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Afghanistan: Anti-Soviet Strike, Violence in Kabul

A general strike began in Kabul Feb. 21 in response to a Moslem rebel call to protest the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan. The walkout of shopkeepers, civil servants and laborers triggered street fighting between the civilians and rebels and Afghan and Soviet troops. At least 300 civilians and an undetermined number of Soviet and Afghan soldiers were reported killed. [See 1980 [Afghanistan: U.S. Arms Rebels](#)]

Although Kabul radio reported Feb. 27 that the capital had returned to normal, Western diplomats in New Delhi, India and rebel and independent sources in Pakistan said the strike was continuing.

The strike had spread to other major cities, including Herat, Kandahar and Jalalabad, and there was a sharp increase in fighting throughout the country between insurgents and Soviet and Afghan forces.

The outbreak of unrest prompted the Afghan government to impose martial law in Kabul Feb. 22, placing Afghan government rule in the hands of the Soviet military commander. Soviet and Afghan troops were put under a joint command.

The imposition of martial rule was reported by the Soviet news agency Tass, which said the government was attempting to put down a wave of "plundering and arson" by the insurgents and "foreign agents and mercenaries."

Another Tass dispatch said an American with ties to the Central Intelligence Agency had been arrested in Afghanistan along with 16 Pakistanis for antigovernment activity. It identified the American as Robert Lee. The U.S. State Department said it had no record of such a person in Afghanistan.

Tass quoted the Afghan Interior Ministry as saying that "foreign agents and mercenaries, English, American, Pakistani and Chinese stooges embarked on openly subversive and instigatory activities in Kabul, seeking to undermine the peace in the city."

Kabul radio Feb. 25 reported the arrest of six more alleged Pakistani infiltrators.

The Soviet press Feb. 24 reported widespread unrest in Afghanistan for the first time since Moscow's intervention. The Communist Party newspaper Pravda quoted the Afghan justice minister as saying that it was clear from the start of the demonstrations in Kabul that the unrest had been instigated by trained infiltrators from abroad. The report acknowledged the unrest had spread to Herat, Kandahar and Jalalabad.

As the general strike was launched in Kabul Feb. 21, thousands of Afghans took to the streets and rooftops of the city to shout protests against the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan.

Soviet helicopters and jet fighters buzzed Kabul Feb. 22-23 to discourage the continuing anti-Soviet demonstrations. The ensuing clashes compelled Soviet troops to replace some Afghan units Feb. 23 in enforcing martial law restrictions.

The U.S. State Department said Feb. 23 that it had received reports that the start of fighting in Kabul the previous day had left 150 Afghan civilians dead and 350 injured.

The State Department said Feb. 25 that most civil servants in Kabul had returned to their jobs but that the shopkeepers' strike was continuing.

In a crackdown, Afghan forces Feb. 26 carried out widespread arrests in Kabul of Shiite Moslems suspected of having instigated the anti-Soviet disturbances. The Shiites included members of the Hazara ethnic group, which made up 10% to 20% of Afghanistan's 15 million people. The Hazaras traditionally had faced social and religious discrimination at the hands of Afghanistan's dominating Pathan ethnic group, which was Sunni Moslem.

Traffic from Pakistan Halted

While the unrest in the Afghan capital escalated, **Afghan troops Feb. 23 closed off all traffic from Pakistan** for the first time since the Soviet invasion by sealing the 150-mile (240-kilometer) highway linking Kabul with Peshawar. All westbound traffic toward Kabul was stopped and turned back at an army roadblock about 30 miles (48 kilometers) east of the capital, according to Pakistani bus drivers who traveled the route daily.

The blocking of the Kabul-Peshawar highway came one day after reports that the Soviets were reinforcing their district garrisons in Afghanistan's three provinces bordering Pakistan. Western diplomats in Peshawar

and Islamabad said Feb. 22 that they believed the deployments were designed to close the mountainous frontier to infiltrating Afghan rebels and fleeing Afghan refugees. **The Soviet troop shift to the district garrisons in Paktia, Nangarhar and Kunar provinces was said to have started about Feb. 12.**

A U.S. official told a news briefing on the Afghan situation Feb. 21 that "nothing has gone right" for the Soviet military intervention. The Soviet troops appeared to have failed in their goal to take control of cities and major roads and airfields, bolster the existing Afghan forces and give backing to the Afghan government, the newsmen were told. The Afghan army was said to have virtually disintegrated as an effective fighting force and the government seemed to have failed to command a significant loyal following.

The U.S. officials added that Soviet soldiers could only travel in groups in towns for fear of assassination.

To effectively control Afghanistan and crush the Moslem rebellion, the U.S. officials said, the Soviets would have to bring in as many as 400,000 more troops.