

# Gorby's Asian nightmare

**"Allah Akbar! God is Great"** roared tens of thousands of Azeris in Baku these past few days as they defied the Red Army's occupation troops.

For the first time in recent memory, the ancient Moslem war cry was raised in the USSR. Soviet soldiers had heard it in Afghanistan. Now the anger of militant Islam has finally erupted among the Soviet Union's long-oppressed Moslems.

The non-communist popular front that runs Azerbaijan is demanding independence from the USSR. A small Azeri enclave on the Iranian border, Nakhichevan, actually proclaimed itself independent this week — the first segment of the mighty Soviet Union to actually secede. Throngs of Azeris tore down barbed wire barriers along the border with Iran in a move that was, at least for the Moslem world, every bit as dramatic and symbolic as the opening of the Berlin Wall.

Interestingly, the western media, which has lavished great attention on the Baltic independence movements, has tended to ignore the Azeris' drive for self-determination. Instead, attention has been focused on the bitter communal fighting between Azeris and Armenians.

When a seemingly reluctant Mikhail Gorbachev sent Soviet troops into Azerbaijan to crush the independence movement, the western media and governments gave him sympathetic support. Even the U.S. backed Moscow's intervention, saying it was necessary to stop ethnic violence and "pogroms" against Armenians.

In other words, the West simply bought Moscow's argument, hook, line and sinker, that Soviet troops in Azerbaijan were only "peacekeepers" — rather like the U.S. Marines in Beirut. But under the guise of peacekeeping, the Red Army and KGB are busy moving against Azeri nationalists. By banning western reporters from the region, Moscow was able to control the news and shape our view of the situation there.

If all this had happened in Latvia, there would

## Punch



**"Don't blame me!  
I just work in his PR department."**

## ERIC MARGOLIS



be a huge rumpus in the West. But the Azeris are Moslems, and Shia Moslems to boot. Both are dirty words in the West. The rights of Moslems are in a lower category than those of Christians or Jews. A point underlined by Moscow's whispering campaign that all Moslems who oppose Moscow — be they Azeris or Afghans — are dangerous fanatics . . . little ayatollahs in waiting.

Meanwhile, in Tehran, the Ayatollah Khomeini's successors have got their turbans into a twist over Azerbaijan — and it serves them right.

Readers of this column may recall a piece last summer about how Iran's new leader, Hashemi Rafsanjani, had made a secret deal with Moscow. Ayatollah Khomeini had always refused to recognize the 19th-century Soviet conquest of Moslem Central Asia. His successor, Rafsanjani, gave official Iranian recognition of Soviet rule and even visited Soviet Azerbaijan. Iran promised to stop stirring up Moslem passions in the USSR. For this, Tehran got Soviet arms and aid to help rebuild from the ravages of the long Gulf War with Iraq.

Azerbaijan is divided between the USSR and Iran. Iranian Azeris are now calling for Tehran to aid their brothers in the USSR. Some are even demanding a "Greater Azerbaijan." This thought gives the mullahs in Tehran the willies since Azerbaijan has long had strong separatist tendencies and chafed under Iranian rule.

But Iran styles itself as defender of the world's oppressed Moslems. To maintain his militant Islamic credentials, Rafsanjani must now figure out how to help Soviet Azeris without infuriating Moscow — which has just warned Iran not to get involved — while at the same time avoiding fuelling the fires of Azeri nationalism in Iran.

A sticky wicket, to say the least.

Azeris now join the rebellious Kurds who have been demanding a "Greater Kurdistan" carved out of Turkey, Iran and Iraq.

Back in Moscow, the Kremlin leadership is suddenly realizing that its artfully crafted West Asian policy is now threatening to unravel. A confrontation with Iran will ruin Moscow's patient diplomacy to draw Tehran into the Soviet orbit.

It will also certainly end Iran's secret sabotage campaign against the anti-communist mujahedin in Afghanistan — which was done in return for Soviet arms and cash.

And shooting down more Moslem Azeris could gravely set back Moscow's fast-warming relations with the Arab oil producers.

As previously noted here, trouble in Azerbaijan could also quickly spread to other regions of the Caucasus — a sort of Lebanon north — and to the 50 million or so Moslems in Soviet Central Asia. Azerbaijan is relatively well-off compared to the other Soviet Moslem republics.

One wrong step and the Kremlin could be hearing a lot more "Allah Akbars" thundering out of Central Asia.