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JACK ANDERSON and JOSEPH SPEAR

Hanging On in Afghanistan

Confidential State Department cables provide a glimpse of the life of American diplomats at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, the embattled capital of Afghanistan. It's not a pretty picture.

Far from protecting the Americans stationed there, the Soviet puppet government of Afghanistan inspires and encourages a constant campaign of denunciation in the press, "spontaneous" mass demonstrations, harassment and threats of physical violence against our diplomats.

With a professional diplomat's understatement, charge d'affaires Ed Hurwitz noted in one cable to Washington: "Our relations with the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan are probably colder and more limited than with any other country in which we maintain an embassy." The United States has never sent a replacement for Ambassador Adolph Dubs, who was kidnaped, then killed in a botched rescue attempt in February 1979, months before Soviet invasion.

"The regime claims that the United States is its primary enemy and threatens us accordingly," Hurwitz continued. "Frequently labeled as a nest of spies, the embassy has had four officers declared persona non grata within the last 2½ years. Most embassy staff members are regularly followed by secret police agents, and all but a few of our FSNs have been arrested on espionage charges." FSNs, or "foreign service nationals," are Afghan citizens employed in nonsensitive positions by the embassy.

According to U.S. cables obtained by our reporter Jenny Cunningham, the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs delivered a none-too-subtle threat to the embassy in September 1983, claiming that it would be unable to prevent "angry Afghans from taking action against our buildings and staff members." And in fact, the regime has apparently done nothing to stop frequent anti-American demonstrations in front of the embassy. As in other communist countries, such demonstrations cannot take place without the government's collusion.

"This highly restrictive environment necessarily puts severe limits on the goals and objectives of the embassy," Hurwitz cabled Washington. "We have little hope of influencing [Afghan government] policy decisions, nor can we perform those commercial or informational functions which are normally part of an embassy's portfolio."

Why stay, then? Hurwitz disagrees with critics who complain that the embassy's continued presence in Kabul gives tacit recognition to the Soviet puppet regime. He also points out that, for all the restrictions, the embassy is able to collect some information on the fluctuating situation in Afghanistan that is valuable to Washington policy-makers.

The embassy staff is also able to keep the Soviet aggression in Afghanistan from becoming "the forgotten war" by sending out information that can be used by the press, which is barred from Afghanistan. Continued world attention will exert pressure on the Kremlin to negotiate a settlement, Hurwitz believes.

Remarkably, Hurwitz reported that "employe morale has generally been high in Kabul, since most people have volunteered for the job and know what they are getting into."