WITH THE RESISTANCE IN AFGHANISTAN

by Edward Girardet

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GUERRILLAS KEEP CONTROL

Shotal, Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan—The dust-covered and weary young partisan, a Kalashnikov assault rifle slung over his shoulder, hastily recounts the latest developments from the battlefront.

"The communists still hold the ridge," he says, "but the Mujahideen (guerrillas) are regrouping lower down and awaiting new orders."

Massoud, the resourceful and highly respected guerrilla commander of Afghanistan’s strategic Panjshir Valley, 40 miles north of Kabul, listens intently until the messenger finishes. He and his heavily armed companions sit quietly in the mud and stone farmhouse, their hardened, bearded faces etched eerily against the flickering shadows of the gas lantern. They show little concern for the ripping explosions of Russian mortars and rockets that tear into the rugged mountain landscape above the village.

A bright but modest former engineering student still in his 20’s, Massoud has displayed such leadership and knowledge of guerrilla warfare that he has earned a reputation here in Afghanistan not unlike that of Che Guevara. He consults briefly with his lieutenants, then draws out a notebook, scribbles a series of orders, and hands them to
the messenger with a word of encouragement. Oral or handwritten messages are often the only forms of communication among this country's vast pastwork of resistance groups.

"We shall wait a bit longer," he explains, "and then attack in small units to take back the ridge."

"The Russians don't like to fight at night," he adds with a wry, creased smile that softens his otherwise strict hawk nose and piercing eyes. "We'll also keep them busy by launching a diversionary assault against the Salang Highway. We have got to keep hitting them from all sides. They are already getting tired and demoralized."

As part of a massive communist offensive against this resistance-held Panjshir Valley, a combined force of Russian and Afghan commandos seized control only 24 hours earlier of the long, jagged ridge that dominates this bomb-scarred village and its terraced wheat fields.

By dawn, however, Massoud's disciplined, olive-denimed fighters, using primarily captured Soviet weapons, fought their way back up to their original mountain top positions and pushed the communists down into the plain below.

If there is one clear conclusion from this correspondent's recent one-month-long, 700-mile trek through several provinces, it is that the majority of Afghanistan's estimated 20,000 active partisans have developed into a formidable resistance force well versed in guerrilla tactics.

Conditions vary from region to region. But the combat effectiveness of Massoud and the roughly 1,000 well-armed Jamiat Islami guerrillas of the Panjshir Valley illustrates a marked improvement in the overall ability of the Afghan
resistance to strike back at the Soviets.

In contrast to the situation just over a year ago when this correspondent last visited Afghanistan, morale among the Mujahideen is high. They are better armed, better trained, and better organized.

No longer do they launch large free-for-all attacks against Soviet bases or convoys. Carefully planned strategy, using small but more incisive well-armed units, is now a vital element in what has become an increasingly successful war of attrition against the Soviet-backed central government in Kabul.

Furthermore, despite a continued lack of political unity among the country's seven major resistance organizations, there is greater readiness to coordinate guerrilla activities. Only the Muslim fundamentalist Hekmatyar Gulbaddin faction of the Hezb-i-Islami continues to withhold its cooperation.

Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the stubborn resistance offered by the 80,000 inhabitants still living in the Panjshir has been more than a thorn in the flesh for the communist government and the Russian forces that prop it up. Much as the Vercors Plateau came to symbolize French anti-Nazi resistance during World War II, so the Panjshir Valley has become for many Afghans the core of guerrilla opposition to Kabul.

Three times—in April 1980, in August of the same year, and again this past January—the Soviets have launched massive assaults against this long and beautiful valley, itself agriculturally rich but girdled by stark desert mountains. Up to 80 percent of the valley's houses, shops, schools, and mosques have been destroyed or damaged in air
attacks or by tanks rumbling up the Panjshir river bed during the offensives.

Afghan casualties have been high, particularly among the civilians. The guerrillas have suffered from desperate shortages of weapons and ammunition. At one point, they were forced to retreat into the rocky caves of precipitous mountain bluffs and into the narrow side valleys that cleave into the mighty Hindu Kush. On each occasion, however, the Russians failed to crush the resistance.

And now, this month, a fourth offensive against the Panjshir also appears to have failed. An estimated 10,000 to 15,000 Soviet and Afghan troops first began massing around the towns of Jabal-us-Siraj, Gulbahar, and Charikar at the base of the Panjshir on about August 20. Afghan military officers in the capital who were cooperating with the guerrillas warned that the Russians were throwing in 1,500 armored vehicles plus considerable plane and helicopter support. A contingent of Bulgarian troops also was reported to be taking part, but this could not be confirmed by independent sources.

Davastating barrages of mortar, rocket, and cannon fire were launched against villages and guerrilla concentrations in the Kabul plain and around the mouth of the Panjshir Valley, which has been physically walled off by the communists for the past year. This correspondent can witness to the severity of the communist onslaught, being forced to flee with his Afghan guides as the shells fell and seeing the hut he had just left behind blown up along with his abandoned rucksack.

The offensive faltered in the early days of September. Repeatedly harassed by partisan units along the approach roads in and around the towns as well as in the mountains,
the Soviets were initially unable to break into the valley itself.

(Although reports remain sketchy at time of writing, the communists apparently broke into the Panjshir Valley in mid-September and briefly occupied two small towns. Earlier this week, Radio Kabul claimed that their troops had occupied the entire valley. It also accused bandits of “destroying homes and crops,” and added that “life is now back to normal.”)

(Western diplomatic sources in the Afghan capital reported otherwise. According to eyewitness accounts they said government troops had, indeed, managed to penetrate the valley but were soon forced out by guerrilla fighters. They also indicated that the communists had suffered severe casualties. Long convoys of tanks and other vehicles, some of which are believed to have been involved in the offensive, were seen returning to Kabul.)

For the first time, said Massoud, “the Russians have begun sending their men into active combat rather than sticking to their armored vehicles.”

The resistance also claimed more than 30 Soviet tanks destroyed and at least five helicopters shot down during early stages of the offensive. One of them, they said, was carrying four Russian generals on an inspection tour of the front. They were apparently all killed. This could not be confirmed by independent sources.

Mujahideen casualties were not known at the time of this correspondent’s visit to the Panjshir. Several severely injured partisans were brought to a hospital in the Panjshir Valley run by French doctors of the Paris-based Aide Medicale Internationale. Two of them died shortly after
wards. Some guerrillas from the front spoke of heavy and bitter fighting around the towns of Gulbahar and Jabal-us-Siraj with many dead on both sides.

In the past eight months, there have been no bombardments in the main Panjshir Valley. But several villages in the side-valleys adjacent to the Kabul plain were badly hit during the latest offensive, causing serious civilian casualties.

It was while visiting this “front” in late August that this correspondent was caught in the brief but brutal pre-dawn mortar attack against Shotal. Three inhabitants were killed and two, including a young boy, injured. Most of the men, women, and children had previously fled to the safety of the surrounding mountains, although a few remained behind to tend the fields and livestock.

Unlike the early stages of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Panjshir guerrillas now have a small number (not enough, they stress) of antiaircraft guns strategically placed among the mountains overlooking the valley. Soviet MIG fighters and helicopter gunships enter Panjshir airspace only at high altitudes. The rusting hulks of Soviet aircraft, tanks, and armored personnel carriers along the river banks or in the fields attest to the growing effectiveness of resistance defense measures.

Although the guerrillas exude confidence in their struggle against the Soviets, they are acutely aware that they remain vulnerable targets to any serious and concerted Soviet assault. Massoud has carefully established a clandestine mountain redoubt—replete with operational headquarters, maps, and hidden caches of weapons, ammunition, and mines—in case of a forced retreat.
Since the Soviet invasion, Massoud had trained over 5,000 men at a special guerrilla instruction center in the Panjshir Valley. A number of them have been sent to him by other resistance groups elsewhere in the country. During the training, which lasts two months, recruits are taught tactics, weapon maintenance, and close combat.

"We have no trouble finding the men," he explains, "just the weapons."

Obtaining sufficient arms, particularly sophisticated ones such as surface-to-air missiles or heavy machine guns, as well as ammunition, remains a considerable problem.

Most resistance supplies in the Panjshir consist of captured communist material. This correspondent saw no sign of Western assistance and, reportedly, only one-quarter of guerrilla guns are procured in Pakistan. Many of Massoud's frontline fighters wear captured Russian boots and carry Russian AK-47 assault rifles or the more modern AK-74 Kalakovas.

"We do not regard an attack against a convoy successful, even if we destroy many trucks or tanks, unless we bring back supplies," Massoud explained. "A few weeks ago, we almost ran out of ammunition. But then we captured three truckloads along the Salang highway and now we have enough."

The presence of so much Russian equipment, some of which is not even issued to Afghan Government troops, indicates the extent to which the guerrillas have been able to hit the Soviet occupation forces.

"Moscow keeps accusing us of receiving outside aid," noted Ara Gul, a former Kabul policeman and a close aide
of Massoud. "But we have received almost nothing. We must really thank the Russians. They are the ones who are providing us with what we need."
AFGHAN OFFICIALS, SOVIETS AT BAY

Ruka, Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan—The prisoners—Afghan Government officials, teachers, students, officers, and the director of a large cement factory—are obediently lined up against the stone walls of the jail's inner courtyard.

As several armed guerrilla guards look on, the prisoners stare at the visitors with glum contempt, unease, or faces totally devoid of expression.

The prison commander is a bulky former Afghan army officer, polished pistol at his side, who has defected to the Mujahideen guerrillas. He fingers one of the inmates, a blue-jeaned engineering student, as a rancher might poke at a steer.

"We have a special Islamic court to judge people like this," he declares loudly. "Depending on their crimes, they may get four months' imprisonment, or a year, or we'll keep them until the communists are finally kicked out of our country. Then the people will decide what to do with them." A broad, toothless grin indicates what he expects their fate will be.

This stone prison tucked into a side valley of the Panjshir is one of many indications of the anti-government guerrillas'
hold on huge swaths of this rugged country—and of the demoralization of the pro-government forces.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Afghan resistance commands almost the entire countryside. True, the dull roar of a pair of Russian MIGs occasionally echoes over the mountains. Or a bearded Partisan points to a distant hilltop and says: “The Russians have a base up there, but they don’t dare come down here any more.”

But in most parts visited by this correspondent during a 700-mile trek through several Afghan provinces there is little sign of the Soviet presence. Rural life continues under guerrilla rule much as before the 1979 Soviet invasion, with farmers cultivating their fields and women performing traditional household chores.

Even in the towns, the Soviet and Afghan Government forces exercise only tenuous control. In contrast to the early stages of the Soviet occupation, for instance, when Russians could still openly amble through the streets of Kabul, life there also has become one of constant insecurity. While the city functions as a capital during the daytime, the resistance takes over at night.

Russian soldiers now patrol only in armored vehicles or in heavily armed groups. Both diplomats and Afghan residents report sporadic shooting almost every night. And Afghan communists live in well-justified fear of being assassinated or kidnapped by the Mujahideen (Muslim fighters).

“The communists know we can get them if we really want to; the atmosphere in Kabul has become one of nervousness and fear among party members,” says Haji Safert Mir, a former tourist office guide who recently left his job to
join the resistance here in the Panjshir. "Government officials rarely travel by bus between towns—if possible, only by plane."

Resistance sources also report a growing panic among communist officials that the Soviets might eventually pack up and leave. "There will then be nothing for them to do, but to go and live in the Soviet Union." Remarks one Mujahideen, Fiaz Muhammad Haji Panjshiri. "There will be no room for people like that in a new Afghanistan."

Russian convoys come under constant attack among the highways that link Afghanistan's major towns. In some areas, particularly in the northern provinces bordering the Soviet Union, supplies can be brought in only by air. The latest reports suggest that the partisans are beginning to redirect their strategy toward a more aggressive warfare against both towns and military bases.

Until now, the Soviets have tried to contain the resistance by seeking to control the main population centers and communications arteries, and by launching specific operations against heavy guerrilla concentrations. In the countryside, massive retaliatory raids against civilians believed to be actively supporting the resistance have also been part of their tactics.

In addition, according to the Afghans, Soviet helicopters still drop mines along the border areas as well as along the main caravan routes in order to terrorize inhabitants and discourage the resistance from trafficking supplies between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

On two occasions during his month-long trek this correspondent came across graphic reminders of this Soviet tactic, a cruel contrast to the apparent pastoral tranquility
of cows grazing in highland pastures or golden stalks of wheat billowing in the evening breeze. Shortly after the weapons-supply caravan which I accompanied crossed into Afghanistan, a young partisan stepped on a booby-trapped watch or compass—it could not be identified. The explosion blew off his left foot. Three days later, an 8-year-old boy in an isolated mountain village lost his hand while trying to pick up a plastic anti-personnel “Butterfly” mine lying along a goat track.

We reached the guerrillas’ Panjshir Valley jail by climbing a steep, rocky path weaving precipitously above the thundering waters of a mountain torrent. At a distance, it looks like a group of desolate farm shelters. Consisting of three solidly constructed stone and concrete buildings, the prison has been purposely tucked away in a narrow side valley to avoid detection from the air.

Although Afghan guerrilla groups elsewhere in the country are known to keep communist prisoners in makeshift jails, ranging from barricaded bombed-out houses to locked rooms in downtown Kabul, the Panjshir prison is thought to be the largest and most organized of its kind.

Captured Afghan communists used to be kept in guarded mountain caves in the resistance-controlled Panjshir Valley. Today this prison, built in July 1979, harbors some 80 inmates, the majority of them in their late teens and early 20’s. A limited number are allowed out during the daytime to collect firewood or work in the fields. The more important prisoners such as the cement factory director, who is also a senior official in the communist party, remain permanently confined.

Several communal rooms have been set aside for sleeping, eating, and cooking. The gravelled, tree-shaded yard,
barely larger than a basketball court, is used for fresh air and exercise.

Although this correspondent was not permitted to visit the living quarters, the interior of the prison appeared remarkably clean, much cleaner than the average Afghan farmhouse, and the prisoners well fed. Two Khalq (ruling People's Party) doctors captured two years ago, provide the prisoners with basic health care; they also run a small dispensary under resistance supervision in the Panjshir.

According to the guerrillas, a substantial number of the prisoners were captured during various rounds of fighting. Many of them were teachers and students conscripted by the Kabul Government. Normally, most captured recruits are questioned about their political affiliations and released within a few days if proven to be anti-communist. Party members, on the other hand, are retained.

"Captured senior officers tend to be party members," said Muhammed Yahya, a former veterinary student from Kabul University now in charge of political and Islamic instruction at the Mujahideen training school in the Panjshir Valley. "But most Afghan soldiers are quite simply miserable country peasants or schoolboys who have been forced into uniform by the communists. Often they have little choice and are pushed into battle with Russian guns pointing at their backs."

But some prisoners are also kidnap victims—members of the communist party seized by the Mujahideen and brought to this and other "jails."

There are estimated to be fewer than 5,000 communist party members in Afghanistan. Most of them have long since left their homes in the country for the rapidly
diminishing safety of Kabul and other towns. The resistance keeps close tabs on who is who and where. Constantly updated lists of communist collaborators are compiled by the guerrillas. Professional town photographers, for example, pass on duplicates of party members who have come to have their pictures taken.

Both Western diplomatic sources and resistance groups have reported a rise in assassinations and kidnappings in Kabul over the past few months. Between 20 and 30 communists are believed to be killed every week by various guerrilla groups. A similar number are kidnapped.

“We just go for the party members, not their families,” says Massoud, the guerrilla commander of the Panjshir Valley. “We don’t believe the family should suffer if they are not responsible.” Some communists are also assured survival by paying a “protection” tax to the resistance.

Russians captured by the partisans are rarely allowed to live. There are no Soviet prisoners in the Panjshir jail. But some guerrilla groups are rumored to be holding captured Soviet personnel.

Earlier this year, for instance, a shot-down Russian pilot was brought to Pakistan by the Younis Khalis faction of Hazb-i-Islami. Although photographs and super-8 movie footage were released to the news media to prove his existence, the Pakistani Government was concerned about possible embarrassment and he was never actually presented to the international press as had been originally intended. So great was the Pakistan pressure that the Afghans were forced to release the pilot within 10 days. He was eventually handed over discreetly to the Soviet authorities by the Pakistanis.
The knowledge that there is little hope of survival if captured is said to have had a severely detrimental effect on the morale of the Russian troops. Tales of brutal torture at the hands of the guerrillas apparently abound in Soviet camps. On the other hand, similar tales of communist torture are recounted among Afghan circles.

The Mujahideen report cases of injured Russian soldiers committing suicide or shooting each other rather than face bitter Afghan wrath. There are also reports of Soviet helicopters purposely machine-gunning or bombing encircled Russian soldiers who could not be rescued. The Geneva convention appears to hold little sway on either side in this ruthless guerrilla war.

Educated Afghan leaders are aware of the propaganda value of capturing Soviet soldiers alive. "But there is little we can do," remarks Massoud, who obviously finds the question of Russian prisoners of war purely academic. "Hatred for the Russians is just too great. Many Mujahideen have lost their families or homes through communist terror. Their first reaction when coming across a Russian is to kill him."

Numerous I.D. cards, letters, and photographs taken off the bodies of Russians soldiers attest to the increasing number of Soviet casualties. The smiling faces of young men clutching girlfriends, posing for family portraits, or horseplaying among fellow recruits are tragically reminiscent of innocent-looking American draftees in the Vietnam war.

Many observers now believe Moscow may have to decide whether to beef up its estimated 100,000 troops and directly confront the guerrillas on their own terrain or seek a diplomatic solution that will permit them to leave, if
possible, without losing face.

As things stand now, the guerrillas cannot hope to physically remove the Russians from Afghan soil. But neither can Moscow suppress what is to all intents and purposes, one of the most popularly supported anti-communist revolts of this century.
**VILLAGE IN EYE OF THE STORM**

Bazarak, Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan—In this tree-lined village halfway up the Panjshir Valley, the war seems far away.

Farmers thresh knee-deep mounds of ripened wheat with teams of plodding bullocks. Shawled young women, carefully concealing their dark beauty from passing strangers, harvest stalks of oats and barley in terraced fields. Shopkeepers offer baskets of fresh melons, grapes, and tomatoes in the village bazaar, while scampering schoolboys steal apples and peaches from irrigated roadside orchards.

“Last year the Russians destroyed much of our harvest through bombings,” said Massoud, the young resistance leader of the Panjshir Valley. “We only hope that we can gather enough food this year in case they attack again.”

The shattered remains of houses, mosques, and schools—as well as the twisted wrecks of Russian tanks and trucks—are grim reminders of the repeated communist onslaughts that swept through the Panjshir in the early days of the Soviet occupation. But the Afghans here have succeeded in establishing a surprisingly normal existence despite the constant threat of further attack.
Throughout this winding 70-mile-long valley hemmed in by the rising mountains of the lower Hindu Kush, the Panjshir’s estimated 80,000 primarily Tadjik inhabitants have demonstrated their determination to resist what they consider to be the “infidel” repression of the Soviet-backed Kabul regime.

Freshly plastered mud walls and brightly colored window frames of reconstructed houses emerge among the ruins. Strings of young boys sit in the shade of walnut trees reciting Koranic verse or scrawling arithmetic problems on black slates. (At least a dozen primary schools have recently reopened in the valley.)

At the French-operated hospital of the Paris-based Aide Medicale Internationale (A.M.I.), mothers are taught to provide their children with balanced diets in order to reduce the semi-malnutrition that pervades much of Afghanistan.

Despite the physical blockade of the Panjshir by a six-foot-high communist-built wall across the mouth of the valley, the Afghans here still manage to keep themselves replenished with goods from the outside world.

The local bazaar stalls sell not only locally grown produce ranging from eggs to beef and string beans, but also imported flashlights, cigarettes, chewing gum, biscuits, cotton fabrics, and even transistor radios. Other forms of basic commerce such as bicycle repair shops, shoemakers, and tailors continue to give the valley a sense of functioning normality.

A constant stream of horse and mule caravans as well as foot travelers and merchants trek the mountain path leading out of the valley to supply the Panjshiris with
goods from both Kabul and Pakistan.

Battered buses and repainted army trucks regularly ply the potholed dirt road that runs the length of the valley. In the event of an assault, local residents can mine the road effectively at short notice. Gasoline is taken from attacked Russian convoys and transported in canisters into the Panjshir.

Massoud, too, has a captured Russian jeep that serves as his command vehicle. The jeep enables him to keep in touch not only with villages up and down the Panjshir, but also with battle zones near the mouth of the valley.

Although he can no longer afford to engage in active combat, Massoud insists on visiting the “front” every few days to review conditions, talk to his men, and plan strategy. He considers it important to maintain close contact with the local population and regularly stops to chat with inhabitants along the way.

The ingenuity of the Afghan resistance to exploit whatever happens to be available cannot fail to impress. Heavy weapons from destroyed communist helicopters, armored personnel carriers, and tanks are immediately dismantled and carried back. They are then repaired and reoutfitted by local mechanics.

At one hidden Mujahideen base overlooking a narrow mountain gorge, this correspondent was shown a rocket pod from a downed helicopter. The local guerrilla commander, a former Afghan army officer, explained that although the resistance lacked the proper firing equipment, they could easily make do with a set of batteries and two connecting wires.
As for another more readily available Russian projectile fired from a special launching mechanism, the commander took a hammer and without ado struck it on its base. Despite the crude firing mechanism, a loud explosion among the rocks on the other side of the gorge attested to its efficiency.

Few inhabitants of the Panjshir Valley have sought refuge in Pakistan. But many live and work in overcrowded Kabul. A small minority, mainly government officials and intellectuals, left because their communist party affiliations made them vulnerable to reprisals if they stayed in the valley. Others went because bombardments had destroyed their homes. But the majority left to seek work.

"This is a major problem. The war has left many people unemployed," explained Mira Budin, a high school student now engaged as a volunteer male nurse at the AMI hospital. Educated at the French-language Lycee Istiqal in Kabul, he was forced to leave at the beginning of this year because of communist attempts to press-gang young men into the army even before they finished their Baccalaureates. "In my home village up to half the families or part of their families have gone," Mira says. Remittances are sent back to support relatives.

The war has disrupted the studies of many other students period. Mujahideen ranks in the Panjshir boast a large number of educated young men. The women are less visible, but this correspondent was assured that some are active in the resistance here.

Many students speak of their former teachers, some of them American or British, and dream of eventually returning to high school or university to continue their studies.
“But the tragedy is that this fighting could go on for years,” observed Muhammed Yahya, a veterinary student. “When peace comes, we will have a desperate need for trained and educated people.”

To a certain extent, the Panjshir Valley is run like a semi-autonomous state dominated by the Jamiat-i-Islami, one of the seven major Afghan resistance groups. The valley’s political ties with the Peshawar-based organization, however, are loose and undefined with much of the decision-making influenced by Massoud.

The resistance council in the Panjshir operates its own finance office to collect taxes, a cultural and propaganda office to deal with information, and a defense office to coordinate guerrilla activities.

Ironically, in a strong, traditional society that used to be governed by venerable tribal chiefs, feudal lords, or Mullahs, an increasing number of the guerrilla leaders are young, educated men like Masoud.

And a surprising number of the aging traditional leaders have shown themselves willing to accept and respect these guerrillas instead of the Marxist-inspired intellectuals and administrators of the Khalq (People’s Party) or Parcham (Banner Party) who tried to force their will on the country.

Not anyone can join the fighting Mujahideen. “We have to be selective,” Masoud says. “First, we have not got enough weapons. Second, we have to ensure that enough people are available to run the economy, the farms, and the administration. There is a role for everyone. But if it really comes to the crunch, then everyone will be ready to fight. During the last Russian offensives we had women firing guns at the enemy.”
Although the small handful of anti-aircraft guns that have been strategically placed around the valley's more heavily populated areas provide a greater sense of security than a year ago, the prospect of devastating Soviet bombardments remains a constant worry for the Resistance.

Every morning like clockwork during this correspondent's visit to the Panjshir, a pair of Russian MIG jets from an airbase to the north roared toward the Kabul plain, where Afghan guerrillas had been struggling to hold back the Soviet Union's fourth attempt to take the valley. But they flew high and the locals scarcely raised an eyebrow as they passed.

"If they dare come in, we'll shoot them down," proclaimed Haji Saddadim, a prominent Bazarak citizen, in a thundering voice.

Despite such open confidence, residents have hidden emergency caches of food and other supplies. They have built stone shelters and dug caves in the Panjshir's rugged side valleys. The French doctors have also made contingency plans to quickly evacuate patients and set up relief operations in the mountains.

What the resistance feared might happen appeared to materialize this month. Despite the failure of the most recent offensive, there were reportedly heavy bombardments in some parts and numerous Afghans were forced to seek refuge in the mountains. (After correspondent Girardet left the region, Soviet and Afghan forces briefly occupied Bazarak and the neighboring village of Ruka but were then forced to retreat, say diplomatic sources monitored by Reuters in New Delhi.)
But Islamic resistance fighters as well as local residents made clear to this correspondent their determination to persevere: "Even if they destroy everything we will keep on fighting, for we have something which the Russians have not got: Faith."
LIFELINES TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD

On the Afghan-Pakistan Frontier—The moon has just risen from behind the towering peaks of the Hindu Kush. Like a steady flow of quicksilver, the first ghostly figures of the caravan emerge from the darkness of the Pakistani village.

The 70 Mujahideen guerrillas carry newly acquired rifles: Their horses are laden with additional weapons, crates of ammunition, medication, food and other vital supplies.

A cool rush of air from a cascading torrent in the gorge briefly dispels the dry heat of the night as the guerrillas and their 50-horse caravan make their way along a dirt track. They are heading toward one of the 120-odd mountain passes along the 840-mile Pakistan border that leads into the resistance-controlled regions of Afghanistan.

To safeguard their secret supply routes, the Afghans have requested that its exact location not be revealed.

Two group of partisans form this particular caravan, one of dozens along this route during the snow-free summer months. Fifty men are returning to the Panjshir Valley armed with Russian-style Simonov rifles to fight against the Soviet-backed Kabul regime.
The others will stay with the caravan for several more days, then branch off to the north to join partisan units in Takhar and Badakshan provinces. Two French doctors and one nurse of the Paris-based Aide Medicale Internationale have also joined the 10-day trek to the Panjshir in order to continue running the valley’s only hospital.

The sieve-like Afghan-Pakistan frontier is almost impossible to control under present circumstances. With only an estimated 85,000 occupation troops, the Soviets are finding it hard enough to battle resistance groups in the rugged and often inhospitable desert terrain of Afghanistan. Attempting a physical blockade of border entry points would require a vast injection of manpower that Moscow seems unable or unwilling to commit for the moment.

Although the Russians continue to seed the frontier regions sporadically with “butterfly mines” and booby-trapped objects such as pencils or watches, this has had only a limited effect.

But communist displeasure at such unrestrained border leakage—ranging from fleeing refugees to resistance supply caravans and ordinary merchant traffic—has been expressed by military incursions into Pakistan. Overflights are almost too common to be reported. Helicopters have even pursued partisans several miles into Pakistani territory.

Border posts have also been attacked. Earlier this month, Afghan Government forces twice attacked Pakistani installations, first with Soviet MIG jet fighters and then with two armored vehicles and some 40 soldiers. Western diplomats regard these more recent incursions as Russian pressure on Pakistan to start talks with the Kabul authorities and to halt what Moscow considers to be active
support for the resistance movement. President Zia-ul-Haq, however, has repeated that his government would not enter negotiations with the Afghan regime until Soviet troops have fully withdrawn.

As for the Pakistanis, there is little they can hope to do to restrain border movement. With such a long, mountainous frontier, only the major passes have police posts. Resistance activity between the two countries can continue almost without restriction. Frontier guards are often all too pleased to shut both eyes in return for a greased palm.

Faced with enormous administrative difficulties in coping with the growing refugee population in Pakistan, the Islamabad Government is not keen on provoking unnecessary trouble among its more than 2 million Afghans. As long as the resistance remains discreet, the Pakistanis indicate they will not go out of their way to ease Soviet annoyance.

The Afghans, for example, are reluctant to disclose the exact origin of weapons brought in from Pakistan. “With money you can buy anything you want on the arms market,” shrugs Ara Gul, the caravan commander.

There is no way to establish whether the more than 50 Simonovs carried by the partisans in this convey were purchased in the weapons bazaars or came from Egypt with U.S. help. Nor could it be determined that the Soviet APU-2 antiaircraft gun, dismantled and loaded onto eight different horses, came from these sources or from China, where exact replicas have been produced.

For many resistance members inside Afghanistan, foreign assistance from the United States, China, or the Gulf countries is regarded as a joke. Even if outside aid is
seeping through, they complain, they do not see much of it.

The Peshawar political groups allow only a trickle to reach fighters inside. The rest is used either to reinforce the resistance under direct control of Peshawar or apparently to line the politicians’ own pockets.

For the outside observer, the Gulf between Afghans inside the country and those in Peshawar is striking. But for the moment, most resistance groups in the field are obliged to remain affiliated with the political organizations: They need both the limited assistance that does come through and a headquarters outside Afghanistan.

When asked how they perceive the political future of Afghanistan, if and when the communists are overthrown, guerrilla commanders in several Afghan provinces maintain that ultimate responsibility will lie with the political groups.

“Two years ago, a Loya Jirga (a traditional grand assembly) might have worked to create a new Afghanistan,” noted one commander. “But the war has changed this. A lot of local leaders have either gone, been killed, or are no longer in control of their areas. The political organizations of the resistance have taken over. But the ones who will decide will not be the leaders sitting in Peshawar, it will be those fighting here in the countryside.”

Although the resistance in the Panjshir Valley under the guerrilla leader, Massoud, retains ties with the Jamiat Islami, one of the Peshawar based groups, local loyalty and respect are the determining factors. Posters of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the overall Jamiat leader, can be seen everywhere, but the local population leaves no doubt that Massoud is the one who counts.
Apart from the Russians, one of the main concerns of Massoud and other guerrilla commanders is the possibility of civil war following a Soviet withdrawal. Although most of the major political organizations coordinate guerrilla activities in the field, the fundamentalist Hekmatyar Gulbaddin faction of the *Hezb-i-Islami* has repeatedly withheld its support.

There have also been violent clashes between the *Hezb* and its arch rival, *Jamiat Islami*. In the recent Panjshir offensive by Soviet and government forces, a force of *Hezb* guerrillas attacked *Jamiat* forces in the rear, forcing Massoud to cancel a planned counteroffensive.

Although the highly organized and publicity-conscious *Hezb*, which reportedly receives hefty support from some Arab countries, has strong support among the refugees in Pakistan, there are indications it is losing ground inside Afghanistan.

Two *Hezb* commanders and their men recently joined the *Jamiat*, saying they were in the resistance to fight Russians—not fellow Muslims. Local populations have complained bitterly about *Hezb* harassment and thievery as well as the levying of protection taxes. *Hezb* officials in Peshawar deny such accusations.

But observers feel the organization is holding back during anti-Soviet operations in order to eventually emerge with enough strength to take control of the country—if and when the communists are overthrown.

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