

LETTER FROM KABUL BY MADELEINE POULIN



“The Afghans are like journalists ... they are not very disciplined.” In an offhand manner – it being strictly a formality – the Soviet official gives a warning. “It’s twenty-nine degrees in Kabul,” he says ...

“and the situation is dangerous. We cannot guarantee your safety. If you’re afraid, don’t go.” The trip to Kabul, for about a dozen of us, really begins in Moscow. We have to endure the derision which press attachés reserve for reporters. While we are only a stone’s throw from the Kremlin, it could just as well be Ottawa or Washington.

We arrive in Kabul in the early hours of the morning. At the last second the plane plunges toward the airport amidst a shower of tracer shells. A Japanese reporter explains to me that the tracers are white hot pieces of metal. Whatever they are, the objective is clear: to decoy any US-made heat-seeking Stinger missiles that the Mujahideen, lying in ambush in the mountains, might fire at us. Inside the cabin all is quiet, except for the engines and a melodious piece of music by Grieg – “Solvieg’s Song.” Once we are safely on the ground, the Japanese journalist gives the thumbs-up in a sign of victory.

The display of tracers and the ballet of Soviet helicopter gunships around each airplane paint an undeniable message in the sky over Kabul: the war is not over. The real originality of the accord signed in Geneva is that it was not accompanied by a ceasefire. And the irony of our presence is that some two hundred journalists have been invited to attend a sort of peace celebration. The occasion marks both the coming into effect of the international accords signed by Afghanistan, Pakistan, the US and the USSR; as well as the withdrawal of the Red Army. Moreover, everything will proceed as if the war were over. The Soviet Army will parade before us covered with flowers thrown by “grateful” Afghans. But for

the scene to be truly believable you have to plug your ears, because the Mujahideen have signed nothing at all and these strange celebrations are marked periodically by the explosions of rockets and booby-trapped trucks.

Exactly what is being celebrated here? If there is any unofficial happiness in the air, it stems from the relief of a proud and independent people seeing the backs of domineering and often scornful foreigners. And it is pre-

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cisely at this point that the situation becomes complicated for an outsider. “What’s that? You’re a party member and you’re happy to see the Soviets leave?” Even those closest to the regime want the Soviets to go. Then their attention will turn to defending Kabul against the Mujahideen. These same Afghans admit, in private, that calling on the Soviets for help in the first place was a mistake; just as Moscow now officially acknowledges that it was wrong to have intervened.

But who are these Afghan communists? They are engineers, technicians and educated people wishing for progress at any price – like the veterinarian who, having studied in and been enchanted by Hungary, was shocked on his return home by the state of underdevelopment of his country. In a nation where the life expectancy is thirty-eight years, the communists are physicians like Dr. Najibullah, current President of a regime the Americans predict will collapse very soon after the Soviet withdrawal.

Dr. Najibullah granted us an interview in a small room in the presidential palace. Tall, heavy-set, and sporting a mustache, the President, dressed in sports clothes, looks more like a young entrepreneur than a statesman. He says that one day the Afghan people will realize that the Soviet presence was beneficial. He does not deny that for a moment it is a political burden. He knows the Americans are predicting his rapid demise but believes that Kabul can survive if the Geneva accords, aimed at ending outside interference, are respected. But the accords are vague on the provision of arms to the Mujahideen by the Americans, a fact that clearly worries the President. He wants the time to effect a national

reconciliation, and has already invited all Afghans, including his enemies the Mujahideen, to join a coalition government. While he has already received some response from the unarmed opposition, the adversary that counts – the leaders of which are currently ensconced in Peshawar, Pakistan – continues to say no. The guerillas will keep on fighting until victory is achieved.

“They are driven by hate,” says Najibullah, “whereas we are willing to share power.” Would he resign if he thought it were helpful to national reconciliation? If the *Loya Jirgah*, the national assembly, asked him to step down, he would. But I wonder what this means in a country that appears to be ruled by a powerful secret police resembling the KGB, of which Najibullah was himself both founder and chief.

The Najibullah regime is still able to keep the “useful” thirty percent of Afghanistan under its control because the Mujahideen

have yet to advance beyond the guerilla stage militarily. Moreover, while they are brave, they are also divided. This naturally gives rise to questions as to what would become of Afghanistan after an eventual victory by Gulbuddin Heckmatyar, the most powerful of the Mujahideen leaders, who, although Sunnite rather than Shiite, in many ways resembles a young Khomeini. Not a reassuring prospect.

Friday at the mosque for prayers there are only men. I enter, head wrapped in a scarf, and draw only a few furtive glances. Afghans are courteous to foreigners. At the front of the mosque a man is speaking. At my side a venerable old French professor whispers a translation. The man at the front with the white beard is saying, “We don’t support the [communist] revolution.” Nor does he support the Mujahideen. He was one of them, in Pakistan. But, he says, they indulge in endless discussions and always end up where they started. Now that the Russians are leaving, the goal has been achieved and the opportunity for national reconciliation must be seized. That evening I saw him again at a reception given by Americans of Afghan descent. Sayed Abdoul Wakil Sadaquat left the country after the Communist coup in 1978. He believes that the bloodbath predicted by the Americans can be avoided and that national reconciliation is possible, but that Najibullah should resign.

Saturday finds us back aboard a Tupulov jet, once again enveloped in the same soft music of Grieg. This time it is an Afghan plane taking us not to Moscow, but to New Delhi. India, as a non-aligned Asian country, has problems, but works them out in its own way, according to democratic principles. So it is not impossible. □

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