



Statements and Speeches

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THE SOVIET OCCUPATION OF AFGHANISTAN

Statement by Stephen Lewis, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, to the Fortieth Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, November 12, 1985.

Mr. President. The reports of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) say it all. At regular intervals, these short documents cross the desks of the missions here in New York, setting out, in unemotional language, the chronicle of a ghastly war.

Each report — "Afghan Sitreps" they're called — up-dates the activities of the Red Cross in the border areas of Pakistan. Let me quote briefly from report number 40, issued in July of this year:

"During July, an exceptionally high level of military operations in Paktia Province (Afghanistan) resulted in the highest ever number of war-casualties evacuated through the ICRC/Pakistan Red Crescent Society first-aid mobile post in Miramshah to the surgical hospital in Peshawar... In addition to intense surgical activities, the orthopaedic and paraplegic centres were also very busy, and a high level of activity was recorded for all other ICRC programmes in favour of Afghan conflict victims."

Report number 41 issued in early September, showed no let-up in the fighting. Indeed, throughout the summer of 1985, the casualties mounted. In the words of the Red Cross: "The number of patients continued to increase during August, and over last weekend, emergency measures had to be taken to strengthen ICRC's medical facilities with the provision of additional personnel and equipment."

The report goes on:

"The two surgical teams in Peshawar, as well as the specialized medical staff made available by the National Societies of Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden had to cope with the highest number of admissions ever recorded at the hospital. For two weeks from the middle of August... the hospital... reached its maximum capacity with the evacuation of two tents in the hospital compound... It is not possible to further extend the capacity of the hospital and it is, therefore, necessary to establish an independent field hospital in Peshawar with the staff to run it, and to find additional staff for the existing surgical structure."

In the sorry human saga of invasion, depredation and tyranny, the numbers recorded in these reports seem relatively low. For example, in the little field hospital in Peshawar during the month of July, there were 199 war-wounded admitted, 478 surgical operations performed, and 962 patients otherwise treated. But you take those figures, and you multiply them by the network of field hospitals and mobile emergency stations in Pakistan and Iran, as well as the tens of thousands of casualties dealt with in Afghanistan itself; and you further multiply them by 12 months in the year, and by a war which has raged with unrelieved ferocity for almost six years, and then you note the constant references to

surgical, orthopaedic and paraplegic procedures, and you have, in the ICRC reports, the microcosm of a nation massacred and mutilated.

Over one million dead. An equal or greater number physically scarred by battle for life. Between one and two million uprooted, ravaged and homeless in their own land. Four to five million as wretched refugees in Pakistan and Iran. Is it any wonder that the Helsinki Watch Committee in its recent study of Afghanistan observed, with eviscerating simplicity, that "A whole nation is dying."

And for what reason? This immeasurable human tragedy is made even more appalling because it is so utterly, inexplicably pointless.

The entire world knows that the Soviets weren't invited in. The entire world knows that Afghanistan posed no threat — not even to Soviet secularism. Afghanistan was a middle-sized non-aligned power whose neutrality was never menacing. The entire world knows that the Soviet invasion and occupation weren't prompted by some startling geopolitical imperative of the moment; the circumstances of December 1979 were hardly sufficient to merit a diplomatic note, let alone an act of aggression and war.

Perhaps it is an expression of the ugly, age-long lust for territorial expansion — a Soviet version of *lebensraum*; perhaps it is some unfulfilled strategic design to reach a warm-water port; perhaps it is a deliberate policy, with as yet unstated objectives, to unsettle further that already destabilized region of the world; perhaps having intervened to install a puppet regime, ideological rigidity took over, and departure became impossible.

But whatever the rationale, explicit or conspiratorial — and not a word of it is believable in any event — the Soviet Union, in its war against the people of Afghanistan, has reverted to the ethics, the excesses, and the excrescences of Stalinism.

The Soviet Union, however, will not win. Russia has unleashed 115 000 troops, equipped with the most lethal and technological of modern conventional weaponry, but the people of Afghanistan cannot be subdued. No matter to what extent the Soviet high altitude saturation bombing and helicopter gunships decimate civilian populations, reduce whole communities to ashes, or turn the countryside to cinders, the Afghan *mujahideen* fight on.

After nearly six dreadful years, it is now clear that the Soviet Union cannot impose a military solution. It might wish to make of Afghanistan a subservient, vassal state, but it will not succeed. The words of the Secretary-General's report ring true: "Peace, and the degree of national reconciliation that it should entail to allow the Afghan people to decide their own future, cannot be attained by military means."

The only answer is a negotiated settlement which embraces the principles in the resolution before us, and reflects the views expressed in this debate by the overwhelming majority of member states of the General Assembly. It is an answer for which the Secretary-General, and his Special Representative have been nobly — at times, productively — striving. In that context, we more than welcome the pending third round of proximity talks.

But it all hangs on Soviet troop withdrawal. That is the *sine qua non*. Everyone understands it. If we are back here, same time, next year, it is solely because the Soviet Union continues to believe that nihilism is preferable to negotiation; that butchery is preferable to bargaining. It all raises a series of inescapable hypocrisies. Here we have a country, the Soviet Union, which regularly reminds this Assembly, during debates on regional conflicts, that resolutions, once passed, must be honoured. But this resolution, on the "Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security", is never honoured by the Soviet Union.

Here we have a country, the Soviet Union, which regularly — almost obsessively — lectures this Assembly on the right to self-determination of certain peoples. But self-determination, when applied to the people of Afghanistan, becomes a nullity. Here we have a country, the Soviet Union, which regularly denounces, in this Assembly, acts of territorial aggression, and proclaims, in this Assembly, the sanctity of territorial borders. But when it comes to Afghanistan, the aggression is naked, and the increasing cross-border violations of Pakistan's territorial integrity matters not at all. It's awfully useful to have a dialectic which is so infinitely malleable.

Here we have a country, the Soviet Union, which is forever reminding this Assembly of "gross and massive" violations of human rights. Yet before us is Afghanistan, where violations of human rights are not merely gross and massive, they are grotesque and universal. Nothing could convey it better than this excerpt from the Helsinki Watch report whose findings, incidentally, were largely confirmed by the Special Rapporteur of the UN Human Rights Commission. I quote:

"From our interviews, it soon became clear that just about every conceivable human rights violation is occurring in Afghanistan, and on an enormous scale. The crimes of indiscriminate warfare are combined with the worst excesses of unbridled state-sanctioned violence against civilians. The ruthless savagery in the countryside is matched by the subjection of a terrorized urban population to arbitrary arrest, torture, imprisonment and execution. Totalitarian controls are being imposed on institutions and the press. The universities and all other aspects of Afghan cultural life are being systematically 'Sovietized'."

Here we have a country, the Soviet Union, which worries, in the Assembly, about demands placed upon important agencies within the United Nations system. But directly because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, there has been created in Pakistan, the largest refugee population in the world, exacerbating significantly the crisis of resources within the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Were it not for the selfless response of the government of Pakistan, coupled with the extraordinary work of the UNHCR, we would have an ever greater disaster in Southwest Asia. None of that, however, seems to matter to the Soviet Union.

Above all, here we have a country, the Soviet Union, which regularly instructs this Assembly on the imperatives of peace. But this is a highly selective application of the principles of peace. It is meant for all the rest of us. It carefully omits Afghanistan.

As Canada said earlier, Afghanistan will not submit. The conflict may be taking an incredible toll, but there is no sign of subjugation. Karmal remains in power purely by force of Soviet arms. Hostility grows

internally. The government is at war with its own people. Indeed, despite the cruel and inhuman treatment which Russia inflicts on captured defectors and prisoners of war, there is increasing evidence, recently set out in a series of articles in the *New York Times*, of numbers of successful defections from the Soviet army to the ranks of the *mujahideen*. That's not surprising. Some Russian soldiers are bound to rebel against so perfidious a war; some will inevitably be attracted to the Afghan cause.

The Soviet Union would wish to draw the curtains of silence over Afghanistan. They wish they could wage their vengeful war in stealth and in private. They wish the war were never reported in the press. Even now, they attempt to staunch the flows of refugees so that word of military atrocities never reaches the outside world. They wish these debates never occurred. They wish the resolutions were never passed.

But it's up to this General Assembly, to keep the Afghan cause alive, and to make clear, repeatedly, the condemnation of the world. We must somehow persuade the Soviet Union that negotiation is the only route to world approval. The United States has suggested a regional initiative; it might well be worth pursuing. Anything is worth pursuing that brings the prospect of a settlement within the stated goals of this resolution.

When he spoke this morning, the Permanent Representative of the USSR made much of the benefactions bestowed upon the people of Afghanistan by Karmal of Kabul. "The campaign against illiteracy is being waged with success," he said. "After the victory of the revolution," he added, "over one million Afghans have learned to read and write."

After the victory of the revolution, over one million other Afghans have been slaughtered. In the choice between literacy and life, they would, as all the rest of us, have chosen life. But why must they make the choice? Why can they not have both? That is the question the Soviet Union refuses to answer.

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