

Another coverup in Afghanistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

After almost a year of prevarication, President George Bush is now ready to wash his hands of Afghanistan. Judging from recent reports, Washington and Moscow are preparing to sign the much-touted "negative symmetry" accord, whereby both the United States and U.S.S.R. will formally agree to stop arming their respective clients. It is also reported that the signing will take place in the early part of this year, so as to remove yet another thorn irritating the Bush-Gorbachov embrace before their planned June summit.

Bush's decision to remove Afghanistan as an issue of mutual disagreement to make the summit a pleasant one became apparent when U.S. Assistant Secretary of State John Kelly visited Pakistan in October and aired such a prospect to Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Earlier, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), with committee staffer Peter Galbraith (a personal friend of Bhutto) in tow, visited Pakistan and urged the Bush administration to promote a "political settlement" of the Afghan problem. Pell, a Democrat, said on that occasion that the United States should seek an agreement on "negative symmetry" with the Soviet Union.

These two visits, along with on-and-off discussions with U.S. Ambassador Robert Oakley, gave Bhutto the proverbial "willies." She realized that a deal was in process, and President Bush was ready to forget Afghanistan so as to befriend Mikhail Gorbachov. Later, a few days before Bush crawled into the Soviet destroyer off Malta, Bhutto sent Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief Lt. Gen. Shamsur Rahman Kallou (ret.) to Washington to urge U.S. authorities to keep the resolution of Afghanistan on the agenda. That, it seems, fell on deaf ears. At Malta, according to reports, both sides recorded their differences over the role of the Najibullah regime in any future dispensation in Afghanistan. In plain language, it simply means that the war goes on, and another killing season for Afghanistan has been secured by the super-powers.

On Dec. 17, U.S. Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-N. Y.) came to Pakistan "to discuss subjects of mutual interest, both bilateral and international." More visitors from the United States are expected this month.

Implications of 'negative symmetry'

From a formal technical standpoint, there is nothing wrong with "negative symmetry," and it had real political

merit in an earlier day, before the travesty of the Geneva Accords. It will no doubt be welcomed by the unsuspecting. But its appeal hides highly disturbing realities—not the least of which is the implication for Pakistan, where 3 million refugees are a not inconsiderable political and economic burden. But there is more to it.

First, while Moscow was loading up the Kabul regime with massive shipments of arms, including sophisticated rockets and rocket launchers, the supply of U.S. weapons to the Afghan mujahideen—the rag-tag coalition that the Bush administration was allegedly backing to militarily dislodge the Moscow-supported Najibullah regime—remained suspended from February to August 1989! On Feb. 15 the Soviets finally withdrew from Afghanistan, it will be recalled, and the United States was telling all and sundry at that time that the mujahideen would overrun the Kabul regime within weeks. Never mind that the mujahideen were using single-barrel 122 mm rockets, the most sophisticated weapon in their armory, for attacks on Kabul. These rockets, experts agree, are unreliable. They often go wide of the mark, their launching system is relatively primitive, and they have no controlling device, the mujahideen claim.

Under the circumstances, one is compelled to wonder as to who benefited from the Bush administration claim that the Kabul regime would fall in no time. Besides the fact that that did not happen, those disarming claims, so to speak, only helped Kabul's Najibullah to procure more arms from Moscow and strengthen himself militarily and politically. The ruse also helped to further discredit the mujahideen and set them off against each other.

According to those in the know, the Bush administration's vociferous claim that the mujahideen would overrun the armed-to-the-teeth Kabul regime was so ridiculous that it had to be a big lie. It was widely appreciated that the Afghan Interim Government (AIG), set up by the late Pakistan President Zia ul-Haq's henchmen and a few CIA operatives, was a mere sham led by such little-known individuals as Yunus Khalis (one Afghan observer says of Khalis: "You could not even discover him with a microscope, if you searched for him in Afghanistan then [before the Soviet invasion]"), Burhanuddin Rabbani, Rasul Sayyaf (both were obscure professors before they became "leaders"), and Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, whose past is riddled with violence and misdeeds. Apart from the National Islamic Federation of Afghanistan (NIFA) leader Sayad Ahmed Gailani no one in the AIG was well known to the Afghans before Zia and Bush's men made them into "national leaders." Indeed, many educated Afghans and others, including this author, had said it would not be easy to defeat the Kabul regime with this Bush-Zia army known as the AIG.

More to the point, it was also known that the Kabul regime was at its weakest when the Soviets left on Feb. 15, and that Dr. Najibullah, in order to save this own neck, would have been ready to agree to a broad-based coalition

government in which the role of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) would be minor. These facts were known to educated Afghans and told to the Americans, but were given short shrift by the latter under the pretext that the Najibullah regime would be swiftly brought to its knees by the Bush-Zia army. The rest is history, and the Gorbachov-Vorontsov-Shevardnadze troika now tells President Bush that the only deal Washington will get is "negative symmetry."

Why the ruse?

When AIG President Sibghatullah Mojaddedi met with President Bush for 30 minutes in Washington Nov. 27, the U.S. President promised the Afghan leader continuing support to set up a broad-based government in Kabul. President Bush did *not* promise Mojaddedi that he would make the removal of Najibullah an issue with the Soviet Union. With this the last shred of doubt as to the nature of the Bush administration's Afghanistan policy ought to have vanished. The rah-rah "policy" of removing Najibullah militarily stands in direct contradiction to what the administration is and has been doing with its hands and feet, as confirmed by Bush to Mojaddedi.

More important perhaps, President Bush has left Prime Minister Bhutto in the lurch. To this day Bhutto insists that a broad-based coalition government in Kabul is only possible if Najibullah steps down.

This leaves us with the unanswered question: Why did Bush, who earlier had headed the CIA and certainly was not unaware of various CIA covert operations, want everyone to believe that the Sayyafs and Hikmatyars and Rabbanis and Khalis, without any arms supply from the United States, would make mincemeat of the well-trained and well-entrenched Kabul army? Is it because the Pakistani ISI and his own CIA sold him a dud? Or, was it done deliberately, in order to weaken the Afghan resistance in the quest for a cozy deal with Moscow, throwing the Afghans to the dogs and worse? One or both of these is certainly true; but there are most likely other reasons as well.

According to one Afghan intellectual, who spoke anonymously to a journalist writing for the Bombay-based *Economic and Political Weekly*, there was money in it. This source pointed out, for example, that Yunus Khalis had a small bicycle repair shop in Afghanistan before he left. "But now Khalis owns one of the largest automobile parts shops in the Saddar area of Peshawar. He also owns more than 50 flying motor coaches which run the route between Swat and Dir," he added.

It is now acknowledged that Afghanistan has become the single largest producer of opium—and opium means heroin, and heroin, to some, means money. The nexus between drugs, arms, money, and the CIA, among other covert operators, is slowly coming to light. Perhaps President Bush want to cut his losses before it bursts open in Afghanistan.

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