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CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
25 June 1980

US 'eyes' see no Afghan pullout

Washington

US intelligence is carefully watching for reported Soviet troop withdrawals from Afghanistan but has no independent evidence of these yet, a Defense Department spokesman, Thomas Ross, said Tuesday.

The intelligence community's estimate of Soviet troop strength is 85,000 inside Afghanistan and another 30,000 Soviet soldiers just across the border, Monitor correspondent John K. Cooley reports.

At a conference here recently, a leading expert on Soviet Muslims, Prof. Alexandre Bennigsen, said the Soviets had withdrawn all of their own Muslim troop units from Afghanistan in February and replaced them with Russians, because the Muslim troops had in some cases refused to fight their Afghan Muslim brethren. US intelligence officials say they have no confirmation of this.

Farther west, on the Iranian border, the Soviets have one airborne and one motorized rifle division in the Transcaucasia region between the Caspian and Black Seas. Gen. David C. Jones, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Armed Service Committee last week before his Senate confirmation for a second term.

General Jones said the Soviets could move those two divisions quickly to the Iranian oil fields if the United States and Gulf nations did not react quickly. However, he added, Soviet aircraft involved in such a move would have to fly 1,000 miles, making their detection by airborne early-warning aircraft easy. Soviet moves of troops into and out of Afghanistan by air are more difficult to monitor, intelligence sources say.