

# Comment

# One of Moscow's pots boils over

This has not been a good week for the People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen. In fact, no week is a good week in this wretched country whose only resources are rock, sand, scorpions and trigger-happy Marxists.

Democratic, socialist and peace-loving supporters of President al-Hassani have been lustily blasting away at democratic, even more socialist and peace-loving members of the faction supporting former president Ahmed Ismail. Downtown Aden, the leprous, fly-blown capital of this unhappy land, has been turned into a battlefield. Tanks, artillery and aircraft of both sides blast away at anything that moves.

This nasty, bloody brawl is quite fascinating for two reasons. First, it is going on in the only Mideastern state that has become a virtual Soviet colony. South Yemen — not to be confused with neighboring Yemen — has the only successful communist party in the region. In other Arab nations, even those close to Moscow like Syria or Libya, local communists are shot, jailed or kept under house arrest.

Arabs, who despise communists, are delighted to see South Yemen's savage Marxists mowing each other down.

Secondly, Moscow has a treaty of friendship and security with its South Yemeni vassal, equivalent to a formal defence alliance. The USSR has never allowed an ally so bound to slip from communist control. What will Moscow do if the uproar in South Yemen, a mixture of civil and tribal warfare, gets out of hand?

It may not be obvious to the West, but the bloodletting between South Yemen's Marxists, magnified by tribal rivalries and old feuds, is beginning to look very much



**ERIC MARGOLIS**

like Afghanistan in 1979. There, Marxist factions battled one another in the streets of Kabul until the exasperated Soviets sent in 120,000 troops, killed the Marxist president and put their own man into power.

Seven years later, Moscow is still fighting Muslim tribesmen. The prospect of this happening in South Yemen must give Moscow the willies.

The Soviets will try to hold onto South Yemen because it offers them a toehold on the oil-rich Arabian peninsula and two important naval bases on the Red and Arabian Seas. Just across the narrow mouth of the Red Sea lies Marxist Ethiopia, Moscow's most important African ally. From Aden the Soviets and Cubans have been spreading mischief into pro-western Saudi Arabia, Oman, Sudan and Somalia.

Moscow virtually snuck into this important piece of Arabian real estate after Britain abruptly dumped its Aden Protectorate in 1967, leaving it bankrupt and rent by tribal rivalries. Promising to pay the new nation's bills, the Soviets moved in and put their homegrown communists — all schooled in Moscow — into office.

No sooner than did Moscow's proteges take charge that, as in Afghanistan, they fell to killing their Marxist comrades.

Further complications: South Yemen and Yemen, usually at daggers drawn, share many of the same tribes. Heavily armed primitives from the north may be entering South Yemen's fray. If so, Saudi Arabia and Oman, right-wing allies of Yemen, could be drawn in — and behind them, their big brother, the U.S.

Meanwhile, it was with much delight that the many non-friends of Moscow observed thousands of Russians, Cubans, East Germans and Bulgarians fleeing in a most undignified manner from their war-torn socialist colony. That many fleeing Bolsheviks were saved by Her Majesty's yacht Britannia was not lost on the smiling British.

A chagrined Kremlin must now decide what to do next. If the Marxist stew in South Yemen returns to a low bubble, so much the good for Moscow. But if the South Yemeni comrades and their tribal backers in the hinterlands continue to run amok, the Soviets might — just might — be forced to fly in troops.

The picture of Soviet or Cuban troops fighting wild Yemeni mountain warriors will hardly please Afghanistan-weary Soviets. Even the British SAS still speak with admiration of the martial qualities of the Yemeni and Omani tribal warriors known as the Red Wolves of Radfan.

Odds are that Moscow will keep its grip on South Yemen; but the local Marxist wildmen will likely be calmed. But if Moscow fails, then keep an eye on this desolate patch of southern Arabia. It could just turn into a colossal headache for the Soviet Union.

We, meanwhile, may sit back and enjoy the spectacle of South Yemen's Marxist thugs slitting each other's comradely throats.