

No glasnost for Afghanistan

For more than a year now, the Soviets have been talking about some sort of settlement that would end the bloody, eight-year-old war in Afghanistan. Moscow's peace offensive raised a lot of hopes in the West and has neatly distracted attention from the fact the war is intensifying rather than abating.

This summer, some of the most violent battles of the war took place. From April to late July, Afghan Mujahedin fought hand-to-hand with Soviet and Afghan communist troops in the ruins of the ancient caravan city of Kandahar. In Pakhtia province, powerful Soviet forces tried to block resistance supply lines from neighboring Pakistan, producing a series of savage clashes and heavy casualties for both sides. Along the Jalalabad-Kabul road, 5,000 Mujahedin fought in the largest pitched battle of the war.

Reports coming out of the war zones suggested that the Mujahedin were shooting down Soviet aircraft daily with their new, U.S.-supplied Stinger portable missiles. Few people were aware of more sober intelligence assessments that downplayed the kill rate of the Stingers. These missiles hurt the Soviets, to be sure, but they are having no decisive impact on the war.

The Soviets may have failed in their latest attempt to knock major Mujahedin groups out of the war. Yet they are making important progress in winning a strategic victory through attrition. Look at the statistics. Out of the pre-war Afghan population of 15 million, one million have been killed. Three and half million Afghans are now pitiful refugees in Pakistan and another million in Iran. Inside Afghanistan, there may be another million people driven from their homes. In other words,

It's possible to just dart across the border safely and have your picture taken, but to see the real war means a 20-day trek across the mountains. Soviet attack, cold, hunger, hepatitis and malaria are enough to discourage most journalists. Take, for example, our own CBC that has time and money to send teams to Mozambique or South Africa but none for the thousand times worse horrors of Afghanistan.

This terrible, forgotten war will not become a Soviet Vietnam, no matter how much we may wish it. "We know we cannot defeat the Soviet Union," a senior Mujahedin leader told me recently, "but each day we continue fighting is for us a victory." Fighting on out of raw courage, Islamic faith and the hope that the West will put enough pressure on the Soviets to force a withdrawal.

But now that Moscow and Washington are nearing an agreement on missiles and a summit, chances are slight that the U.S. will risk provoking Soviet anger by raising the issue of Afghanistan. Washington and Moscow may even make a secret deal to scale down their military support to the Afghan resistance and to Nicaragua.

Short of a miracle, it looks as if the terrible war in Afghanistan will drag on until a Carthaginian peace has been imposed on the countryside — or until there are no more Afghan men left to fight. It is almost impossible to imagine Moscow just pulling out and abandoning its local communist allies.

Instead, the Soviets will patiently continue turning Afghanistan into a desert while the world looks elsewhere and western delegations arrive in Moscow to celebrate glasnost.



Eric MARGOLIS

40% of the population has been killed or uprooted.

This huge displacement of people — the world's largest — is the product of systematic Soviet terror tactics. Unable to defeat the resistance in the field, the Soviets are trying to eradicate the civilian population on whom the Mujahedin depend for food and shelter. So villages are bombed, shelled and napalmed; flocks are machine-gunned; orchards cut down and wells poisoned.

As the rising tide of refugees shows, this scorched earth campaign is successful. Along the Pak-Afghan border I saw firsthand not only the human cost of this Mongol-like strategy but also learned that the Mujahedin are having serious logistical problems feeding their men in the field. Having to carry food for 20-30 days means limiting mobility, endurance and ammunition.

Many westerners are unaware of the gradual eradication of the Afghan people because there are so few journalists inside the country. Communist agents report the presence of western journalists before they cross the border. Once over, reporters and camera crews are hunted by special Soviet commando units. Any villages that shelter them are destroyed.