

August 1988

Report from General Valentin Varennikov to Soviet Defense Minister Dmitri T. Yazov (Excerpt)

Citation:

"Report from General Valentin Varennikov to Soviet Defense Minister Dmitri T. Yazov (Excerpt)", August 1988, Wilson Center Digital Archive, A. A. Lyakhovskiy, *Plamya Afgana* (Flame of the Afghanistan Veteran) (Moscow: Iskon, 1999), pp. 450-52. Translated for CWIHP by Gary Goldberg.
<https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/117278>

Summary:

Varennikov reports on problems with the Afghan forces, including excessive demands for additional weapons and equipment and the unreliability of Afghan troops.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

REPORT FROM KABUL

(Secret)

to the USSR Minister of Defense

General of the Army Cde. D. T. Yazov

I report.

...Recently, especially in August of this year, among the Afghan leaders, mainly and including Najibullah, a tendency has been displayed toward possibly receiving as much material and other resources as possible from the Soviet Union and also forcing the Soviet military to use maximally the men and equipment of the 40th Army. In this regard the favorable solution of these problems does not cause a feeling of gratitude from the Afghan friends but on the contrary, induces them to still greater demands, even complaints...

And what is more, if the Afghan army, MGB, and MVD units displayed unreliability then Najibullah initially indirectly, and now even more directly, says that this is explained by insufficient assistance from the 40th Army. At the same time he is trying to reduce the negative aspects in the operations of Afghan army units.

Here are several examples of such operations.

1. Constant unfounded inquiries about additional deliveries of weapons and combat equipment for the RA armed forces. At the present time there only exists an objective need to increase deliveries of combat transport helicopters. It is necessary to note in this regard that the organization of the combat employment of helicopters remains extremely poor in spite of measures taken by Soviet advisers. This leads to an unjustifiably large number of losses (in just the last month the RA Air Force lost four fixed-wing aircraft and eight helicopters). As regards other types of weapons, there should not be issues here. On the contrary, it has been repeatedly reported to Najibullah that the available combat equipment and crew-served weapons are not completely employed since they are very badly supplied with specialists (from 20 to 40% of tanks, BMPs [infantry combat vehicles], BTRs [armored transport vehicles], field guns, and mortars do not have crews, and many vehicles do not even have drivers) and accordingly are not being used.

In varied form and constantly (for the third year) insistent desires are expressed that military draft work be improved...Only in this case can they can count on the maximum use of the potential which the army and the other branches of the armed forces already have through their own supply of technical equipment...

The Ministers of Internal Affairs and State Security are carefully concealing the situation of their troops, even their authorized strength; however, in these conditions it is known that the level of technical supply of the troops subordinate to them is normal (considering their possible missions) and there are even reserves of several kinds of weapons. For example, in the MGB arsenal alone there are 425 82-mm mortars.

As regards ammunition, Najibullah is carrying out a policy according to which there are to be no norms or procedures for expenditures; the phrase is simply used, "The enemy is shelling us but we are sticking to some kind of norms there". This incorrect judgment leads to irresponsibility in performing combat missions. The troops are, in general, shooting, but not at targets.

Such actions, in turn, will lead after the withdrawal of Soviet troops to the Afghan combat units not being in a condition, even minimally, to ensure the supply of troops with ammunition and fuel (right now the transport of the 40th Army has been put in operation for the needs of the Afghan army). It costs the military (the MO, MVD, and the MGB) nothing, with Najibullah's knowledge, for example, to consume a large amount of equipment, ammunition, fuel, and other material valuables at previous deployment areas when redeploying units from one point to another and while carrying out combat missions.

Examples: when withdrawing the 2nd Infantry Division from Panjshir in the 64th Infantry Regiment there were lost: four 76-mm guns, nine 82-mm mortars, two anti-aircraft machinegun mounts [ZPU], 1 heavy machinegun [DShK], and 180 assault rifles [AKM]; large reserves of material resources were thrown away by MVD and MGB battalions in Kunduz...

Many such examples could be given.

The Afghan leadership has constantly demanded additional deliveries of weapons, equipment, and ammunition, but does not show any frugality in this regard. It probably knows that any of their requests will be met by the Soviet side...

2. The attempt to gloss over the actual situation of the reliability of the troops of the RA armed forces. On 7-8 August Afghan troops abandoned the cities of Kunduz, Khanabad, and Taloqan.

The Khanabad garrison consisted of two MVD battalions and one MGB battalion and in Kunduz, three MGB battalions and two MVD battalions. The enemy, having one-third to one-fourth the forces, seized both population centers without a battle. During all this part of the garrisons went over to the enemy side right away and the rest were disarmed or fled to the area of the Kunduz airfield.

The Afghan leaders were initially indignant at the events. They remarked that all this was a surprise to them. Then they began to look for reasons to substantiate what had happened. Finally to an increasing degree they began to point out the bravery and courage of the combat units which had fled the cities without a defense.

On 18 August at a meeting of the Supreme High Command Najibullah stated that a majority of Afghan units which had participated in combat operations in the area of Khanabad and Kunduz had displayed heroism. I was forced to present a memo noting that the President had been deceived. Indeed, on 12 August I personally looked into the situation in detail which had developed when Kunduz and Khanabad had been abandoned on the scene. Even the leader of the combat operations, Lieutenant General Atsak, and member of the CC PDPA Politburo Karwal' sharply criticized the representatives of the former garrison which had been present at the meeting and the leaders of the province's Defense Council who had themselves displayed cowardice. Units of the garrison surrendered the city without a battle, had no wounded, not to mention killed. He noted that if these units subsequently comprise a Kunduz garrison then the disgrace which had already occurred would be repeated. In this situation the President was forced to change his opinion and partially replace the units of the Kunduz garrison, putting army subunits in them...

3. There are attempts in a number of cases to shift responsibility for failures to the Soviets. North of Kabul is the district of Shakardara. A surface-to-air missile battalion was deployed within this district.

The situation around the battalion with time developed not in its favor; therefore, in

July of this year it was proposed to withdraw the unit to a suburb of Kabul and thereby not create a conflict situation among the local population which is completely under the influence of the rebels.

However the proposal was not adopted. At the beginning of August the enemy blockaded the battalion. In connection with this they were forced to carry out massive strikes by artillery and aircraft (mainly Soviet) on all areas adjoining the battalion. Combat operations by Soviet troops were not envisioned since at this time they were supporting the withdrawal of troops of the 40th Army to Soviet territory in accordance with the approved schedule, and Afghan units of the Kabul garrison were occupied with battles in the provinces of Wardak and Logar along with other units of the 40th Army.

Having held out for four days, the personnel of the battalion threw away their weapons and combat equipment and fled. The enemy, exaggerating their victory, reported by radio to the leaders in Peshawar about their great success. This report was intercepted by an Afghan communications intelligence [unit] and reported to Najibullah, who stated harshly at a meeting of the RA Supreme High Command that "all this happened because the 40th Army did not use ammunition which would have more effectively destroyed the enemy." In connection with this I had to turn to the leadership of the Soviet Union so that it could give orders about the use of such ammunition; moreover, I said that here (in Shakardara) everything was wiped from the face of the Earth.

I explained to Najibullah that Soviet artillery had expended more than 9,000 shells and mortar shells on this area and 169 ground attack aviation sorties were conducted; any garrison could confidently hold out for months with such support. The battalion fled under pressure of rebel propaganda...

Analyzing both the above and the other actions of Najibullah one can conclude the increasingly tense situation in the country is making him less reliable.

At the same time a constant striving to solve all problems by military means is leading to a repetition of the mistakes of the past - to an aggravation, and not a rapprochement [in the relations] of the sides. The desire to hold on to all regions of the country by force and not seek a compromise with the opposition cannot lead to favorable results in Afghanistan in general, primarily including the regions where the situation is heating up: Kunduz, Takhar, and Bamian...

Varennikov

August 1988