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SUBJECT Nikolai Ryzhkov

NOAH ADAMS: The Soviet government reportedly hides from its own citizens the number of Soviet casualties and the true nature of the conflict in Afghanistan. Last month two teen-aged Soviet soldiers arrived in this country. They are the first to come to the West after deserting the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. They were held for four months by Afghani insurgents.

Today we spoke with one of them, Nikolai Ryzhkov, and to Ludmilla Thorn, who brought Nikolai to the United States. Ludmilla Thorn is a member of the human rights organization Freedom House. Based on interviews she held in Afghanistan, Thorn estimates there are more than 100 Soviet deserters, like Nikolai, now in the hands of the Mujahedin Afghani guerrillas.

LUDMILLA THORN: I was in Afghanistan for the second time in August-September of this year. I made three trips, all together. And I met him and another young man, Alexander [unintelligible] on September 5th. And they both asked for asylum in the United States. They gave me little slips of paper and asked me to help them. So I decided to try to help them. And now they're here.

ADAMS: May I speak to Nikolai for a moment?

Nikolai, welcome.

[Nikolai Ryzhkov's remarks are translated by Ludmilla Thorn.]

NIKOLAI RYZHKOV: Thank you.

ADAMS: May I ask you what part of the Soviet Union you

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are from and how old you are, please?

RYZHKOV: I'm 19 years old and I'm from the city of Petropavovsk, which is in Kazakhstan.

ADAMS: And tell me, please, about how it was that you came to fight with the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Did you enlist in the army there, for example?

RYZHKOV: Well, I found myself in Afghanistan, like most 18-year-old young men. They're all required to do universal military service. There is no volunteer army. Everyone has to be recruited at age 18. And that's what happened to me. I was recruited and sent to Afghanistan two months later.

ADAMS: And what were you told about the reason for the fighting in Afghanistan?

RYZHKOV: We were told that we would have to defend the southern borders of the Soviet Union because there we would be meeting American, Chinese and Pakistani mercenaries who'd be dressed up as Mujahedin, and we would have to go and protect the southern borders against these mercenaries.

Well, at the beginning, of course, I did believe this. But what I realized is that there weren't any mercenaries there. The only people we had to see, the only we saw, the Mujahedin and Afghan people.

ADAMS: What is the best way to characterize the morale of the Soviet soldiers who were in Kabul? How did they feel about the war, the people that...

RYZHKOV: Well, everyone realizes this is an unjust war. And psychologically, everyone is looking for a way as to how not to participate in it.

ADAMS: Ludmilla, let me ask you. What, from your conversations with Nikolai and the other defector, what is the misconception in the West about what's going on among the Soviet troops there?

THORN: Most people in the West don't really realize that the Soviet young men that I interviewed -- I interviewed 20 -- that they're caught there in a terrible, terrible three-way predicament. (A) They're forced to fight a war in which they don't believe, for a cause they have to die in which they don't believe. Alternative number two is to be killed in action for a cause in which they don't believe. Alternative number three, unlike the American soldiers during the Vietnam War, they have no haven. They cannot go to Sweden or Canada.

The biggest problem I encountered in talking to all the Mujahedin groups which are holding these young men and their commanders is that they have to lug them up and down the mountains, they have to conceal them in safe houses wherever possible. Because whenever the Soviet command finds out where these young men are held, they try to bomb the area.

I also know of cases where Soviet agents have offered large sums of money for information leading to learning where these young men are concealed.

So, there is no safe haven where these young men can be kept.

ADAMS: Why would the Afghan rebels, the Mujahedin, go to such an effort to protect the deserters?

THORN: Well, as one commander told me, it's against his convictions, against the Koran to kill a man who comes to him without his weapons or comes to him and asks for protection.

ADAMS: Let me speak to Nikolai for a moment.

Nikolai, what happened when you got away from Kabul? Where did you go? Did you sneak out at night, for example? And what did you think was going to happen to you if you were captured by the rebel forces there?

RYZHKOV: On June 16th, that evening, a film was being shown to all the troops. It was under the open sky the film was shown. And the film was called "The Mercedes Escapes Hot Pursuit." And when the film was over, that evening, all all the officers and soldiers were dispersing to go to the tents and barracks and so on, I just quietly walked away and didn't go back. So I just started walking and made my way to the periphery of Kabul. After about an hour's walk, I met some Mujahedin.

Well, at the very first moment I must admit that my body shuddered for a moment because they approached me, and they were heavily armed, and I wasn't. But then a few minutes later they realized that I was coming to them voluntarily, and they were very nice to me and they treated me very kindly.

ADAMS: Nikolai, you cannot, obviously, go back to the Soviet Union. What do you plan to do now?

RYZHKOV: Well, I would like to study and become an electrical engineer.

ADAMS: In this country?

RYZHKOV: Yes, here.

ADAMS: Freedom House representative Ludmilla Thorn translating for Nikolai Ryzhkov, formerly a private with the Soviet Army in Afghanistan.