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## Report from Afghanistan: the conflict — and civilian toll — worse than ever

*The writer has just spent nearly three months in Afghanistan and the frontier areas of Pakistan — including an 850-mile trek on foot around resistance areas in the northeast Hindu Kush mountains. This was his sixth major trip into Afghanistan since the December 1979 Soviet invasion.*

By Edward Girardet  
Special to The Christian Science Monitor

### Kunar Valley, Afghanistan

Most of the villages along the western banks of the Kunar River lie deserted, the bomb-shattered mud houses crumbling and the once lush, irrigated fields and fruit orchards little more than listless dust bowls.

For several years now, the nearby mountains and ravines have served as havens for the hidden bases of local guerrilla groups.

The main highway which traces the length of the Kunar Valley attests to the fierce clashes that regularly erupt between Afghan resistance fighters and Soviet occupiers. It is strewn with wrecked government vehicles, including a Soviet tank.

the scatterings of spent machine-gun cartridges, and the jagged remains of exploded artillery shells.

From all indications, this year has been the hardest, the most gruesome of the war so far. Not only have the Soviets intensified their operations against the Afghan resistance,

but they also have systematically stepped up acts of terror and intimidation against civilians.

Militarily, the Soviet Army and guerrillas have been going hammer and tongs at each other since early this year. But, as far as can be determined, the conflict remains a grueling standoff.

The Soviets have learned some lessons of the past and have generally improved

their fighting capabilities. They are applying more effective tactics and their troops appear better trained in the art of anti-insurgency.

As part of its persistent and often successful propaganda effort, Radio Kabul regularly claims to have annihilated vast numbers of "antirevolutionaries." Only last week, it maintained that its forces killed 23,000 guerrillas in 1984 alone — a figure granted little credence by most observers unless civilians are also included.

While the *mujahideen*, or holy warriors, as the guerrillas are called, are known to have suffered devastating setbacks in some areas, they have tended to hold their own. According to Western intelligence reports and journalists who have witnessed several attacks against government and Soviet convoys and bases this year, the resistance may be inflicting higher casualties on the Red Army than before. It is thought that the Soviets are also taking substantial losses by conducting more exposed commando-style operations inside guerrilla territory.

For Afghan civilians, however, the future looks grim. Although some regions such as the valleys of Nuristan in the northeast and the central highlands of the Hazarajat have been spared the full thrust of war in recent years, most provinces have suffered badly.

While reliable figures are virtually impossible to ascertain, hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children are believed to have been killed or have died as a direct consequence of the war. Aerial bombardments and ground assaults against civilian habitations, executions, disease, and malnutrition provoked by the destruction of food sources are principal causes.

Furthermore, the number of Afghans seeking refuge in Pakistan, Iran, and elsewhere — now estimated at over 5 million and nearly one-third of Afghanistan's pre-war population of 15 million to 17 million — continues to rise. For the first time, farmers and nomads from the northern provinces of Kunduz, Takhar, and Baghlan bordering the USSR have been leaving in large numbers.

Analysts consider Moscow's systematic application of terror as part of a deliberate policy to rid Afghanistan of all potential resistance, a form of "migratory genocide" ignored by most of the world. This includes the strafing by Soviet MIG-27s on Aug. 18, as witnessed by this correspondent near the Chamar Pass just east of the Panjshair of some 500 Kandari nomads and their animals. The attack resulted in at least 40 dead and dozens of injured.

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