

# Afghan pullout stalls

**M**OSCOW — For the past 10 days, Moscow has been swept by rumors the Soviets might halt their pullout from Afghanistan that was to have been completed by Feb. 15.

There is growing worry here among ordinary Soviet citizens that their boys might not be marching home after all from a nasty war that has little public support.

Yesterday these fears were sharpened by remarks made by the powerful Soviet first deputy foreign minister and current ambassador to Afghanistan, Yuli Vorontsov. He told reporters that because of the refusal of the Afghan resistance forces to join a Moscow-created coalition government, the Soviets might "not be able" to pull their remaining 55,000 troops out of Afghanistan.

Last April the Soviets committed themselves to a February pullout and said they didn't care what happened after that. Now their tune has changed. Moscow says it cannot leave a "political void" in Afghanistan. According to well-placed Soviet and Arab sources here, hard-core supporters of the hated Afghan communist regime in Kabul number about 120,000-200,000, including dependants and immediate relatives.

We just can't pull all of these people out of Afghanistan, say the Soviets, and certainly not in time to meet the February deadline.

At the same time, the Soviets are exerting maximum diplomatic pressure on Pakistan and the U.S. to undermine their vital support for the Afghan national resistance. Threats alternate with charm in this war of nerves — something the Soviets do very well.

Speaking of threats, I have heard persistent speculation here that Vorontsov has been chastised by the party leadership for having made public statements that were too blunt and menacing toward Pakistan.

Days before Pakistan's late leader, Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, was assassinated in a mysterious air crash, Vorontsov openly said Zia would be held "personally accountable" by the USSR for continu-

**ERIC  
MARGOLIS**



ing support to the Afghan resistance.

Apparently the Kremlin has belatedly decided it simply can't walk away from Afghanistan and allow the resistance to take over and massacre local communists. The Soviets are pushing hard for some sort of loose coalition that at least gives them a face-saving interval before it collapses. Or the Soviets may even be hoping to undermine and split apart the shaky resistance coalition. The result would be a weakened but still alive communist regime in Kabul.

If this plan does not work, my sources here tell me, the alternative may be partition of Afghanistan. The south and Kabul would be ceded to the resistance. Moscow would withdraw its remaining troops and Afghan communist supporters into the northern province of Afghanistan which borders the USSR and is both economically integrated into the Soviet Union and ethnically related to the peoples of Soviet Central Asia.

But Soviet sources still insist Moscow would prefer a total pullout, provided that a humiliating disaster does not ensue. But the Afghan resistance does not want to join a coalition in Kabul, and for good reason. Its leaders fully understand that doing so would allow the wily Soviets to split up the coalition and turn its members against one another. Still, they are under growing pressure from the U.S. and Pakistan to make some sort of deal with the Soviets.

Vorontsov's threat to halt the troop pullout must be seen as both a way of strong-arming the mujahedin into joining a coalition and as a means of alerting the world — as well as the Soviet people — that the Afghan intervention may not yet be over.

One possible way out of this mine field is being considered by the Soviet leadership, according to Soviet sources. They maintain that Moscow and Washington have entered into secret talks aimed at creating a totally new government in Kabul.

This would entail a coup by a senior military figure not overtly associated with the communists. The general or colonel would then become Afghanistan's neutralist, non-aligned strongman. His regime would be acceptable to both Washington and Moscow. More important, it would give the Soviets a face-saving way out of the Afghan mess.

Extremists on both the resistance side and among Afghan communists would thus be cut out of negotiations and a settlement.

It's an appealing idea, no doubt, to politicians in Moscow and Washington. But, so far, no candidate to become Afghanistan's Gen. Naguib has been found. Nor do the mujahedin, who have nearly won their war on the battlefield, appear eager to throw away their victory at the negotiating table.

**Punch**

