

No end to Afghan genocide in sight

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

As Moscow and Washington approach each other with smiles and warm handshakes, the question being asked in this part of the world is, "Who will clean up the superpower-created mess in Afghanistan?"

The answer is: no one. Despite the superpower global power-sharing agreements, or possibly because of them, the rate of killing in Afghanistan is expected to equal that when the Soviet army was busy annihilating the "revisionists" and "imperialist stooges."

The reason why this morbid and painful episode will continue is not difficult to comprehend. In Kabul, Afghan President Dr. Najibullah is armed to the teeth with Soviet-supplied sophisticated weapons, directing action from the bunker against a rag-tag army of the Mujahideen, as well as against some of his not-so-loyal fellow Marxists, while the Mujahideen, led by a group of fortune-seekers set up by the CIA and their fellow Pakistani covert operators as the representatives of the Afghan people, are a hapless lot.

The so-called nationalist Mujahideen leaders, based in Peshawar and who are too often traveling to Rawalpindi to express their gratitude and sincerity to a faction of Pakistani Army officials and politicians, are more interested in selling toothpaste smuggled in from London, lavatory bowls from China, stereos from Singapore, vodka from Russia, and freshly refined heroin in the bazaars of Peshawar, than in unseating Najibullah. This is not unexpected, since the war business has made some of these "national leaders" and some followers rich—a privilege they had never enjoyed before the war—and the money and guns have made them powerful amidst a sea of poor Afghan refugees.

All this has strengthened Najibullah's credibility as a potential winner, and the only way he can likely be removed now is by ambitious fellow Marxists who give him the traditional bullet-in-the forehead Afghan sendoff. Otherwise, it is unlikely that either Pakistan or Iran or Saudi Arabia, acting independently or in tandem, can remove Najibullah and put these or any other Mujahideen leaders into power in Kabul.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has been virtually reduced to occasionally praising the "valiant Mujahideen fighters" and demanding removal of Najibullah as the necessary first step on the illusory road to peace. But Bhutto has no maneuverability. Pakistan's economy is now in the hands of the International Monetary Fund, and President Bush, who espouses great affection for the Pakistani leader, is not out to help Bhutto in this area. Now that Bush is set to wipe

Afghanistan off his strategic map, Bhutto's opinions will have little weight.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov, who condemned the deployment of Soviet troops to Afghanistan in 1979 but who has shown no inclination to put a single Soviet general in the dock for a "wrongdoing" which killed more than 1 million Afghans and left 5 million others homeless, is assuring Bhutto that the Soviets would like to help Pakistan economically. He did not spell out the price for such help, but Bhutto knows it, and Najibullah is happy.

Regional powers jockey for position

Iran and Saudi Arabia have their own divergent Afghanistan policies. Iran wants the Shi'ite-Afghans, about 2 million of whom reside in northern Iran since the Soviets marched into Afghanistan, to control the southwestern and part of western Afghanistan. If a broad-based coalition government in Kabul becomes a reality, Iran would like to see the pro-Iran Shi'ite-Afghans strongly represented in the government. While Pakistan may not oppose the Iranian formulation, the Saudis find the design repulsive and oppose it. Najibullah and Moscow, on the other hand, will remain ambivalent so long as the Iranians do not demand that Najibullah be eliminated.

Saudi Arabia's plans are more muddled. Unlike Pakistan, Iran, and the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia is not contiguous to Afghanistan, and the Saudis do not expect to procure a piece of Afghanistan. But the House of Saud is known for its religious zeal to export "Wahabism" within the Islamic world. Saudi policy in the context of Afghanistan is more akin to dropping banana peels on the road so that others slip and fall. But the Saudis have friends in high places in the United States and Pakistan, and their money-based power is not inconsequential. Hence, Saudi involvement has resulted in furthering the quibbling and trouble.

India has perhaps been the least effective player in the search for an Afghan solution. Indian policy has been to back Najibullah. Ministry of External Affairs analysts argue that Najibullah is the "best" among the Afghans and a "true democrat" when compared to the Mujahideen leaders, who are nothing more than drug-runners and stooges of the Pakistani hawks. But hardly anyone believes this ministry's mistaken litany.

Indian policy towards Afghanistan is not guided by Moscow. But the Rajiv Gandhi administration wanted to see an Afghanistan free from Pakistani control. This thinking has dictated India's role so far, and unless the new government chooses to change policy, India's role will remain as nominal as before.

With a weak Pakistan depending on a disinterested United States and a quibbling Mujahideen, a designing Iran pushing its Shi'ite theocracy with an approving nod from Moscow, and Saudi Arabia and India interested more in their parochial issues, the killing in Afghanistan can only speed up.