

Afghan blood still flows

A lot of very ferocious mujahedin have been busy investing Jalalabad for the past few weeks in what is becoming the biggest battle of the Afghan war. So far they have not had much success. Guerrilla fighters don't make good besiegers.

Jalalabad is a strategic city of 200,000 that controls the road between Pakistan and the Afghan capital, Kabul. It lies on a flat plain overlooked by high mountains and has a sizable airport. The seven-party Afghan resistance alliance wants to capture Jalalabad and move their government in exile into the city. Once this is done, it's likely that the mujahedin alliance will be recognized as the legitimate government of Afghanistan by most western and Moslem nations.

As long as the muj leadership stays in Pakistan, it can't win international recognition.

The Afghan communist regime in Kabul is just as determined to hold on to Jalalabad. Doing so would not only prevent the muj from implanting a rival government in Jalalabad, it would also tell the world — and wavering Afghans — that there's still a lot of fight left in the Kabul regime.

Two crack Afghan Army divisions, the 11th and the 9th, are defending Jalalabad. Backing them are about 2,000 communist militiamen and secret police units. These units are dug into deeply layered rings of defensive positions around the city, supported by artillery, air strikes and helicopter gunships.

The mujahedin have by now managed to drive the Afghan Army off of the mountain ridges ringing the Jalalabad plain. This process began last November when the muj threw the communists out of their mountain bastion at Torkhan — thanks, in part, to a rush shipment of Milan anti-tank missiles from friends in Western Europe. But even though the muj now control the high ground, Jalalabad sits many miles away from the mountains.

To get at the heavily defended city, the muj

ERIC MARGOLIS



have to move over flat, open ground and mine fields, where they are perfect targets for enemy guns and air strikes. Ground assaults by the muj against Jalalabad and its airfield have been repulsed with heavy casualties. So the muj have taken to pounding the city and airfield with Chinese and Egyptian artillery rockets, new Spanish 120 mm mortars and captured guns. Unfortunately, this cannonade is not going to produce a second Dienbienphu — at least not for a while. The garrison is holding and supplies continue to arrive in by air and road.

The defenders' morale is reported good and the muj have made many bad mistakes in their siege of Jalalabad. Attacks have been unco-ordinated, poorly planned and often unsupported by artillery. Liaison between the seven muj factions ranges from poor to nil.

Somehow, muj units to the west of Jalalabad have failed to cut the narrow highway linking the city to Kabul, so allowing the communists to keep their supply lines open. As soon as Jalalabad was invested, simultaneous attacks should have begun on the other key cities of Kandahar, Ghazni and Herat, forcing the communists to split their forces. But this was not done and limited attacks on Herat and Kandahar only began this week.

Clearly, rooting the Afghan Army out of its bunkers and trenches is going to be a long, bloody business. This is not what guerrilla armies are supposed to do. In fact, it now seems that unless communist morale collapses, the only way the muj will be able to take cities — including the prize, Kabul — is by starving them out. With Soviet arms and food arriving daily by air, this will be no easy matter.

To make matters worse, the Soviets and Afghan communists are making a great fuss, claiming that Pakistani troops are involved in the Jalalabad fighting. Advisers there are, but not regular army units. But the communists are using this false claim to suggest the war may widen. This is an obvious threat that India, a close Soviet ally, just might join the fray.

India has long — and shamefully — backed the Afghan communist regime. Now the Soviets are hinting that India might attack Pakistan in "retaliation" for Pakistani intervention in Afghanistan.

Westerners are being hoodwinked by bogus claims that India and the USSR merely want to prevent dangerous Moslem fundamentalists backed by Pakistan from taking over Afghanistan.

So while the Afghan Army defends its positions around Jalalabad, the Soviets are still hard at work trying to fashion a diplomatic settlement that will keep the Afghan communists in power.

If Jalalabad's defences begin to crack, it's possible Moscow could play its "India card." Peace, in Afghanistan, is not around the corner.

Punch



"I met him at the health club. I had no idea he was like this in street clothes."