

The tragedy of Tajikistan

The death toll and the number refugees is already near 1 million, and peace nowhere near at hand. By M. Babur.

"M. Babur" is the pen-name for one of Russia's most eminent orientalists, who has had over five decades experience in Central Asian affairs, including having been an adviser to numerous governments in Moscow in the past. EIR's own evaluation of the events in Tajikistan, which differs in many respects from his, will be published in future issues. His essay was dated Feb. 20. Subheads are EIR's.

None of the conflicts which have flared up on the outskirts of the former Soviet empire can compare in their scale and brutality with the Tajik tragedy. The conflict, which has been raging for three years, has finally entered the stage of a full-scale civil war, that has claimed the lives of 100,000 and turned another 800,000 into refugees, of which 100,000 have crossed the Amudar'ya [Oxus] River border and become hostages of another civil war waged in Afghanistan, particularly in its northern provinces bordering on Tajikistan. These, incidentally, are also populated by Tajiks. By comparison, in the Patriotic War of 1941-45, Tajik casualties were 60,000 people.

Tajiks belong to one of the most ancient ethnic groups in Central Asia. They are descendants of the inhabitants of the ancient countries of Bactria and Sogdiana, who, 2,500 years ago, professed Zoroastrianism. In the 8th century, they were conquered by the Arabs, and converted to Islam. Later, they became extremely devout Muslim Sunnites. They formed a small oasis of Persian language and culture amidst Turkic peoples and tribes. In the 15th century, Tajiks were incorporated into Tamburlane's Turkestan Empire, and in later epochs, what is now Tajikistan was divided between the Bukhara and Kokand Khanates, with their ruling Uzbek elites. In the late 1860s, after the conquest by Russia of Central Asia, Tajiks were partly incorporated into the Turkestan Territory, ruled by Russian governor-generals, with some portion of the Tajik population remaining in the Bukhara Khanate; the latter became a protectorate of the Russian Empire.

The borders between the Bukhara Khanate and the Turkestan Territory (in the Pamirs), on the one hand, and Afghanistan, on the other, were demarcated on the basis of the British-Russian agreements of 1872, 1873, and 1895. Tajikistan's southeasternmost part is separated from Azad

Kashmir, occupied by Pakistan, only by a narrow Wakhan strip.

The Turkestan Autonomous Republic, incorporated in the Russian Federation, was set up in Central Asia after the 1917 October Revolution. In 1924-29, after the Bukhara Khanate was eliminated, administrative national reforms were launched in Central Asia: First, the Uzbek and Turkmen Union Republics and later the Kazakh, Tajik, and Kirghiz Union Republics were set up there instead of the Turkestan Autonomous Republic and the Bukhara Khanate. For some time (1925-29), Tajikistan was an autonomous region of Uzbekistan, with Leninabad (now Khodzhen) as its capital, and in 1929, Tajikistan was proclaimed a Union Republic, with Dushanbe as the capital.

However, the Samarkand and Bukhara regions, with their indigenous Tajik population of 700,000, and their more advanced economy, were still incorporated into Uzbekistan. In 1989, Tajikistan's government once again made a futile attempt to prevail on the Soviet government for those regions to be "restored" to Tajikistan.

Projects postponed

At present, Tajikistan has an area of 143,000 square kilometers with a population of 5 million, including 2.3 million Tajiks. The Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region, with an area of 60,000 square kilometers, which proclaimed itself as the Pamir Badakhshan Republic in 1991, is part of Tajikistan. Mountainous ranges, rich in mineral deposits and potential hydro-energy resources, account for 93% of Tajikistan's territory.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan, like the other Soviet republics, proclaimed its sovereignty.

Its natural resources and advantageous geo-strategic position in close proximity to China, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have naturally evoked great interest both from western businessmen and those in neighboring countries. For instance, Pakistan offered to invest \$500 million to complete the construction of Central Asia's biggest Rogun hydropower station on the Vakhsh River; Pakistan is also a partner in the laying of the Karakorum railway which will run from Tajikistan to China, Pakistan, and on to the Indian Ocean.

Iran, for its part, also made important proposals for oil deliveries, humanitarian aid, and investments for the manufacturing industry. Iran is making use of its ethno-cultural contacts with Tajikistan, and under its influence the Tajik Supreme Soviet decided to switch to the Iranian version of the Arabic alphabet. The Teheran authorities also manifest great interest in the Tajik uranium concentration plant, the only one in Central Asia. In the past few years, U.S. companies also began to show interest in Tajikistan, which has one of the world's largest silver deposits and considerable potential reserves of oil and gas. Exploitation has already started in the most accessible gas fields.

However, with the Tajik conflict assuming the scale of civil war, all those plans and projects had to be postponed.

Tajik national democrats

In February 1990, Tajik national democrats made their appearance on the republic's political scene. Young people resolutely opposed the regime of Kakhor Makhkamov, then first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Tajikistan. In autumn 1991, political passions ran high in the republic, with residents of its very backward regions (the Pamirs, Garm, and Karategin) manifesting hectic activity: For many decades their population had been oppressed by the republican ruling elite, who came from Leninabad, with its relative material welfare. The struggle for power was started by the leaders of the Garm-Pamir clans under the banner of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan, against those of the Leninabad-Dushanbe clans united in a Popular Front, who ruled the roosts in the republic. Almost at the same time, the Islamic Revival Party was formed which leaned for support largely on the peasants of the Kurgan-Tyube border region, marked by its low level of economic development.

In May 1992, after a protracted period of struggle, the bloc of democrats and Islamists (something unprecedented in Oriental history) emerged victorious. Safarli Kendjayev, the actual leader of the Popular Front, had to flee from the capital in a tank of the 201st Russian motorized rifle division, which was carrying out peace-keeping functions in Tajikistan.

However, President Rakhmon Nabiyev, the front's formal leader, went on with his efforts to prevent a large-scale civil war, maneuvering between the coalition government, where the democrats and Islamists had played first fiddle since May 1992, and the Popular Front. The latter, with the help of weapons and other kinds of material assistance from Afghanistan and, secretly, from Uzbekistan, actively trained the units of its fighters and organized massacres of the peaceful population in the Kurgan-Tyube region, while making preparations to take revenge.

In September 1992, President Nabiyev was forced to resign. Attempts by the new leader, Akbarsho Iskandarov, to bring the opposing groups' leaders to the negotiating table,

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also proved futile. In October 1992, Kendjayev's units, which had received not only submachine guns, but also gun mounts and tanks from the Uzbek command in Termez, launched an attack on Dushanbe.

It was impossible in this situation to hold a session of the Tajik Supreme Soviet in besieged Dushanbe. All attempts at mediation by the leaders of other Central Asian republics proved fruitless.

A long criminal record

In November 1992, at the height of the civil war, with casualties running toward 60,000, Garm tightly besieged, all populated localities in the Kurgan-Tyube region devastated, and the republic hunger-stricken, the government of national reconciliation, i.e., the democrats and Islamists, had to resign. Emomali Rakhmonov was elected the Parliament's speaker and, consequently, head of the republic, at the Tajik Supreme Soviet session held in Khodzhen. At the same session, the newly elected speaker publicly applied to Sangak Safarov, commander of the Armed Forces of the Popular Front, for his blessing. Safarov, a chef by profession, has a total record of 23 years spent in prison for criminal offenses.

In December 1992, on Emomali Rakhmonov's orders, the Tajikistan government forces, with vigorous support from the units of Safarov and Kendjayev, found their way into Dushanbe. The Islamist fighters retreated eastwards, and entrenched themselves in the area of Kofirnikhon (former Ordzhonikidzeabad), 20 kilometers from Dushanbe. Kofirnikhon was turned into a springboard for a new offensive on the capital. On Dec. 14, 1992, the Islamist fighters, supported by units of the local narco-mafia bosses, launched an attack on the prison situated on the outskirts of Dushanbe, and set free several hundred of its inmates, sentenced for especially grave crimes. These people joined the Islamist

fighters' units, which started making wide use of guerrilla and subversion tactics, by attacking small units of the government forces and making raids on the capital's suburbs.

It was only late in December 1992, that the government forces of Tajikistan and the Popular Front units managed to recapture Kofirnikhon by employing armored vehicles and heavy artillery. The Islamist fighters' units had to retreat further eastward, where they took up fortified positions in the spurs of the Pamirs—in the Ramit Gorge (for more details see below)—and to Tajikistan's southern areas in the Khatlon border region, formed as a result of the merger of the Kurgan-Tyube and Kulyab regions.

In order to buttress the positions of the Popular Front and of Rakhmonov, President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan and the chairman of the Tajik Supreme Soviet signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation in Tashkent in January 1993. Meanwhile, refugees continue to flee Tajikistan, tens of thousands of skilled Russian professionals among them.

Afghan fighting affects Tajikistan

The civil war, raging with new force in Afghanistan, has a highly negative effect on attempts to reach a peaceful settlement in Tajikistan. In his struggle against President Rabbani of Afghanistan, Gulbeddin Hekmatyar, head of the Islamic Party of Afghanistan, not only launches attacks on Kabul, destroying entire blocks of housing there by long-range artillery fire, but also openly interferes in Tajikistan's affairs by giving all-round assistance to Islamist units in the Pamirs and in the republic's border regions.

By seeking to extend the scale of civil war in Tajikistan and prevent normalization of the situation in the republic, Hekmatyar hopes to deepen dissension not only in Tajikistan, but also in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, with 6 million Tajiks among the inhabitants. Hekmatyar, the fanatical leader of the Pushtun fundamentalists, fears the establishment of a united Tajik state on both banks of the Amudar'ya, the more so since for the first time in Afghanistan's history, Tajiks are at the helm in Kabul, for acting President Rabbani and influential Defense Minister Ahmad Shah Massud are also Tajiks. Moreover, by supporting Islamists in the Pamirs, Hekmatyar hopes to preserve and extend in every way unhindered drug traffic from the Pamirs and the Khatlon region to Afghanistan and thence to the West. Narcotics are his chief currency, for Tajik Islamists receive endless supplies of arms from Afghani fundamentalist leaders in exchange for narcotics.

According to documents seized by the Tajik command, secret contacts between the Tajik Islamists and Hekmatyar were established back in 1988. Not only arms and propaganda material for the jihad, but also experienced instructors for training Tajik "brothers" in modern warfare methods, subversion, etc., were sent from Afghanistan to Tajikistan. Special camps for training extremist Islamist fighters, recruited from among Tajik emigrés and refugees, have been set up in the Tabor and Konduz provinces of Afghanistan. In the past few

years more than 3,000 fighters have been trained in those camps; later they are sent back to Tajikistan in small groups.

Those camps and the neighboring areas are under the tight control of Amirlatif, one of Hekmatyar's most ruthless field commanders. After the Islamist fighters were driven from Kofirnikhon, they entrenched themselves, as we said above, in the Ramit Gorge, 80 kilometers from Dushanbe. The gorge has three lines of defenses; the mountainous road leading to it is blocked by snipers. The locality is mined and almost impassable for armored vehicles. Over 1,000 Islamist fighters are entrenched in the Ramit Gorge. All of them have been trained in the Afghan camps, and they are assisted by about 200 Afghan mujaheddin hand-picked by Hekmatyar. This personnel is constantly replaced, and arms and ammunition are supplied to them not only from Garm and other neighboring areas, but also directly from Amirlatif by helicopter.

A new offensive

Trustworthy information supplied by the Tajik Ministry of Defense indicates that, on Hekmatyar's orders, the Islamists are planning to launch a large-scale operation, "Retribution," immediately after Ramadan, i.e., March 21-23, with the aim of taking the area of Dushanbe in a pincers movement. In the east, from the Ramit Gorge, and in the south, from the Khatlon region, to provoke more bloodshed in the civil war. Intervention from the southern bank of the Pyandzh River is not to be excluded.

In preparing this operation, Hekmatyar and his allies hope to distract the attention of the Central Asian republics' leaders, primarily that of Uzbekistan, from the internal situation in Afghanistan, where a big offensive on Kabul is being prepared. The objective is to depose President Rabbani's transitional government, which has already established contacts with Uzbekistan's leadership.

Such is the inter-connection between the civil war in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, on the one hand, and the general politico-strategic situation in Central Asia and the Middle East, on the other.

Civil war has caused colossal damage to the people of Tajikistan. All kishlaks (villages), i.e., over 120,000 houses, have been either burned down or destroyed in the former Kurgan-Tyube region, and in a part of the Kulyab (now Khatlon) region. Over 80% of the industrial enterprises (100% in the south) have been destroyed in Tajikistan. As a result of the autumn 1992 military operations, only 100,000 tons of cotton, i.e., slightly over 14% of the total cotton harvest, were processed. The republic is in dire need of material assistance, food, and medicine. Otherwise, its population will be threatened by famine, epidemics of infectious diseases, and still greater social upheavals.

The republic's new leader, the Supreme Soviet Chairman Emomali Rakhmonov (it was decided not to elect a President, in order to forestall a new round of clan infighting over pow-

er) and Prime Minister Abdumalik Abdullodjanov, are firmly determined to carry out socio-economic reforms. They are adopting political measures, and at the same time consolidating central power, setting up a regular army and putting an end to the civil war. They are also taking vigorous steps to rehabilitate the national economy. At the meetings of the leaders of the Community of Independent States, held in Tashkent and Minsk in January 1993, the Russian Federation and the Central Asian republics pledged all-round support to them. Large supplies of food products, building materials, and consumer goods are being sent to Tajikistan. After some vacillation, a decision was also made to prolong the temporary stay in Tajikistan of the 201st motorized rifle division of the Russian Army, which has done much to curb the development of the civil war in Tajikistan.

However, the situation in the Pamirs and, especially, on the Tajik-Afghan border in the Pyandzh area, is still very tense. Although the authorities in Dushanbe have been informed about the preparations for Operation Retribution, and all necessary steps are being taken not only to localize but also to deal an excruciating blow at the Islamist fighters' units, in the spring of 1993, Tajikistan remains one of the most dangerous points of instability and Islamic fundamentalist activity—an arc of sorts, stretching from the Adriatic through Iraq, the Caucasus, Iran, Afghanistan, the Pamirs, and the Hindu Kush to the Himalayas.

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New Afghan accord may widen Central Asia war

by Dean Andromidas

Afghani mujahideen guerrilla leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has been named prime minister of a new Afghan government in an agreement brokered by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United States. Since the overthrow of the Soviet-backed government last year, Hekmatyar, bankrolled by both the CIA and Saudi Arabia, has conducted a bloody conflict against the government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani, that has left Kabul in a shambles and thousands of civilian casualties.

Observers fear that the new agreement could throw the current Central Asian arc of crisis into new convulsions, especially when seen in the context of regional developments in the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union, including Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and especially Tajikistan, which is currently in a civil war. The fact that the populations of these countries are all ethnically represented in neighboring Afghanistan has served to interconnect Afghanistan, and potentially the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, with developments in these countries.

According to various reports, Hekmatyar's well-armed and well-financed forces have been training and otherwise abetting insurgents inside the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan, as part of a strategy to set Tajiks against Tajiks and thereby weaken the relative influence, within Afghanistan, of ethnic Tajiks. Both Afghan Defense Minister Shah Ahmed Massoud and President Rabbani, Hekmatyar's leading opponents, are ethnic Tajiks, while Hekmatyar himself is a Push-tun, the ethnic group that has traditionally dominated Afghanistan.

For its part, Moscow is prepared to react to this by stepping up its brutal intervention within Tajikistan on behalf of the existing government, which is essentially the same species of regime as existed in the communist era. Russian troops have abandoned their "peacekeeping" role and are actively fighting in Tajikistan.

How the deal was brokered

Hekmatyar's ascendancy was the result of a deal negotiated by Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who invited both President Rabbani and Hekmatyar to Islamabad. Sharif was also helped by Prince Turki bin Faisal of Saudi Arabia and Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Allauddin Broujerdi, who were also on hand in Lahore. According to mujahideen