

# Kremlin-watchers scoff at hints that Soviets may leave Afghanistan

## Despite earlier signs of flexibility Soviet troops still involved in conflict

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Despite broad hints of Soviet "flexibility" on a political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan, many Kremlin-watchers here are skeptical.

Six years after Soviet troops entered Afghanistan, attention is focused again on the Soviet role in the country. A new round of talks has opened in Geneva between the Afghan government and neighboring Pakistan, home to nearly 3 million Afghan refugees. The talks are aimed at hammering out an agreement under which the troops could be withdrawn and the refugees could return home.

"We keep hearing the same hints [of Soviet flexibility], but we don't see them matched by actions," says a well-informed diplomat.

To be sure, the hints keep coming. The president of the French National Assembly, Louis Mermaz, said after a recent visit to Moscow that he had heard "highly interesting" things from the Kremlin leadership about Afghanistan.

But some diplomats are skeptical, noting that they heard broad hints of Soviet willingness to end the Afghan conflict during the summer of 1984, but nothing came of them.

The fighting continues unabated. In one of the most recent reports, up to 65 Afghan government troops were reported killed in the Afghan capital of Kabul. The deaths came as the result of a bomb planted in the capital — the latest in a string of explosions in or near the city.

The Soviet press has recently printed a number of dispatches from Afghanistan about the war, usually citing acts of heroism by Soviet soldiers but occasionally confirming deaths as well. There have been no official figures of Soviet troop losses, although some Western diplomats suspect the figure has risen in recent months.

The conflict started when Soviet troops invaded the underdeveloped, mountainous country in late December of 1979. Moscow then installed a friendly government, headed by Babrak Karmal.

"It's clear," says one diplomat, "that although Karmal may have been able to gain a following in the ruling party, he has not been able to do that in the country as a whole."

The Soviets, meanwhile, have devoted millions of dollars' worth of arms and equipment to the conflict.

But, notes one diplomat, "they seem unwilling to allo-

cate the men and money" that would be required to defeat the bands of guerrilla fighters that have resisted the Soviet occupation.

Some military analysts suspect this is a deliberate policy, since Afghanistan offers the Soviet Army a real-life "training ground" in battle techniques. The cost, in monetary terms, is relatively small. It represents only a fraction of the Soviet military budget, says one diplomat.

Still, the conflict is clearly unpopular with at least some Soviet citizens. Some draftees go to extraordinary lengths — including bribes — to avoid being posted to Afghanistan. And many beyond draft age, both men and women, seem to have little enthusiasm for the conflict.

"It's a dirty war," said one Muscovite, adding that he hoped it would be over soon.

But a number of Soviet citizens appear to have accepted the view that the United States, because of its support for the resistance fighters, is behind the conflict.

"If the United States would stop supporting the counter-revolutionaries," says one Soviet official, "then troops would be home tomorrow." But, as the last six years have shown, tomorrow can be a long time in coming.

Western diplomats say a Soviet troop withdrawal is a prerequisite for ending the conflict. Otherwise, they say, the 3 million Afghan refugees that have flooded into Pakistan are unlikely to return home.

And diplomats say that until the refugee problem is

solved, Pakistan will not agree to a political solution to the Afghanistan conflict. Moreover, they add, the refugee camps — so long as they exist — will continue to provide fertile fields for the recruitment of Afghan guerrillas.

Other diplomats argue that the Soviets might be searching for fresh approaches to solving the conflict.

"Their fallback position could be to accept a non-aligned Afghanistan as a result of negotiations," says one diplomat.

"And that would not be too bad a position for them to be in, since they are so concerned with not having hostile neighbors on their borders," he adds.

But some diplomats say this outcome is virtually impossible so long as Karmal stays in power, since he has become so closely identified with the Soviet occupation of the country.

One well-informed analyst says, however, that the Soviets are not committed to Karmal for the long run.

"As soon as they can gain something by dumping him, they will dump him," he says.

But some diplomats claim that the Kremlin has vowed to "teach Pakistan a lesson" by fueling unrest in Paki-

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stan's tribal areas near the border with Afghanistan.

They argue that this does not bode well for a political settlement, since the Soviets may still think they can punish Pakistan until it stops allowing Afghan guerrillas to operate from Pakistani territory.

But one analyst points out that the Soviets may simply be trying to place themselves in the most favorable position prior to reaching a political settlement.

"Of course, when one goes into negotiations, one likes to deal from a position of strength," he says. Consequently, he adds, a flurry of military activity and attempts to foment unrest in Pakistan could actually be a prelude to serious discussions about Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Still, many diplomats admit that the Soviet strategy now is no clearer than it was six years ago, when the Red Army crossed the Afghan border.

An Afghan government official, meanwhile, claims the Karmal government is continuing to gain support within the country.

"The people support the government," he says. "Really, they do."