



The Gorbachev leadership seems anxious to disentangle itself from the Afghan war.

Ceasefire In The Balance

Nearly nine years after the advent of a Communist Party regime in Kabul, and over seven years since Soviet troops were sent in to prevent that regime from being overthrown by rightwing rebels, there is now some chance of a turning-point in the conflict. In early January, the leader of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), Najibullah, announced a ceasefire to come into effect on January 15; and on February 11 the indirect negotiations between Pakistan, the USSR and the PDPA regime are scheduled to reconvene, under UN auspices, in Geneva.

It was not the Soviet Union that initiated the current war in Afghanistan. This conflict has its roots in the attempts by reforming governments in Kabul to impose their policies upon the countryside. Such reform attempts had provoked revolts well before the 1978 advent of the PDPA to power, but it was in the months after April 1978 that rural resistance, inflamed by the arbitrary, and at times brutal, methods of the reformers, and further encouraged by Pakistan, China and the CIA, came to pervade most of the country. The

Soviet intervention of 1979 was designed both to restrain the PDPA and make it more cautious, and to hold off the rebels until the Kabul state could stand on its own feet.

UN-sponsored talks have been in train since 1982, and documents have been drawn up covering four aspects of a settlement: the return of refugees (up to 5m out of a total population of around 15m); the withdrawal of Soviet troops; guarantees of the 'non-aligned' status of Afghanistan; and an agreement by Pakistan and Afghanistan not to interfere in each other's internal affairs. Agreement is said to have been reached on all issues, including, most recently, on the means of monitoring the Soviet withdrawal, but the timetable for this last item still remains unclear. The Russians are now hinting that they may agree to pull out over three years.

A number of developments over the past few months have made the prospect of a settlement somewhat more likely. The most important is the changed situation within Afghanistan, where Soviet and Afghan government troops have scored greater successes on the battlefield,

and a significant number of guerrilla leaders have accepted local truces. External changes have also helped: the Gorbachev leadership is evidently much keener on a political settlement; the disarray of Washington's covert operations policy after Irangate has weakened US credibility; and Pakistan itself is being pressured from within to solve the problem before the 3-4m Afghan refugees become a major threat to domestic stability.

This Soviet pull-out will be conditional on Pakistan ending its support for the guerrillas. In other words, the Russians are not prepared to allow the PDPA regime to be overthrown. They favour 'national reconciliation'; the incorporation into the government of non-communist, nationalist, religious and tribal political forces, but this regime would still retain a PDPA core.

It remains to be seen if the West will accept this. A Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan is a real possibility, but only in return for an end to support for the guerrillas by Pakistan and its backers. •

Fred Halliday