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*Prime Minister
Quite an
interesting read.
CDD*

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF KABUL

The British Charge d'Affaires at Kabul to the Secretary
of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

SUMMARY

1. Impressions restricted to Kabul (paragraph 1).
2. Key to the city is the airport. Massive array of Soviet aircraft and constant activity, tinged with Afghan farce (paragraphs 2-3).
3. Town is an overgrown mud-village with a few modern buildings. Signs of creeping Sovietization. Many Afghan and Soviet soldiers: latter mix openly with the population. Economically Kabul is surprisingly alive and non-Communist (paragraphs 4-6).
4. The Afghans are divided between those in turbans and those in trousers. The regime is trying to be all things to all men, but the emphasis is on youth and women. The foreign community divided between the Russians (who rule Kabul) and the Western camp, which includes the Chinese and Pakistanis. British Embassy in good shape (paragraphs 7-8).
5. The war, mainly aerial, is all pervasive: helicopters pitted against mountains. No signs of a Soviet withdrawal or change of Government. Force is what matters, but the Russians may have to pay more (paragraphs 9-10).

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Kabul
12 September 1984

Sir,

1. My impressions are confined to Kabul, since I cannot travel more than 20 km outside and have not visited the country before.

2. The key to the city is now the airport which is therefore worth describing in some detail. Although high up (6,200 feet), it is situated in a hollow surrounded by much higher mountains. Contrary to the clear plateau air I had expected, there is a layer of sullen monsoon cloud. This accentuates the sensation of descending into an abyss. A break in the clouds reveals first a military camp with jeeps and scurrying soldiers, and then the shining steel rooves of the infamous (for its liquidations) Pol-i-Charkhi prison, designed like an eight-spoked wheel within a rectangle of high fortifications. For anyone who has read Tolkien's Lord of the Rings this must be the Land of Mordor.

3. After a sharp turn at the end of the valley, offering a rather pleasant interlude of green trees and golden threshing circles, the aerial hosts of Mordor appear drawn up beside the runway: at least 36 Antonov transport planes and perhaps 50 or 60 helicopters. The Russian aircraft are parked on proper aprons, the Afghan ones on packed stones. Tents and soldiers, lots of soldiers, are everywhere. The ads suggesting that Heathrow is the busiest airport in the world are clearly wrong. It must be Kabul. There is an Antonov landing only 500 yards behind us as we turn off the runway and our star-board wing nearly touches another Antonov impatiently waiting to go. Everyone is hurrying, even an Afghan on a bicycle. The radar is military, surprisingly still on a mobile base, although a permanent tower is being constructed nearby. We are nearly run over by a taxi-ing Tupolev. A Russian tries ineffectually to impose order on Afghan chaos by waving us away. I discover the airport has been attacked last night by Mujaheddin. The runway closes at 10 am for repairs. The aeroplane I came on does not get away on time and after a row, during which the Afghans suggest that it takes off over a steaming patch of asphalt, it has to abandon its passengers. The effect is of action, urgency and massed Russian force, with a small amount of Afghan farce.

4. The rest of Kabul is not so Mordor-ish, more an overgrown mud village with some Soviet-style modern blocks, notably in Mikrorayon ("small district" in Russian), a futuristic brown marble Soviet House of Culture, and an Afghanised Intercontinental Hotel on the skyline behind this Embassy. (It houses half a dozen foreign guests and sometimes a few Party "jeunesse doree" in the restaurant). New buildings under construction include a large Ministry of Communications and a Blood Bank. There are a few Communist billboards with red flags, notably one including a minaret and some rather small, official graffiti saying "Long Live the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan" or "Up with Afghan-Soviet Friendship": rather tentative given the long mud walls which could lend themselves to vast scrawls like in Tehran. (In one case, I have seen the word "Soviet" defaced.) Other signs of Sovietization include shop advertisements in Russian, clearly on the increase, a lorry saying "Xleb" (bread) on the back, and a new postbox with the word for "post" in large Cyrillic letters above a smaller sign in Persian.

5. Everywhere there are soldiers. They come in three sorts:

- (a) the rough Afghan conscripts in a mid-khaki uniform;
- (b) smarter, taller and thuggier Afghans in dark mud-coloured uniforms, sometimes with red flashes and always with automatic weapons, visible particularly outside important installations;
- (c) young, hot-looking Russians in light mustardy uniforms and distinctive well-brimmed and high-peaked bush hats: an incongruous mark of colonialism. They mix a lot with the locals in shops and surrounded by boys outside the military hospital, always being sold something.

Sometimes one sees the Russians with helmets and flak-aprons. Those on top of tanks or personnel carriers look more Siegfriedish, blond and not Central Asian. Officers one seldom sees, although there are lots of junior Afghan officers visible in smartly pressed uniforms and highly polished pointed shoes.

6. Economically, Kabul seems to be humming - not surprisingly with the population having gone up from about 500,000 in 1978 to 1.5 or even 2 million now. (The peasants still flock in, but infant mortality is one of the highest in the world - mainly from diarrhoea.) Although there is no electricity for most of the day, there are plenty of portable Japanese generators all over the pavement outside the richer shops and offices. The telephone works but the water and sewage situation is dicey. There is plenty of traffic though much of it is military often with Soviet plates,

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billboards attract some popular attention, unlike those of the Indian Embassy - are a well-knit group of surprisingly high calibre and morale, although the UNDP and UNICEF sport some oddballs mainly out for the money and with little to do. I should add that this Embassy seems in excellent shape both in material and, more important, human terms, thanks to my predecessor.

9. Although the town seems to work, you cannot forget the airport. Every day as I sit down to breakfast, two flies appear in the distance and buzz towards me: they are helicopters on early morning patrol. And there are always Antonovs sweeping over to the south to support the fighting near the Pakistani border: mainly twin-engined, sometimes four-engined. Every window I look out of in the Residence frames two helicopters. It is a war of helicopters versus mountains: the air against the ground.

10. So who is winning? In the early morning, the mountains, especially the high ones behind the immediate range of hills, give one renewed hope, as does the muezzin calling the faithful to dawn prayers when the curfew ends at 4.00 am. But in the evening, as the dark closes in and after or even before the curfew begins at 10 pm, the sight of flares floating down and the rumble of tanks and often of gunfire and rockets, makes one much less sure. This is paradoxical given that these are signs of continuing Mujaheddin resistance. But, as my predecessor said in his last quarterly report, there are few people in Kabul today who see any prospect of a Soviet withdrawal or a change in the Government and those who remain are becoming increasingly dispirited (Mr Garner's letter of 9 July 1984 to Mr Cleghorn, South Asia Department, FCO). Nothing I have yet seen or heard here suggests the opposite. Indeed it would be odd if the view from Kabul suggested anything else. Force is what seems to matter here, e.g. one of the national monuments is a tank and a list of soldiers' duties which I recently read on a scrap of paper which had floated over the compound wall from the typical Afghan rubbish heap on the other side, ended up: "If he does not salute, he will be hanged". Unless the flow of arms and training to Mujaheddin, especially in anti-aerial warfare, increases, the Russian genocide tactics seem likely to enable the trousers to grind down the turbans. But external factors (Moscow, the US elections, Pakistan and its elections, China, Iran) will clearly play an important role; and the Russians may have to pay more to those who are left: the Afghans, especially the crucial Pathans, love their gold even more than the proverbial Scotsman. Meanwhile Kabul remains a rather beautiful, but grim place.

11. I am copying this despatch to HM representatives at Moscow, Islamabad, New Delhi, Peking, Tehran, Washington, UKDEL NATO and UKMIS New York.

I am Sir
Yours faithfully

C D S Drace-Francis