

Foreign tinkering continues, as Afghan imbroglio reaches a new watershed

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

A temporary cease-fire between the Hizb-i-Islami, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the Kabul government under President Burhanuddin Rabbani, head of the Jamiat-e-Islami, was signed on Feb. 14 to facilitate negotiation of a permanent truce. From all accounts, the truce is a temporary one, and there are already reports of extensive looting being carried out during the truce period. Meanwhile, there are rumors that foreign commandos have landed in Pakistan, near the Afghanistan borders, with a specific mission to carry out selective assassinations of Mujahideen leaders.

The temporary truce came about following a Saudi Arabian-Pakistani initiative to assemble the Afghan Mujahideen leaders at the Saudi capital Riyadh to work out a negotiated peaceful settlement. Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul (ret.), former Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief and noted architect of the "Afghan Jihad" (holy war) against the invading Soviet Army and the pro-Soviet Communist regimes in Kabul, was in Kabul recently, ostensibly in order to invite the warring factions to Pakistan's capital Islamabad for preliminary talks. He was accompanied by some Arabs and Afghan war veterans, and met with President Rabbani.

Foreign commandos

While General Gul was in Kabul, the chief of Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, who is pro-Hekmatyar, alleged that 60-odd commandos had landed to liquidate Afghan Mujahideen leaders and sought clarification on the issue from Islamabad. Although Pakistan's new Chief of Army Staff Gen. Abdul Waheed Kakkar refuted the allegation, calling it "totally incorrect," the English-language daily *The News* has quoted a high-ranking Pakistani official saying that "the power-hungry Mujahideen leaders would not hesitate to eliminate their rivals in the game." There is no indication, however, that the official was referring to foreign commandos.

The "rumor" nonetheless received extensive coverage in the wake of a bomb explosion in Gardez, capital of Paktia province, on Feb. 12, which claimed the lives of the Paktia province governor and the Logar province deputy gover-

nor—both allies of President Rabbani. These were the first top Afghan Mujahideen leaders to be killed since the start of the 14-year-long resistance against the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. Meanwhile, Hekmatyar seconded the Jamaat allegation, and said that the foreign commandos are heading towards Charsyab, the headquarters of the Hizb-i-Islami.

Another news item which has raised observers' curiosity appeared in the Islamabad-based English daily *The Muslim* Feb. 6. The report said that American diplomats, including the ambassador, have begun extensive travelling throughout the length and breadth of Pakistan, visiting leaders of various political and religious parties. It was also pointed out that this was the first instance of its kind in Pakistan, where American diplomats were on an unannounced mission to meet with people at the political level from Khyber Pass in the north to Karachi in the south.

Whatever may be the motive behind these unannounced visits and rumors about foreign commandos, it hardly enhances Pakistan's credibility with the Afghan Mujahideen. Moreover, the situation in Kabul, as well as the northern part of Afghanistan, has come to such a pass that it would be naive to assume that the same old attempts at a "quick fix" by the same old outsiders has any future. Kabul has been undergoing intense rocket and mortar shelling since the beginning of the year when the controversial Shoora-e-Hal-O Aqd was held, which gave President Rabbani yet another two-year term. Afghanistan's capital has practically no fresh water or power supply available to its citizens, and food prices have soared to an unprecedented high, bringing foodstocks to a dangerously low level.

The Saudi initiative

The latest rush of peace efforts followed a five-point formula proposed by Saudi Arabia. The formula called for cessation of hostilities immediately, respect for Afghanistan's territorial integrity, discouragement of all moves to divide up the country, involvement of all parties in Afghanistan for a peaceful negotiated settlement and recognition of the composition of the Shoora-e-Hal-O Aqd, and formation of the Kabul government through

a process of consensus among the warring factions. Prince Fahd bin Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, governor of Tabuk, came to Pakistan with the proposal in mid-January. Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited Riyadh, and subsequently Pakistani Foreign Secretary M. Shahryar Khan went to Teheran to seek Iran's approval.

The Saudi initiative, which has been solidly backed by Pakistan, but so far had only won lukewarm support from Iran, was triggered by the fast-deteriorating and seemingly irreversible process unleashed in Kabul. Riyadh had earlier backed the Hizb-i-Islami to the hilt, when the Afghan Mujahideen were fighting the Soviets and Soviet-sponsored regimes in Kabul, but, of late, it has shown signs of uneasiness over the shifting stances of Hekmatyar. The sham of a Shoorā, in which only 1,350-odd Afghan leaders showed up and almost 25% of those present did not vote, gave President Rabbani the two-year term he was looking for. But, the process has drawn untold wrath from five of the nine major Sunni Afghan Mujahideen groups. Of the five, the most vocal and most militant is that of Hekmatyar. Hekmatyar has been shelling the Afghan capital incessantly, since then, killing thousands and turning the city into a rubble heap. The Kabul government, on the other hand, under a tenuous alliance of ethnic Uzbek and Tajik Afghans, has tried to isolate the Pushtoons completely, but has failed in this effort. What perhaps worries the Saudis most is the recently formed alliance between Hekmatyar and the Teheran-dictated Hizb-i-Wahadat, a group of Shia Mujahideen.

On the ground, the situation has evolved according to the worst fears of nationalist Afghans. Since the fall of the pro-Soviet Afghan President Dr. Najibullah almost eight months ago, Afghanistan has practically divided itself up into unaccounted parts. Small local rulers in the Pushtoon-dominated areas of the east and southeast are collecting taxes wherever they can, and are receiving financial and military help from outsiders. Despite all this, however, it is among the Pushtoons that some still aspire to keep Afghanistan undivided.

Unstable equations

The most intense pressure for the division of Afghanistan has come from the north, where Gen. Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek Afghan based in Mazar-e Sharif, controls a powerful and well-equipped militia. Having benefitted from his close association with former pro-Soviet communists, including former Afghan President Babrak Karmal, General Dostum began his political movement, Junbashe Milli, with the sole purpose of separating northern Afghanistan from the Pushtoon-dominated areas. He has threatened to topple the Kabul government if his movement is not given recognition. When Hekmatyar increased the pressure by stepping up rocket and mortar shelling into Kabul, President Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik, made General Dostum the deputy defense minister under Ahmed Shah Massoud, President Rabbani's strong-

man in the Jamiat-e-Islami and a fellow Tajik-Afghan. It was evident that if General Dostum had joined Hekmatyar, or made himself unavailable to defend Kabul, the Kabul government would collapse.

But, the Tajik-Uzbek equation, which plays such a significant role in shaping policies in Afghanistan, is not a firm equation either. The influx of at least 60,000 pro-Iran Tajiks into Afghanistan, and Russia's deeper involvement in Tajikistan's internal affairs, may tilt the balance in the near future. It is evident, at least for now, that Teheran is quite content at the way things are shaping up. The cool reaction of Iran to the Saudi proposal is noteworthy even though there are indications that the Iranians are otherwise willing to improve their relations with Saudi Arabia.

Like Afghanistan, Pakistan has worked itself into a no-win situation. The long umbilical cord between the Jamaat of Pakistan and Hizb is under strain, and Islamabad has reasons to be concerned about it. At least three top Mujahideen leaders have accused Islamabad of allowing the Jamaat to interfere in Afghanistan's affairs through supplying arms and training to Mujahideens. Qazi Hussain Ahmed has himself noted that the Afghan jihad is over, and what is going on now is the fratricidal war. Hekmatyar's growing mistrust of Islamabad's future intention was made clear in January, when the Pakistani embassy staff had to leave Kabul under an intense rocket shelling by the Hizb.

But, it would also be naive to assume that pressures from outside, or even the five-point peace formula, will make any serious impact on the Mujahideen leaders. Iran, a potential Islamic ally of Pakistan, has made it clear on a number of occasions that it does not see eye to eye with Pakistan on the Afghan issue. Observers note that the Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani made it a point, while visiting Pakistan last September, to emphasize that Teheran abhors the power plan in Afghanistan. What he was referring to is Pakistan's continuing honeymoon with Hekmatyar. That Teheran's views on this have not changed was made clear by the ultra-radical daily *The Salam*, which said recently that Iran is in a position to play its role in Afghanistan. The daily also criticized Saudi Arabia for furthering U.S. interests. Iran had told Islamabad more than once that it was for the Afghans to decide whether President Najibullah should be associated with any power-sharing in Kabul after the end of Soviet occupation, but Islamabad adopted a contrary policy and worked through Hekmatyar to oust Najibullah.

Now, it is evident to the Saudis that the situation in Kabul is slipping through their fingers. Perhaps, it is for this reason why Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul, as the ISI chief and a staunch backer of Hekmatyar, has been sent to Kabul to convey to President Rabbani Pakistan's hardened stance against Hekmatyar. Maybe it is a simple ruse, and perhaps the ground is being laid for a new process to emerge—a process of elimination of Mujahideen leaders through assassins' bullets.