

Afghanistan: Is there light at the end of the tunnel?

by Susan Maitra

General Aslam Beg, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, told reporters in Islamabad Sept. 13 that there should be direct talks between the Afghan Mujahiddin and Kabul's Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) regime once the Soviet Union has persuaded Afghan leader Dr. Najibullah "and some others" to step down. Certain diplomatic moves were under way, he indicated, and those would soon bring "good news."

Afghanistan was only one of several burning topics candidly addressed by the Army Chief during the unprecedented two-and-one-half-hour meeting with the press. But, taken together with what Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto told Reuters several days later, Beg's forthright discussion of Afghanistan marks a new determination by the Pakistan government to take up the reins on Afghanistan and chart out an independent path.

Significantly, Pakistan's highest authorities chose to speak out at a time when the so-called Zahir Shah option was being blown into center stage by the Western media for the umpteenth time in the past ten years, following reports of a high-ranking American diplomat's meeting in Rome with the exiled monarch.

Benazir: 'AIG best framework'

On Sept. 19 Prime Minister Bhutto told Reuters that talk of the return of the deposed Afghan king was "premature," and reiterated Pakistan's support for the AIG (the Afghanistan Interim Government, the multi-party resistance front based in Pakistan), warts and all. "Some people feel that the AIG has perhaps not lived up to the exaggerated expectations that were held at the time of the Soviet withdrawal and are thinking of alternatives," Bhutto said. "But as far as we in Pakistan are concerned, that is premature and the AIG is the best framework with which to proceed for the time being. To talk of King Zahir Shah at this time would be a bit premature."

Prime Minister Bhutto's insistence on the primacy of the Interim Government as the political vehicle for a settlement—underscored by Mrs. Nusrat Bhutto's call for recognition of the body at the just-concluded Non-Aligned summit,

where the senior minister and mother of the prime minister represented Pakistan—is at the core of Pakistan's approach. Chaotic as it is, the AIG represents a large chunk of the Afghan political spectrum, of the eight million refugees created by the Soviet invasion. Any attempt to bypass it, or preempt it must fail.

The prime minister also told Reuters that her government was encouraging the AIG to broaden its base, including the mujahiddin based in Iran and local commanders in Afghanistan, to make public its internal and external policies, and to act cohesively, as a matter of urgency.

On Sept. 21 a Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman denied that a visa had been issued to Zahir Shah for a visit to Pakistan in October. "Zahir Shah has not approached us for a visa," the spokesman said. "We have no information on his travel plans."

A typical superpower 'solution'

According to one Pakistani analyst, the so-called Zahir Shah option is a typical superpower-initiated "solution" that has little to do with realities on the ground. The monarch, who is widely credited with having laid the groundwork for the Communists' takeover of Afghanistan in the first place, is rejected by a majority of the members of the Interim Government. Having declined to involve himself in the fight for Afghanistan all these years, Zahir Shah has little moral authority. Moreover, his longstanding ties to tribal groups in northern Pakistan and his related refusal to recognize the Durrand Line demarcating Afghanistan and Pakistan, must raise serious questions for Islamabad.

"If the Americans and Russians think they can put Zahir Shah back in there, and thereby 'fix' the Afghan situation, they are sorely deluded," stated one knowledgeable observer. Whether or not Zahir Shah emerges as *an element* in some kind of political settlement in Afghanistan is another question—that the exiled monarch is not himself "the solution" could hardly be more plain. Diplomats, it seems, are only now trying to elicit a statement of support for the AIG from Zahir Shah, apparently the first step in the scheme to implant him into the crisis! But given the disarray of the AIG, quite

apart from the general antipathy toward him, the old king himself may well decline to climb aboard.

Reportedly, Pakistani Foreign Minister Yaqub Khan has sounded out the Saudi princes on the matter, and, though it is officially denied, Pakistan Foreign Office leaks say Khan has had a talk with Zahir Shah as well. But as some commentators noted, the Saudis themselves are now openly questioning the capability of the AIG. Iran has already gone on record opposing the return of the king, charging it is a Western plot to create the impression that the Afghan resistance is now an Islamic government. Latest reports are that the Indian diplomats, among the Afghan monarch's promoters, are in Iran for talks with the Iran-based mujahiddin.

A realistic approach

The diplomatic flurry does represent a break from the ritual endorsement of "the military option"—a euphemism for the military overthrow of the Kabul regime—that has covered over a yawning policy vacuum for the past ten months. Arguably precious political capital has been lost in the meantime.

General Beg's unprecedented press meeting was clearly aimed, among other things, at retaking the political high ground. As such, it serves to put the Zahir Shah flap into perspective. "Let the people of Afghanistan determine their future destiny without any outside interference," is the way General Beg put it. "There is no point talking about the Zahir Shah option or any other option; it is for the Afghan people to decide their future, and if they want Zahir Shah or anyone else, that is their concern."

Beg's call for talks between the PDPA and the Mujahiddin is actually a call to restart the dialogue tentatively begun more than a year ago when the Kremlin's stated willingness to dump Najibullah led to two meetings between AIG and PDPA representatives, first in Saudi Arabia and then in Islamabad. Beg had a hand in pressing the Soviets into opening direct talks with the Mujahiddin at that time. From August 1988, when President Zia ul-Haq was killed, through the November elections that brought the PPP to power, it was General Beg, together with the then-caretaker President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, who was in charge of Afghanistan policy.

General Beg scored the Soviets' subsequent decision to continue backing Najib as "as bad a decision as the 1979 intervention in Afghanistan." Now, Beg told reporters, he had reason to believe the Soviets may again be willing to dump Najibullah in the interest of working out a political settlement.

Why? Ultimately, Beg insisted, the Kabul regime's position is untenable. Acknowledging that the Jalalabad attack was a mistake, precisely because with it the mujahiddin had abandoned their winning strategy of strangulation of the cities, Beg said that Kabul's "fortress strategy" could buy time. But he is convinced, he said, that it is ultimately a losing strategy. "A force that is denied space and has no room

to maneuver, has to ultimately lose," he said.

General Beg added that he had studied the Afghan problem intensely for the past eight years, and cited the final stages of the negotiations that produced the Geneva Accords as an example of how *not* to handle a problem. At the time, he said, the government, the Foreign Office, and the Army all seemed to be pulling in different directions.

A few imponderables

Welcome as it is, the Pakistani initiative is beset with imponderables. Whether the initiative enjoys the genuine support of the U.S. is moot. The sovereign interest of erstwhile allies has not counted for much in the face of superpower compulsions thus far. Washington's recent abrupt decision to channel military aid to the field commanders inside Afghanistan instead of through the AIG must have caused disquiet in Islamabad. According to one source, it provoked nightmares of a Vietnam-type process being unleashed in the Pakistan-Afghanistan theater.

There is little doubt, in any case, that the Washington-authored miscalculation as to the Najibullah regime's staying power, and the faulty assumptions about the level of Soviet aid to Kabul, following the pullout, have resulted in a serious loss of ground for the resistance. Pakistani commentators have scored the drift, arguing that bad American policy has held sway only by virtue of Pakistan's default.

The new initiative will test the claims of the Najibullah regime to political stability and viability, and the actual intentions of its Soviet backers as well. In the past several months the Kabul regime claims to have made agreements with several hundred local resistance commanders, ending their fighting and bringing them into the "National Reconciliation" process. Indian journalists fresh from Kabul report that everything is coming back to normal in major cities, universities and schools are open, and shops are doing brisk business. Some 400,000 refugees, Kabul claims, have already returned to their country. Dr. Najibullah, it is claimed, is the great peacemaker—in the words of Indian commentator Bhabani Sen Gupta, the one Afghan leader who can be negotiated with with confidence.

The recall of the Kremlin's "wunderkind," Yuri Vorontsov, the deputy foreign minister assigned as ambassador to Afghanistan during the critical Geneva Accord period, has been taken as another signal of Moscow's confidence in Dr. Najibullah. But that remains to be seen. It could as well mean that Moscow is shifting its priority in Afghanistan from defense of the Kabul government to elsewhere. Reorganization of the PDPA might require someone with different skills than those of the Count.

If Gen. Aslam Beg is right, perhaps the new ambassador to Afghanistan, B.N. Postohov, will be drawing less on his experience as ambassador to Denmark and more on his in-nings as the Soviet Communist Party's Komsomol organizer in the days ahead.