

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 44COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW
March/April 1987

COVERING AFGHANISTAN, PART II

Covering the seven-year-old Afghanistan war, always a hazardous job, has of late become even more dangerous. In October 1984, following the capture of a French television journalist by Afghan army troops, the Soviet ambassador to Pakistan, Vitaly Smirnov, announced that henceforth Soviet troops would kill any reporter caught entering Afghanistan with the mujahideen. A year later, Charles Thornton of *The Arizona Republic* was killed when Soviet helicopter gunships brought in soldiers who ambushed his truck near Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. Informed observers believe that the Soviets had been tipped off about Thornton's planned route by Afghan government agents who had infiltrated the mujahideen.

The informant network has become a pervasive danger, especially now that large rewards have been offered by the Afghan government for assistance in the

✓ *Christina DAMEYER is a free-lance journalist who regularly visits Pakistan and has made several trips into Afghanistan. Her article "Covering Afghanistan: A Reporter's Notebook" appeared in the September/October 1984 Review.*

capture of Westerners — preferably Americans. (One writer observed, sardonically, that while newspapers pay only \$100 for an article, the Soviets are apparently willing to pay \$10,000 to prevent a story from being written.)

Dominique Vergos, a French photographer who has spent a total of more than three years inside Afghanistan, says, "You even have to be careful about the boy bringing your tea." He related an example of the rapidity with which information can be relayed: "I had stayed in one house near Herat [in western Afghanistan] only for a morning, and three hours after I left, regime officials came around asking where the Western journalist was. We crossed the highway at night and stopped in a village beyond. By morning, six tanks and APCs [armored personnel carriers] had surrounded the village, followed by trucks carrying five hundred Afghan army soldiers. The mujahideen fought them all day and finally we escaped."

Improved Soviet intelligence and the sharp increase in nighttime ambushes of resistance caravans have created concern even among the old-timers. French photographer Pierre Issot-Sergent, who was

the first journalist to visit northwest Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion, admits, "I am more worried about going in now. In the old days, we could travel wherever we wanted in the countryside, often in broad daylight. But it's definitely gotten a lot tougher."

If journalists are having more doubts about the advisability of going inside Afghanistan, some mujahideen commanders are growing less eager to take them. These commanders say that press coverage has done less to further their cause than they had hoped it would. As one commander put it, "Film crews and writers have been coming and going for years but we haven't seen many results, either in bringing our problems to the attention of the world or in getting the weapons supply we need."

More important, the perception is growing among the mujahideen that extensive coverage of guerrilla strongholds can be detrimental. A recent example was the attack in April 1986 on Jawar, an important supply base near the Pakistan border, which many observers believe was triggered in part by a flurry of articles in the Western press. European newspapers had published aerial dia-

grams showing a detailed map of the caves where equipment and ammunition were stored and where tanks captured from the Soviets were repaired. Peter Jouvenal, a British combat photographer who has gone into Afghanistan a record twenty-seven times, observes that, while "the Soviets certainly had that information already from informants, all the publicity made it a question of prestige for them to knock out Jawar." Some commanders, taking cues from this experience, have moved their headquarters and do not allow journalists to visit them in their new, secret hideouts.

Westerners enter Afghanistan with groups that range from strict Saudi Arabian-style Islamic fundamentalists to underground Maoists. Some of these groups have become increasingly reluctant to take journalists unknown to them to areas in which intense fighting is going on. All the precautions needed to assure the safety of foreigners put an extra burden on the mujahideen.

In some regions, the mujahideen are particularly reluctant to take along female journalists, especially on longer trips. In Afghan society, of course, women are usually veiled and kept separate from men. On one trip, the problem was solved by my interpreter, who told the fighters at the front that I was a young man from Egypt who had volunteered to help them in their *jihad*, or holy war. (Although I was wearing Afghan tribesmen's clothes and a turban, my foreign features required an explanation.)

Usually, a spokesman for one mujahideen party explained, finding accommodation for women is difficult, especially in areas like the Panjshir Valley, where massive Soviet bombing has destroyed the houses and driven out all the civilians. One French medical organization was asked to stop working in several Afghan provinces in which the presence of female doctors and nurses offended conservative residents.

The growing risks and difficulties for reporters who go into Afghanistan and for the resistance fighters who take them could reduce the already sparse coverage of the war provided by the American media. Although the Afghanistan issue has become more prominent in the press over the last two years as the result of the stepping up of U.S. aid to the resistance, along with speculation that the

Soviets might withdraw their forces, comprehensive overviews of the Afghan situation still tend to appear only at the anniversaries of the Soviet invasion. In 1985, according to a study carried out by the Library of Congress's Congressional Research Service at the request of Senator Gordon Humphrey, the evening-news time allotted by the three television networks to the Afghanistan conflict totaled less than an hour.

Because no Western news organization maintains a bureau, or even a permanent correspondent, in Peshawar, most of the news of the fighting inside Afghanistan is reported by the wire services in Islamabad, the Pakistani capital, and is largely based on reports from embassies in Afghanistan. Observers are sometimes skeptical of their accuracy, because the diplomats are sequestered in a small area of Kabul and are not allowed to travel into the countryside. Peter Jouvenal recalls that, while at a guerrilla camp inside Afghanistan, he heard a Western radio report that quoted diplomatic sources as saying that the famous commander of the Panjshir Valley resistance forces, Ahmad Shah Massoud, had been killed. "I knew it wasn't true," Jouvenal says. "I was sitting right next to him."

The other main source for the wire-

service stories are resistance reports; these, too, must be regarded skeptically because of the guerrilla leaders' tendency to exaggerate their accomplishments. Occasionally, according to the editor of a respected resistance news service, accounts of battles are even recycled from the season before. One party's press department discovered that many of the reports it distributed were being invented in the office by members who hadn't even crossed the border. The competition for international media attention sometimes seems almost as intense as the battle being waged in the field. One reporter, for example, in the course of interviewing a high-ranking Afghan army prisoner captured by one group, learned that a rival faction had tried to coerce the officer into saying he had been captured by them instead.

Even Westerners who work full-time in Peshawar with the Afghans on humanitarian aid projects find it difficult to obtain an accurate picture of events in Afghanistan. The director of a European relief organization, who describes the situation as "very complex," adds, "It has taken a year to find reliable people here who can tell you what's really happening."

Many correspondents can spend only a few weeks in Peshawar, and they are faced with a confusing array of Afghan-related organizations among which to

Mortal danger: This photo of Charles Thornton of The Arizona Republic (right), with mujahideen, was taken four hours before the truck was ambushed and Thornton was killed.



Continued



Ed Grazia

New journalists: Across the border, in Peshawar, Afghans learn how to cover their own war.

find good sources. A visual indication is the proliferation of signs crowding the main thoroughfare leading to the Khyber Pass: "Dental Clinic for Afghan Refugees," "Afghan Female Surgical Hospital," "Islamic Unity of Afghan Mujahideen," "International Committee of the Red Cross," and "Saudi Red Crescent," among others.

Some mujahideen warn that Westerners must be careful about which Afghans they listen to. There would seem to be good reason for caution: according to Major Mohammad Raquib, an Afghan army defector, the Soviets sometimes plant Afghan agents to give reporters disinformation.

Many journalists find that some of the most objective assessments are provided by other journalists. Those who stay in Peshawar for any amount of time get together regularly at the three or four main restaurants to exchange war stories and trade information. (When they tire of mutton curry, the staple fare of the city's restaurants, they gather in a hotel to sample the latest delicacies from the bazaar: deep-fried swallows and Russian caviar smuggled in from Afghanistan.)

Most reporters still go "inside" to get their own firsthand impressions. But the average trip allows only a brief glimpse of a small slice of territory close to the Pakistan border. For an overview of Afghanistan as a whole, treks must be made to far corners of the country. (Not surprisingly, given the amount of time required to make these trips, most reporting from the battle zones has been done by dedicated free-lancers.) Long delays are common while the mujahideen organize both to go in and to come back out. And, once inside the country, one can be forced to hole up for days by Soviet and Afghan troop movements or simply by the remoteness of the region. One photographer was stranded for two months near the Iranian border when he missed a rare passing truck. He finally gave up waiting for another and set off by camel across the Dasht-i-Margo, the "Desert of Death."

After such long trips, news is considered old by Western media standards. And, for all the time spent inside, one may have seen very little actual fighting. Placing more reliance on Afghan journalists, it has been suggested, would re-

duce the need for Westerners to go into Afghanistan and, at the same time, provide more consistent, timely, on-the-spot reporting. Several Western-sponsored projects, including one conceived by the United States Information Agency, are under way to train Afghan cameramen who would be stationed in key spots throughout the country. Their film would be sent out regularly, thus eliminating time-consuming treks back and forth to Pakistan. There is even talk of equipping some of the new Afghan reporters with electronic-burst transmitters so they can relay battle reports to Pakistan instantaneously.

The Afghans have their own ideas about how Western press coverage of the war could be improved. Many knowledgeable mujahideen believe that the news media have overlooked practices of political leaders in Peshawar that are impeding military performance and lowering morale. "We wish journalists would do some investigative reporting to expose the incompetence and corruption of these leaders so they wouldn't continue to get foreign support," says an American-educated Afghan in Pesh-

awar. "Some are notorious for selling many of the weapons they are sent. The arms they do dispense go not to the many sincere fighters in the field, but to a few personal friends who do very little fighting. When we try to question such things, they make excuses that they're too busy to talk to us. But if a Western journalist comes, they have all the time in the world, since they want to enhance their fame and thus get more financial support.

"One party in particular stages attacks on Afghan government positions near the Pakistan border for the benefit of TV teams," this Afghan says. "But then Soviet planes come and bomb the surrounding villages and mujahideen camps in retaliation. Many lives are lost just so the journalists can get good footage and the party can get favorable publicity."

A source close to this party claimed it had recently spent 25 million rupees (\$150,000) to take in an American television team. The price was said to include paying for a large entourage to stay in Afghanistan for six weeks and for the purchase of heavy weapons and ammunition for some of the "arranged operations."

Despite these and other attempts to attract coverage, some Westerners knowledgeable about the war consider American reporting to be rather superficial. A European who works closely with the Afghans says that most of the articles he has seen in the U.S. press repeat the same themes and facts without offering original insights. There is too much of the "I was in Afghanistan with the mujahideen" genre and too little in-depth analysis of such important subjects as the wide-ranging Soviet campaign to convert Afghanistan into a satellite.

The coverage, he adds, also paints too rosy a picture of the mujahideen's military situation, failing to examine some of their very real problems. He and other Western observers say that increasingly effective Soviet tactics have forced the mujahideen onto the defensive in many parts of Afghanistan and have resulted in the deaths of some of their best commanders. Intermittent internecine fighting continues to cause many mujahideen casualties and to sap energy from the struggle against the Soviets.

A European ex-army officer who has spent much time in Afghanistan per-

ceives another flaw in coverage of the military situation. "I sometimes read articles in the U.S. press announcing a new weapon or tactic being introduced by the Soviets when, in fact, it has been around for a year or two," he says. Meanwhile, reports of widespread use by the mujahideen of sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons, like the Stinger missile, seem questionable, since accounts are contradictory. This past December, for instance, *The New York Times* ran two AP stories under the headline **AFGHAN REBELS HIT MORE PLANES**. The first story, bearing a Washington dateline, quoted State Department sources as saying that the Soviet Union had been losing "an average of one plane or helicopter a day for the last three months to Afghan guerrillas armed with better weapons." The second, shorter item, bearing an Islamabad, Pakistan, dateline and citing "Western diplomats," put the November total at two Soviet transport planes and eight helicopters.

Most Western journalists who have traveled with the mujahideen believe that, in actuality, few Stingers have yet found their way into Afghanistan. They say the Soviet losses are generally due to older weapons, like SAM-7 and Red-eye missiles, or to pilot errors resulting in crashes.

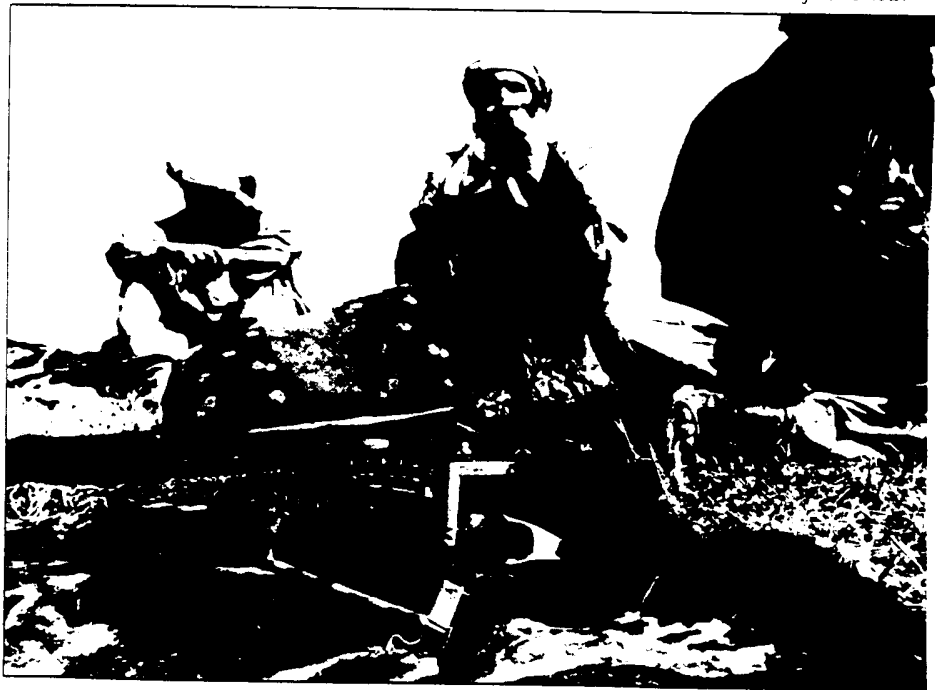
Another point: both Western observ-

ers and Afghan resistance leaders are irked that many major American newspapers continue to use the word "rebels" when referring to the mujahideen. They point out that the resistance groups are not rebelling against a legitimate government but are fighting a Soviet-installed puppet regime.

Finally, it should be noted that, due to the inaccessibility of Iran since 1979, the plight of the two million Afghan refugees who have fled to Iran has gone almost unreported. For the same reason, there has been no firsthand coverage of the activities of the Iranian-based Shia mujahideen parties.

Despite the deficiencies of Western coverage of Afghanistan, Western reporters at least strive to provide a realistic picture of a curtailed-off war. This is far more than can be said of the Afghan government media. Every word in the Afghan press is approved by Soviet advisers, according to a recent defector from the Kabul regime. Meanwhile, to improve their skills in producing Soviet-style propaganda, a number of Afghan journalists have been sent for training in East-bloc countries. To find more reliable news, Afghans both inside and outside the country still tune in to the Voice of America and the BBC. ■

Vital link: For reliable news Afghans tune in to the BBC and the Voice of America.



Ed Grazia