

The news from the front

Every week I receive battle reports from Afghanistan. Because much of the fighting is in remote mountain areas, most of these communiques are two months old by the time they reach me.

Still, they form a dramatic if fragmentary mosaic of the eight-year-old war that brings to life this terrible struggle.

"KUNAR PROVINCE — Commander Malik Zareen attacks nine enemy posts in Asmar. From Oct. 12-16, 96 communist militia troops, 18 senior officers, one doctor, and four Soviet advisers are killed. Two mujahedin (freedom fighters) were martyred and three of them wounded."

"PAKTIA PROVINCE — On Oct. 10 Soviet Kabul forces attacked the mujahedin base at Gurbaz. The mujahedin under the command of Sayed Noor Ahmad Shah retaliated. In the result, four Soviet troops were captured. Two mujahedin were martyred and 10 injured."

"BALKH PROVINCE — On Oct. 4 mujahedin attacked a Soviet convoy. Three tanks, six trucks, one jeep were set on fire. Six of our mujahedin brothers were injured and one of our commanders was martyred."

And so the reports go, an endless series of violent skirmishes, ambushes and battles in the icy winter mountains of Afghanistan. What the battle communiques do not tell is the suffering of the wounded who must be carried down from the mountains or be left to die.

Nor of the shattered villages whose inhabitants have been driven out by Soviet bombing and shell-fire.

Nor of the reprisal raids when Soviet or Afghan communist troops exterminate entire villages in retaliation for a mujahedin attack.

Over the past three weeks, one of the largest battles in the eight-year-old war has been taking place as Soviet and Afghan communist forces have fought to open the road from Ghazni to the besieged town of Khost. Soviet sources claim that 1,600 mujahedin have so far been killed and Khost finally relieved.

Afghan resistance spokesmen admit heavy losses but say they have inflicted more than 1,000 casualties on enemy forces and have trapped a battalion of Soviet paratroopers.

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The Soviet relief of Khost means little in a military sense since the mujahedin can simply melt away and again cut off Khost once the main Soviet force has retired. But it does have important symbolic value.

Why, ask many foreign observers, did Moscow launch such a large offensive at a time when it claims to be getting ready to pull its troops out of Afghanistan? And why at Khost, which lies hard on the Pakistani border and has been besieged since the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979?

Those who want to believe in Soviet good intentions maintain that the Russians, by relieving Khost, are trying to win one last, big victory. Once done, they will announce their duty has been fulfilled and withdraw.

I wish this rosy view was correct, but I'm afraid it's not. The relief of Khost appears to me to be sending two important messages.

First, to the Afghan resistance and the West: The mighty Soviet Union will not be ousted from Afghanistan by force of arms. The Red Army will never be defeated in the field, even if a million Russians must die to prove this religious dogma.

Second, to Pakistan: We are attacking Khost which is right on your border. Stop providing bases and support for the resistance and break your alliance with the West. The next Soviet attack could be inside Pakistan at Parachinar.

Pakistan has become the world's leading victim of terrorist attacks. This year, there have been scores of car bomb attacks and other explosions, shelling of border villages and intrusions by Soviet and Afghan forces. While the Soviets speak of peace and withdrawal, they are using almost everything short of outright invasion to terrorize Pakistan into either abandoning the mujahedin or at least forcing them into a cosmetic coalition regime on Soviet terms.

Most other nations would be swayed by such heavy pressure. The Afghans are not and have redoubled their attacks against the Soviet occupying forces. Neither is Pakistan, whose tough leader, Zia ul-Haq, has stood up to Moscow's worse threats and terror attacks. No wonder these peoples are called "the martial races."

So while the diplomats continue to talk about coalitions and withdrawal timetables, the battle reports keep coming in. They do not form a mosaic of impending peace—at least not so far. What they show is a tableau of a nation in arms against a ruthless invading power, one of the most one-sided and heroic struggles of the 20th century.

Somehow, Commander Malik Zareen and his men fighting in Kunar province have not yet heard of glasnost and detente.