir Valley, a fertile farming center 40 miles north of Kabul. Their daily attacks were witnessed by two American reporters who had walked over the mountains with rebel forces.

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Edward Girardet is a special correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor. This was his fourth trip inside Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in December, 1979. He was accompanied by Bill Dowell, a radio correspondent and writer who covered the wars in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, as well as the revolution in Iran. He is now ABC Radio News' correspondent in Paris.

First, Bill Dowell reports what he saw of the Soviet offensive.

BILL DOWELL: Like countless invaders before them, the Soviets have run into Afghanistan's two classic defenses, its people and its terrain. The Soviets have made ingenious use of helicopters, particularly heavily armored MI24 gunships. But Afghanistan's mountains are so high, the helicopters have to fly at maximum altitude. Even then, an increasing number are being shot down by guerrilla machine guns on mountain peaks.

The Soviets have not been able to get beyond their love of heavy armor and massive deployments of tanks. But in Afghanistan, where the rebels move swiftly over steep mountain passes, armored vehicles are often relatively useless.

Weapons such as these Katyusha rocket launchers are some of the most awesome in the Soviet arsenal. Each launcher can fire 40 rockets simultaneously. In theory, a launcher can wipe out an entire village in less than 30 seconds. But Afghanistan's tall mountains and deep valleys provide natural protection, blocking the rockets. The launcher, like many other Soviet weapons, looks good; it just doesn't work in Afghanistan.

Few events underscore the pitfalls of fighting a war in Afghanistan more than the recent Soviet offensive against guerrillas in Panjshir Valley, 40 miles north of Kabul. On May 17th, after intensive bombing, Soviet helicopters landed Russian and Afghan commandos at key points along the length of the 70 mile valley. While the commandos tried to secure the valley floor, Afghan tanks, followed by Soviet tanks, tried to enter the valley from the south.

The guerrillas waited until the Afghan tanks had passed a narrow gorge. Then they set off explosives, triggering a landslide that buried dozens of Soviet armored vehicles. Hundreds of Afghan troops, who found themselves trapped alone inside the valley, defected to the guerrillas. They brought nine tanks with them.

The Soviet and Afghan troops, who outnumbered the guerrillas nearly ten to one, were eventually able to take the floor of the valley by sheer force of numbers. But when they did, the

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guerrillas simply moved into the side valleys and on to the surrounding mountaintops. The Soviets stayed in the valley a little more than a month fighting a curious kind of routine war. At 5:00 in the morning, MiGs and helicopters would fly out to bomb. They would return for lunch at around noon, fly out again an hour later to bomb in the afternoon, and then return for supper. Villagers, who would go to shelters like these during the daytime, would go back to their houses at night.

Towards the end of June, the Soviets began pulling out most of their troops, leaving a few Afghan troops behind. Radio Kabul and Radio Moscow claimed that the offensive was a complete victory. It clearly had disrupted the economic life of the valley. But the guerrillas had also managed to destroy scores of armored vehicles and to shoot down more than a dozen helicopters. They managed to capture new weapons, like this Soviet grenade firing minigun, and hundreds of the latest Soviet assault rifles.

Even if the guerrillas had not fired a shot, the offensive, with its deployment of tens of thousands of troops and hundreds of helicopters and armored vehicles, would have cost the Soviets heavily.

More discouraging from a Russian point of view, this was the fifth offensive the Soviets had launched against the Panjshir Valley in less than three years. In the end, it was not clear that they'd come any closer to whipping Afghan resistance.

HUNTER-GAULT: Now Edward Girardet reports on how the rebels are organized and now they withstood the Soviet attacks. Following that report, Robin talked with Girardet and Dowell just before they left the United States.

EDWARD GIRARDET: The Soviet offensive was aimed at crushing one of Afghanistan's most influential resistance centers. The Russians were particularly determined to destroy Ahmed Shah Masoud, the well organized resistance commander, who has built himself a nationwide reputation as the Lion of Panjshir. No one else has the guerrilla movement shown itself to be stronger and more effective than in this fertile, high mountain valley.

The Soviet and Afghan government forces failed to defeat the Panjshir guerrillas. They have, however, made their presence felt. Attacks against the valley forced hundreds of families to seek refuge amid stone shelters and caves in the narrow side valleys. Many of them lost their homes.

In Afghanistan, mud and stone houses can be easily rebuilt, no more than a week or two. But the prolonged communist occupation threatens to have a lingering impact on the valley's

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economy.

Farmers have been prevented from returning to irrigate their fields and fruit orchards. Resistance leaders also fear that the Soviets will use chemical defoliants to prevent the soil from being cultivated for years to come. Food supplies in the Panjshir are desperately short. Wheat, sugar and tea have dribbled through from neighboring areas. Guerrillas have been sharing their rations, hidden months earlier in secret mountain caches, with local inhabitants.

Masoud warns that unless adequate outside aid can be brought in, the valley's 80,000 residents will face severe hardship. If food supplies fail, the resistance would face two equally dismal choices: either force the Panjshirees to seek help from the communists or send them to Pakistan as refugees. In both cases, the Soviet-backed Karmal regime would enjoy a propaganda victory.

Resistance in Afghanistan continues to be a vast patchwork of independently run groups. But there are increasing signs that the Panjshir resistance model is spreading. New local commanders, many of them young, are emerging as potential future leaders. Pushing out the older traditional chiefs and mullahs, they're challenging the exile political organizations in Pakistan. The past year or two has seen an increasingly sophisticated resistance structure.

During the Panjshir offensive, hundreds of fighters from regions as far away as central Afghanistan and the Soviet border, walked down to help.

Another sign of improved guerrilla organization are horse and camal caravans. Carrying weapons ranging from Chinese mines to the occasional anti-aircraft guns, they're now a common sight along the old nomad trails. So are the resistance operated trihanas (?), or teahouses. Normally used as rest hostels and restaurants, they also serve as local resistance headquarters. They've become part of a simple, but effective communications system. Archaic as it may seem, news bulletins with the latest on ambushes, bombings or offensives are read aloud to both guerrillas and villagers alike. Copies are made, and the news is then whisked away by messengers on foot to other parts of the contry.

The guerrillas still complain about the lack of anti-aircraft weapons. Most arms have to be captured. Those that come from the outside must be purchased. Nothing is free. Many mujahedeen see their dependence on the Pakistani based political organizations as a means for the exiled leaders to maintain control of their fighting compatriots inside.

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Islam, however, remains the greatest strength of the resistance. They also harbor a bitter hatred of the Soviets. Once or twice, I've been momentarily mistaken for a Russian. It was not just an uncomfortable feeling; it was an ugly one. The Afghans are willing to defend their homeland and willing to die for it.

MacNEIL: Those two reporters are with us now in New York, Edward Girardet and Bill Dowell.

Ed, what is the net effect of what you've seen over the three years and your four trips to Afghanistan? Is the situation stalemated, or can you say that one side gradually appears to be gaining an advantage?

GIRARDET: Well, I think the guerrillas have definitely begun to improve. I think now we're beginning to see a situation whereby guerrilla groups are improving in certain areas. It's still very much of a situation of a patchwork of resistance groups. But you are finding a lot of these young leaders who are beginning to emerge. Weapons have improved greatly. And one is really beginning to see more -- you know, more tactics. And I think particularly now the Panjshir has become such a prominent area and is spreading. For example, it spread up to the north, to Badakhshan Province. It's spreading to the south. There're now groups now penetrating Kabul with urban guerrilla attacks. And I think the Soviets are really beginning to have more problems now than before, and I think this is proved by the Panjshir offensive, which was really an attempt to try and crunch, crush finally this resistance, which failed.

MacNEIL: Are the losses, in any way you can measure them, relatively equal on both side? If you can't see one significantly winning, can you at least see the things they're losing and count that up?

DOWELL: Well, we talked with doctors who were in the Panjshir Valley from the first day of the offensive. And they said there were practically no guerrilla losses at all. The guerrillas knew that the Soviets were going to attack. They knew where the bombing was going to take place. They warned the villagers. And most of them had already left for the mountains by the time the fighting took place.

MacNEIL: So you would say very few losses on the part of the guerrillas....

DOWELL: Yes.

MacNEIL: ...than the losses that you reported on the part of the Soviets.

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GIRARDET: I think more with civilians. For example, Masoud received news beforehand, of course, that the invasion would take place. And therefore, he was able to move his troops outside.

MacNEIL: Do you have now an opinion -- I remember asking you this a couple of years ago when you first went in -- but do you now have an opinion, with your added experience, on whether the Soviets can defeat the rebels militarily?

GIRARDET: Well, I think certainly with the present number of troops in Afghanistan, no way. No way. They'd have to bring in more. And even then, I think it'd be really an impossible situation, because, as last year, you know, we walked in, and you really thought you were not in a war situation. And I think whenever we saw a helicopter, it would fly over us, and we just stood. And it's virtually impossible to see men walking around the desert in the rocks from, you know, 2,000 feet. It's virtually impossible. They would really have to move in many more troops; they'd have to move out into the countryside, sustain more casualties, which they're not doing, and which I'm not sure they really want to do.

MacNEIL: Yeah. Do you agree with that, that without a much bigger commitment they could not defeat the rebels?

DOWELL: It would take a tremendous commitment, probably the size of the U. S. commitment in Vietnam, to really get into these valleys and traps the guerrillas.

The Russians didn't appear to me to be trying to really control the countryside. We walked 150 miles, through four different provinces, and every single village we passed through was under a guerrilla administration. And we saw no sign whatsoever of any Kabul government presence, or of any Soviet presence.

MacNEIL: Well, if the Soviets can't just wipe out this resistance without a significantly greater commitment there, can the rebels drive the Soviets out and force the rebels -- the Soviets to get out, do you think?

GIRARDET: Well, I doubt that very much. For example, as just mentioned before concerning the Russians, they really have not got the support of the Afghan forces. When we walked by a number of Afghan forts, and these forts have made agreements with the rebels not to attack. So we walked by; we shook hands with them. And it was really a somewhat absurd situation.

But I think the guerrillas themselves, until they can organize themselves better -- I mean you have areas which are very, very good. You have other areas which are really totally

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incompetent. I mean the guerrilla fighters have no idea about real guerrilla warfare. For example, one group fired mortars without taking the pins out of the mortars. And they had no tactics whatsoever in attacking Afghan or Soviet forts.

MacNEIL: Have there been significant defections of the Afghan Army, that is the Soviet-backed army of the Soviet puppet regime there? Have there been significant defections?

DOWELL: I think there've been very significant defections and defections in place, because the doctors we talked to said that Masoud, the guerrilla commander in the valley, had brought them Soviet battle plans and asked them if they could recognize what the symbols meant. They had been given by members of the Kabul government. So I said how is that possible. And they said, well, some of the officials in the Kabul government are not sure the Soviets are going to make it. They want to cover their bets on both sides.

MacNEIL: You mentioned Vietnam, and of course you were in Vietnam as a correspondent. What are the Soviet tactics like and their strategy to kind of combat this? And what's going wrong for them?

DOWELL: Well, I was amazed. There was no effort whatsoever by any of the Soviet forces to interdict supply routes. We were moving in broad daylight with tremendous caravans. I mean sometimes 50 men, maybe 20, 30 horses. Helicopters would pass overhead. They would make no effort to stop us.

MacNEIL: Those would be easy to see from the air.

DOWELL: They certainly were. And I looked to me as though the Soviets weren't -- the Soviet soldiers on the ground were not really trying to win the war.

We passed by Baghlan, the major Soviet air base, in broad daylight. There were no patrols out. As far as we could tell, there's no evidence the Soviets go out on the ground at all.

Now if this had been in Vietnam with the American Army, there would have been constant patrolling and very tight security. So I was really very shocked.

MacNEIL: What do the rebels expect is going to happen in the end? Do they think that the Soviets are just going to get tired and find a way out of this, or they're going to be beaten, or what's going to happen?

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GIRARDET: Well, last year Masoud told me that he was going to step up attacks. In fact, they had planned more attacks against Kabul before this recent attack. And now they're beginning to do that again. In fact, they've planned quite a few operations, which I think will really hit rather hard against the Russians in Kabul.

They realize they have to make a counteroffensive, because, for one thing, they have to impress the local population. And secondly, they want to really make the situation totally insecure for both the Afghan government and the Soviets. But I think they're realistic enough to -- you know, to realize that they cannot throw the Soviets out. There's going to have to be a political solution eventually. But I think they're just going to keep trying, keep hitting as hard as they can.

I think one particular point is that their weapons are improving, and so far their tactics, and the guerrillas can only improve. I think that's the major thing.

DOWELL: I think time is definitely on the side of the guerrillas. And on April 25th, the guerrillas in the Panjshir and Kobahar (?) just south of the Panjshir attack Baghlan Air Base, cut through the perimeter, destroyed 25 helicopters, machine-gunned the barracks and the base installations. And the effect of that on the Soviets -- this was the first really major attack I think of this kind -- was really very traumatic.

MacNEIL: So you think time is on the guerrillas' side.

Well, Bill Dowell and Ed Girardet, thank you very much.

HUNTER-GAULT: The fighting in Afghanistan has prompted diplomatic efforts to seek a negotiated settlement. The United Nations is taking the lead role. Its Undersecretary-General, Diego Cardova, has recently met with the Afghan and Pakistani foreign ministers for a round of talks in Geneva. The U. N. official is reportedly planning a series of visits this fall to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran to continue the discussions. The U. S. State Department also reported that it has held talks with the Soviets aimed at convincing them to withdraw from Afghanistan.

For more on the diplomatic efforts and their prospects, we turn to Selig Harrison, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He is also the author of the book In Afghanistan's Shadow.

Mr. Harrison, why do you think the Soviets seem willing to talk now? Are they getting tired and feeling trapped?

SELIG HARRISON: Well, we should be quite clear that at

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this stage, it's too early in the negotiating process to be sure how serious they are. It could be that they're trying to make some propaganda and draw the Pakistanis into a negotiation which would give implicit recognition to their regime in Kabul. But when we look at the situation described so forcefully by Ed Girardet and Mr. Dowell, it's easy to see that the Soviets can well be having an agonizing reappraisal. They're trying to see what kind of a deal they might be able to get. And they -- certainly when they got into Afghanistan, they never expected it to be as difficult as it has turned out to be, either militarily or politically.

First of all, at the political level, they thought they could get together a unified communist party, and they thought that they would find more support for the more moderate wing of the Communist Party that they were installing when they brought their troops in. And that hasn't proved to be true. They don't have a solid political base. And the resistance, with some useful help from the outside, has been able to make the military costs of their occupation increasingly great.

So what they see is a rather -- a situation in which they cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. They....

HUNTER-GAULT: So that they cannot see the light, for example, of a military victory.

HARRISON: No, that's right. They can't be forced out. But neither can they see a situation in which they might consolidate a regime that they could keep in power without the suppression of the people in a very, very bloody way. And every time they are seen suppressing people in the way that they've had to in this tragic episode in the Panjshir Valley, the Islamic world is extremely upset: Iran, in particular, right nextdoor, where they have important political stakes; Pakistan; the non-aligned countries; India, in particular, where they've put a lot of their political emphasis. Even among the communist parties, Mexico and France, they've had a very outraged reaction. And world public opinion, in general, still has them on the defensive. So they're paying a very high political and diplomatic price.

But we shouldn't be under the impression that that is enough or that the military costs are enough to force them to surrender or retreat and lose Afghanistan with their tail between their legs.

HUNTER-GAULT: All right. Well, I mean in that case then, based on the talks that have proceeded so far, do you get the impression that there are concessions that they would be willing to make in order to extricate themselves from this whole

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thing, quote, unquote, with honor?

HARRISON: Well, they made some concessions to get these talks going. And that's what's interesting, and that's what's important.

HUNTER-GAULT: You mean just the fact that the talks have begun is a concession.

HARRISON: They dropped their demand that the government in Kabul be recognized by Pakistan. They have agreed to the U. N. taking a very active role, an initiating role, instead of the mere ceremonial role. And I think that they -- you can't approach this at the superpower level, because if the United States goes to the Soviet Union and says you should get out of Afghanistan, we're trying to make them the defendant at the bar. They won't leave, it seems to me, under those circumstances. But they're trying to see whether, in a more face-saving way, through the U. N. framework, they might be able to strike a deal that would gradually make it possible to withdraw by stages, with the reciprocal cessation of what they call foreign interference from Pakistan and Iran, with the help of the Western and Middle Eastern countries that are helping the resistance.

HUNTER-GAULT: All right, thank you.

Robin?

MacNEIL: We have another view now from a woman who's been studying Afghanistan since the early '50s, since she lived and worked there. Rosanne Klass is Director of the Afghan Information Center at Freedom House, a nongovernmental organization which monitors political, civil and human rights around the world. Miss Klass is the author of a book and many magazine articles on Afghanistan.

Miss Klass, do you see signs that the Soviets may be looking for a way out?

ROSANNE KLASS: I think that they are looking to solve certain of their problems, but I don't think that they are that anxious to get out of Afghanistan at this time.

I would agree that it's proved more costly than they expected. But since Moscow has spent almost 200 years trying to gain control of Afghanistan, I don't really think that three years of trouble are enough to change their minds.

MacNEIL: In other words, this isn't just the present Soviet regime; it goes back into tsarist times.

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KLASS: Oh, yes. In 1838, at least, they then began active efforts. And reportedly, I believe the first Russian plans on Afghanistan are attributed to Peter the Great and Catherine the Great.

MacNEIL: Well, what would you see the present -- would you devine the present Soviet motivation might be?

KLASS: I think they're looking for ways to defuse the international price they've had to pay. They have not had to pay a very heavy price. Nevertheless, in the Third World, in the U. N. and in terms of propaganda, it has presented a problem for them.

MacNEIL: Well, haven't they had the most unanimous opposition that they've ever had in terms of world opinion and U. N. resolutions?

KLASS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. No question about that. I think that what they are looking for is a cosmetic solution that the world will accept, and perhaps a regime that will be recognized internationally, that will nevertheless leave them in power. I've seen signs for more than a year now that they are looking for a way to put together a sort of popular front government involving nationalist figures who are not communists. Their problem has been that they've only been able to find one turncoat. And I suspect that we may see a few carefully selected defectors planted as potential returnees who might form part of the government, which, if it were accepted by the outside world, could then turn around and, on the basis of various treaties, ask the Soviet army to stay, or ask Cubans to come in as surrogates. The Cubans have been in; the Vietnamese have be in Afghanistan. They're signing all kinds of treaties with the Bulgarians. But in any case, set up a situation in which the Russians could maintain effective control. And once such a government was recognized by the international community, the international community could not protest their inviting in or agreeing to certain things.

MacNEIL: There's some speculation I've seen reported that the former Afghan King, Zahir Shah, who's now living in exile in Italy, might be the person who could both unite the -- unify Afghanistan and be acceptable to the Soviets.

What's your reaction to that?

KLASS: If the King were to become involved -- at present, he has declined to become involved. I should say that most of the Afghan leadership, the experienced leadership, was murdered since 1978, I mean about twenty-five to fifty thousand people, an entire educated class wiped out. There are surviving experienced political figures, of whom the King is one. And

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there might be a point at which he would have a role to play.

But he is a very cautious man, and it is not likely that he would initiate something. He might come in on something if it was going.

MacNEIL: Finally, let me ask each of you -- we just have a short time -- would you guess that there would be, in the next year or so, a political solution, or are we going to go on with this military situation for a long time?

HARRISON: Well, I think when you say a year or two, you're talking about the kind of time frame that this negotiating process will have to take. What the U. N. is going to do is not going to be accomplished in six months, or even eight months. It's going to stretch out over a period of time, during which time I think assistance to the resistance should continue. But if the Soviets get the....

MacNEIL: Including the presumed U. S. assistance.....

HARRISON: Yes, that's right. I think both military and diplomatic options and diplomatic pressure and military pressure have to be put on the Soviets. But if they're given some realistic options for negotiations through this U. N. framework, we'll find out what's possible.

And I think that a year, 18 months, will be the time frame within which this has to unfold.

MacNEIL: Do you expect there to be a political settlement?

KLASS: If you mean a political settlement that would give Afghanistan back some control of its own destiny, which is what the resistance is fighting for, then I would say we're a long way from it. The resistance will have to up the price a good deal. The international political price will have to be upped a great deal. And the resistance will have to get significant aid from outside, which it has not been getting, in order, over a long, long haul, to bring the Soviets to the table.

MacNEIL: Thank you. We have to end it there. Miss Klass, Mr. Harrison, thank you very much for joining us.

Good night, Charlayne.

HUNTER-GAULT: Good night, Robin.

MacNEIL: That's all for tonight. We will be back tomorrow night. I'm Robert MacNeil. Good night.