

ERIC MARGOLIS



Canada: Mouse among wolves

Dec. 25 will dawn in the cold mountains of Afghanistan like any other day.

Soviet helicopter gunships will rocket and strafe villages. Mines will maim Afghan children. Wells will be poisoned. "Anti-party elements" will be arrested by the secret police and put into refrigerators or tortured by electrical shocks.

While the West revels and feasts, Afghan freedom fighters subsist on bread and an occasional spoonful of rice. In the terrible cold and snows of the Hindu Kush mountains, Afghan mujahideen (guerrillas) wrap themselves in rags for scant warmth. Many do not have boots and must borrow them before going into battle.

Westerners shudder over the fate of Africa's hungry. Yet almost no one has spoken of the three million malnourished Afghan refugees shivering in tents just inside Pakistan. Nor of the 10 million people in war-ravaged Afghanistan, wracked by disease, famine and incredibly brutal Soviet bombings.

Very simply, very terribly, the Soviets have embarked on a systematic campaign to drive Afghan civilians out of the countryside into policed camps or to exile in Pakistan. The mujahideen are thus deprived of food and shelter.

Cluster bombs and carpet bombing, gas, rockets, mines and gunfire do this work. Whole villages are razed, livestock destroyed, people killed or maimed. There are no doctors, no medicine for one million injured Afghans. At least 500,000 civilians have been killed in recent years — Afghanistan has become a giant free-fire zone for the Red Army and air force.

Few Canadians have seen photos of children who have lost feet or hands after playing with Soviet booby-traps disguised as toys. Less have seen mountain warriors, suffering from TB and burns, trying to destroy Soviet tanks with bottles of gasoline.

Afghanistan's Marxist regime will not allow Western reporters to cover the war. Only a few journalists have cared to take the time or personal risk to accompany bands of guerrillas in the mountains. Without the eye of TV, this deadly struggle has become a shadow war, remote, forgotten, exotic.

Meanwhile, unobserved by the media, the Soviets pursue their campaign to relentlessly absorb Afghanistan, another Mongolia or Latvia in the making. Roads are driven southward, new air bases built within striking range of the Persian Gulf. Ten thousand Afghan children are sent to Russia for "Marxist education."

What has the West done? A trickle of American arms aid reaches the Afghan freedom fighters. Saudi Arabia and China help. Yet the poorly armed Afghans have no means of combating the deadly, armored Soviet helicopter gunships that are their nemesis.

Just enough small arms and aid are provided to keep the war going — but not enough to pose a real challenge to the Soviet occupiers. Pakistan, a poor nation, is left to feed and care for three million Afghan refugees. A few brave French doctors help the mujahideen.

Washington offers brave words of support but, in reality, appears content to merely inconvenience the Russians. The West is willing to fight to the last Afghan — but no more. Pakistan alone must face Russia and a hostile India.

Canada has given a pittance of aid to Afghan refugees; Ottawa has gently admonished the Soviets — and no more. We should expect better from a nation that cherishes freedom and human rights.

If our government will not take action, private citizens can show that we have not yet become a nation of smiling wimps. The social glitterati of our cities might take the time to found an Afghan relief charity. Our corporations could send medicine, food, clothing and money. Canada's enormous stockpiles of surplus food ought to be used to feed the Afghans.

Canadians should write to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and their MPs, demanding that our rich, free nation aid both Afghan refugees and the freedom fighters. If we do not have the courage to provide arms — particularly anti-aircraft missiles — then at least we can provision the Afghan fighters and give them medical aid.

It would be edifying to see our country take a stand for once. Why do we always have to be a timid mouse in a world full of wolves? Thirty years ago people respected Canadians as tough, no-nonsense people who could not be pushed around. Today, many see us as colorless do-gooders, the Swedes of North America.

The Afghans, after all, are fighting for us just as much as themselves. We cannot, in good conscience, ignore their tragic struggle. To continue doing so is shameful. Canadians make a great noise about having ignored the extermination of six million Jews. "Never again!" we say. Today, Afghanistan's people are being relentlessly exterminated — and we are doing nothing.

Last year, I brought two freedom fighters into Canada for a brief lecture tour. The department of external affairs was reluctant to give them a visa. I was told they might "make embarrassing remarks that would hurt our relations with Russia."

It is time to end this disgraceful silence.

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