

# **MY YEARS IN KABUL**

**1990-1992**

*Vijay K Nambiar*

First Published, 2018

Copyright © Indian Council of World Affairs.

ISBN : 978-93-83445-37-0

All rights are reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying recording, or otherwise, without first obtaining written permission of the copyright owner.

The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the author and his/her interpretation do not necessarily reflect the views of the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.

**Indian Council of World Affairs**

Sapru House, Barakhamba Road,

New Delhi-110 001, India

Tel. : +91-11-23317242, Fax: +91-11-23322710

[www.icwa.in](http://www.icwa.in)

## Contents

The Backdrop	3
Getting There	5
Growing Pressures	6
Mission and Diplomatic Environment	8
Crosswinds in 1991	14
April Nemesis and Descent into Chaos	21
Epilogue	37



# MY YEARS IN KABUL

1990-1992

Vijay K Nambiar<sup>1</sup>

*In a famous couplet, Allama Iqbal once described Afghanistan as the “heart” of the body made of the “dust and water” that comprises Asia. Whether Asia flourished or decayed, he said, depended on how the “heart” was treated, how it fared. Today, we live in a networked world, liberated from the boundaries of geography. But, for much of the past four decades, Asia and the world continued to pay a heavy price because that “heart” remained diseased. If the free flow of ideas, energy, connectivity and civilizational stability is to be resumed through this pathway in the future, it must happen through a revived and healthy Afghanistan.*

By August 1990, I had already spent the better part of two years in the East Asia Division of the Ministry of External Affairs during which time I had seen that division through the historic visit of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to China in December 1988. This was the stated reason why Foreign Secretary KPS Menon Jr. had asked me to return to headquarters from Algeria where I had been serving since end-1985. Rajiv Gandhi’s China visit was path-breaking and though not all the understandings from that visit were in the public domain, they helped change the basic tenor of our relations after more than a quarter century of deep suspicion and mistrust. Though a return visit by Chinese Premier Li Peng was scheduled for late 1990, I was not surprised when Foreign Secretary Muchkund Dubey hinted to me in mid-August that he

---

1 Vijay K Nambiar was posted as Ambassador in Kabul in October 1990. He also served as India’s Ambassador in Algiers, Kuala Lumpur, Beijing and Islamabad and as PR in New York. He was later Under Secretary-General at the United Nations and the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Myanmar.

was considering me for a fresh posting. What surprised me was his matter-of-fact assertion that he was considering me to replace Ambassador Hamid Ansari in Kabul. As Under Secretary in the mid-1970s, I had handled the Afghan trade dossier during my deputation in the Commerce Ministry. I was also familiar with the multilateral dimensions of the Afghanistan issue, having served in New York in 1981 under Ambassador Brajesh Mishra when the new government of Indira Gandhi had refused to vote with the majority in favour of the General Assembly resolution condemning the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. I had routinely drafted statements for our delegation at the UNGA as well as in NAM forums on this deeply divisive issue. But I had little direct involvement with the complexities and sub-texts of the ground situation in that part of the subcontinent. The only time I had visited Kabul was in 1975, on a Commerce Ministry trade mission headed by Director Amar Nath Varma.

Prior to my departure, I received routine briefings in the ministry and had some personal discussions with Ronen Sen, then Joint Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office. My meeting with Prime Minister V P Singh was perfunctory and provided me little guidance or strategic direction. Within India at the time, much of the political oxygen was used up addressing domestic pressures across the country. Despite its importance, Afghanistan attracted little attention within the top levels of the government. All ears at the PMO seemed to be trained towards the demands of the OBCs or "other backward classes" for reservations and affirmative action in the grant of government jobs and seats in educational institutions. The Prime Minister's decision to accept the recommendations of the Mandal Commission provoked major public indignation on the streets in Delhi as students and forward class constituencies took up protests creating a law and order situation in the capital as well as across northern India. Elsewhere, in Jammu and Kashmir, the uptick of militancy following the Rubaiya kidnaping exposed weaknesses within the ruling coalition and prompted even more strident anti-government outbursts across the Valley. Public institutions came under sustained attack and the security forces were finding it increasingly difficult to resist the temptation of

stronger reprisals. The unrest in the Northeast was also becoming chaotic. Internationally, Saddam Hussein's military advance into Kuwait and the outbreak of the Gulf War posed a big challenge to the Ministry of External Affairs of ensuring the secure and safe return of almost two million Indian workers from Kuwait and Iraq, who clamored for repatriation and compensation. Amidst these diverse preoccupations, it was not surprising that the fading VP Singh government was unable to give much attention to Afghanistan. With its demise, the interim Chandrasekhar government that succeeded was hardly able to fare any better.

## **The Backdrop**

Although the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan was completed by February 1989, its arms and economic assistance to the PDPA government in Kabul continued to flow for some time after the withdrawal. Not only had large stashes of the military material and supplies from their decade-long operation been left behind as the Soviet troops moved across the border, but an assured volume of Soviet assistance -- placed by some sources at roughly \$300 million per month -- served to prop up the socialist regime under President Najibullah. This may seem a relatively small amount, especially in comparison to the US assistance to Iraq of later years, but, at the time, the promise of such support was a critical boost to the government in Kabul. Apart from the weapons that some of the disintegrating regimes in Eastern Europe left behind or transferred to Afghanistan, there was little that the Kabul government could expect from the other erstwhile allies of the Soviet Union. Even the volume of assistance promised by Moscow seemed increasingly unlikely to be sustained, given the rapid deterioration of the USSR economy. For the immediate short term in 1990, however, the Najibullah government appeared confident of its ability to stay the course. Its air force, while dependent on Moscow for supply and maintenance was still operationally effective and the large stocks of Scud-B missiles, short-range missiles, tanks, and trucks provided critical protection to the capital. Over much of 1989, the Soviet Union had been

sending daily convoys of transport planes to Kabul setting up a significant air bridge effort to secure the capital.

It was also clear that Najib had to rely critically on the financial support of the Soviet Union to maintain his regular army and to retain the support of his presidential guard, as well as to ensure the loyalty of a motley number of militias, including the one led by the ethnic Uzbek leader, General Abdul Rashid Dostum. By a curious counter-intuitive logic, the withdrawal of Soviet troops had the effect of slackening the motivation of the mujahideen fighters even where their control of the countryside continued. Many of them began to seek ways to not so much fight the central government, as work out compromises with Kabul for a *modus vivendi*, to retain their local power against other local groups. In doing so, many rebel commanders had only reverted to the traditional pattern of behaviour towards the central government that characterised Afghan tribal history. Najib, on his part, proved quite adept at dealing with these groups, keeping them at bay, appealing to their tribal loyalties, buying out some and working local arrangements with others while ruthlessly eliminating many.

In August 1990, when he visited India, Najibullah seemed supremely confident he could cope with the immediate consequences of the Soviet withdrawal and retain control over the country in large part. Even though the mujahideen still controlled vast portions of the countryside, their effective control extended only over a small number of the provincial centres. Najib's India visit may have helped him gauge the extent of practical support he could expect from India especially to offset what he knew was an increasingly tenuous dependence upon the Soviet regime. But he would have also realized that no major additional support or practical comfort was likely to be forthcoming from the fading and distracted VP Singh government. The Prime Minister reiterated the traditional position of support for the preservation of Afghanistan's status as a sovereign, non-aligned and independent country. India was for a political settlement by the Afghans themselves without external intervention or interference, a settlement that took into account existing realities and the legitimate interests of all neighbours. At the Indian-Afghan Joint Commission held in June



that year at the foreign minister level, agreements were signed on cooperation in agriculture, commodity assistance, civil aviation, telecommunication and cultural exchanges apart from prevention of drug trafficking etc. These were not inconsiderable promises, given our own difficult straits. For Najib, however, considering the equivocations of the right-wing parties in India, the continuation of political support from India was, itself, very important.

## Getting There

After Algiers, Kabul was going to be my second ambassadorial assignment. Prior to my departure for Afghanistan, a pesky issue of financial irregularity and violation of the conduct rules by the then Cd'A in Kabul had resulted in his early recall to headquarters. This resulted in the then Director at the MEA desk, Bhadra Kumar being sent to Kabul for a few weeks to clean things up. Despite this, I arrived in Kabul early October 1990 to a well-motivated mission but one placed in a very hazardous security environment. As I entered the sandbagged residential premises, I was dumbstruck by an eight-foot deep crater in the garden caused by a mujahedeen rocket attack a few months before my arrival. The attack, intended elsewhere, had landed in the Indian residence. The blast effects of the explosion had taken out a considerable part of the main reception area of the residence and shattered many windows. The garden was also severely damaged, this garden, which was once reputed to have some of the finest rose bushes in all Kabul. Though the repair of the damage was completed within weeks, at least three more such blast attacks from mujahedeen bombardments occurred during the years of my own stay, twice in my absence from the residence and once when I was actually strolling in the garden. Many of these were essentially collateral damage inflicted by missiles and artillery that was targeted either at the Arq Palace or at points in the Wazir Akbar Khan area where senior Parcham leaders were located. Sometimes, they were just the result of indiscriminate artillery bombardment. On one occasion, I was rescued from shrapnel by the vigilance displayed by Bharat Singh Negi, my chef and *factotum* who lived and worked in the residence during the entire period of my stay in Kabul.

Receiving my credentials, President Najibullah was warm and cordial, assured me of complete and unrestricted access to his Office and spoke effusively of his strong ties with India and deep personal friendship with its leaders. His closest adviser and chef-de-cabinet Mohammad Ishaq Tokhi was equally welcoming. In their reception, the Foreign Office was less cordial but more correct. Foreign Minister Abdul Wakil came across as guarded and slightly officious. He said all the right things but it was others like Mohammad Kawyan who exuded more genuine warmth and friendship. Also friendly, informal and personally warm were many leading members of the Parcham faction of the PDPA, recently renamed as the Watan Party. I found leaders like Abdul Rahim Hatif, Mahmud Baryalai (no longer in detention) and Mrs Baryalai, Mohammad Mohtat, even Keshtmand, unaffectedly warm and welcoming. Also in Kabul to receive me were my old friends, Farid Zarif and his lovely wife Aliya, who were back in the capital after years of serving abroad. I was able to meet Prime Minister Khaliqyar only a little later, mainly because of his delicate health but his serene dignity and old worldly manners impressed me even though some of my diplomatic colleagues considered him a “cold fish.” I was able to make my formal calls within the severely restricted diplomatic corps soon enough as also visit other government leaders and institutions of interest to India like the IGICH whose Director, the amiable Dr. Salaam Jalali was also news anchor of the Pashto service on the local TV. It was notable that within about a year and half of my arrival as Ambassador in Kabul, by around March 1992, I was to become Dean of the diplomatic corps in Kabul, in which position I shouldered some onerous responsibilities during the tense and confounding events of April-October 1992.

### **Growing Pressures**

Meanwhile, in October 1990, the government suffered a major reverse when the Hizbe-Islami gained control over Tarin Kot, the capital of the central Afghanistan province of Urozgan. Government forces retaliated against attacks on Kabul by launching their own air and artillery strikes against Hizb positions in the

west and southeast of the city and taking out many of Hekmatyar's commanders in the eastern province of Nangarhar. Also, in the outskirts of Kabul, the government claimed it had knocked out large numbers of opposition forces and seized missiles and anti-personnel mines. The increasing threat to Kabul was clearly part of a pattern of threats put out by Hekmatyar, underlining that he was prepared to visit destruction on Kabul's civilian population in order to take control of it. This threat evidently had the support of his backers in Pakistan's intelligence agencies. While Pakistan's Cda in Kabul Fida Yunus downplayed such reports, there were widespread fears voiced by western and Turkish diplomatic sources of such an imminent opposition attack. On his part, Najib dismissed such reports as wild rumor-mongering and claimed that the government was capable of dispelling any attack. But, persistent reports trickled in of Kabul's defensive ring being breached by the opposition about 20 miles south of the city and of the closing of two major highways. It was only much later that we learnt that the ISI had been hatching precisely such a plan but that other mujahideen groups, especially Masood had been opposed to it. The US claimed that it was only under their pressure that Hekmatyar and the Pakistani government had agreed to temporarily abandon the plan<sup>2</sup>.

Of critical relevance to the Kabul regime were the swift moving political changes taking place in the USSR. The *perestroika* introduced with such promise and optimism by Gorbachev was now shading into deep depression and uncertainty. The widespread admiration the Soviet leader had enjoyed in the initial years of his assumption to power seemed to have been frittered away amidst the quandaries and confusions that festered within the senior political ranks as much as in the armed forces. Moscow's chokehold over the other republics was increasingly being questioned and, beginning with Yeltsin in the RSFR, the stage was being set for the disintegration of the USSR itself. But this had not happened. What we experienced at the time was only a vague confusion and uncertainty mired in glib talk. But, given the

---

2 See Peter Tomsen: *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers-2013*

subject dependence of the Afghan economy as well as its military machine on the Soviet Union, these developments were being watched with increasing desperation by Najib and his senior team in Kabul. Already, at Moscow's urging, after a Loya Jirga in May 1990, Najib tried to broaden the base of his renamed party (now the Watan or Homeland Party) and appointed outsiders to important positions within the government. Late in 1990, he set up a National Commission to clear Landmines and Unexploded Ordnance under the chairmanship of Khaliqyar. The President was already looking at ways to reach out to prominent opposition figures including advisers of the ex-King Zahir Shah for a political solution to the conflict. These efforts were routinely dismissed by the Peshawar opposition as signs of Najib's failing support within the country and brought only increased pressures on the central government. How long the lifeline from Moscow would remain extended was also anybody's guess as the political class within the Kremlin was itself divided on continuing support to the regime in Kabul. Thus far, even under the fraying leadership of Gorbachev, the lifeline continued to be extended by the Soviet army. In fact even where there were interruptions in the flow of convoys carrying food and other consumer goods caused by mujahideen attacks on the capital, they were supplemented by airlifts to provide assurance and comfort to the civilian population. However, such assurances were becoming rare.

### **Mission and Diplomatic Environment**

Despite the overall grim economic outlook, Kabul itself presented a somewhat upbeat spirit during the end of 1990 when I set out to meet with the small and dwindling Indian community there. I was invited to visit the Asa Mai temple as well as at least three Sikh gurdwaras in the city and welcomed enthusiastically by devotees at these places of worship whose simple hearts were warmed by the presence of the official representative of the mother country. On weekends, I was also able to join mission members on picnic trips to the Qargha Lake area, especially when children of the embassy staffers and others including those working in the UN came in over vacation periods or around Divali. Such picnic trips

offered release from the weeklong tense environment within the city but they also provided excitement, and occasionally even a hint of danger. It was not unusual, during the picnicking, for us to hear the whooshing sound of Sakhr or Scud missiles pounding distant localities but these seemed mostly missiles originating from government missile posts nearby. We soon learned to recognize the sounds produced by them as they passed, distinguishing the “outgoing” missiles from the “incoming” ones. Also during this period (around end-1990), I was also able, with some difficulty, to persuade the government to give me permission to make a quick trip to Jalalabad. This trip was mainly intended to visit the tomb of Badshah Khan at Shisham Bagh but also to visit leading members of the Indian community there to get an idea of the situation in this fragile part of the country. Though the government claimed that the security situation in Jalalabad had been stabilized, I was unable to spend more than around ten hours in the city and returned the same evening. Here as in Kabul, I was able to detect an almost “faux” sense of levity of spirit among the local people I met and saw around me. While, recognizably, some of this bravado was assumed, it was, however, the rugged determination behind this attitude that I found deeply inspiring. Even in their desperate situation, these rough and simple people seemed to persevere in their dour sense of optimism, and display a stubborn self-confidence and determination to survive that I found impossible not to admire.

Though the Indian mission like most others in Kabul was formally declared a non-family station, during most of the period of Najib’s presidency under my watch, family members were able to fly in frequently from Delhi especially during the summer vacations season and during major holidays like Diwali or Christmas. After the departure of Ambassador Ansari’s Deputy Head of Mission, the mission was denuded with myself and a First Secretary Ashok Kumar as the only Foreign Service Officers while the senior Farsi interpreter, Qureshi remained the acknowledged “sutradhar” across the major period of the Soviet occupation of Kabul and after. From the defence services side, I had the able support of Col Amar Singh, a highly motivated Armoured Corps

officer with good Army HQ experience, equipped with competent and meticulous subordinate staff, while from the Air HQ side too, Group Captain Bijoy Kumar Pande was to prove competent, motivated and imaginative in times of emergency. In the consular wing, while initially Yogesh Prasad with his affable manners had managed to build a wide set of contacts in the depleted diplomatic community, his contacts with official circles inside Kabul had remained somewhat limited. His successor Rishpal Singh was able to meet this limitation in a somewhat improved manner within a few months of his joining in early 1991. While Ashok Kumar was eager and willing to learn, it was clear that the heightened physical insecurity around the mission as well as the continuous bombardment of the city had impacted him deeply and affected especially his wife during her initial stay in the capital. It was soon to contribute to severe hypertension and a variety of post-traumatic stress syndrome symptoms, but these were neither officially diagnosed as such, nor resulted in his seeking early relief from his post. He carried on with quiet courage until it eventually became necessary for our staff to be repatriated after the climactic events of April 1992. Within a very short period of my arrival, however, I might claim that we were all able to function quite efficiently as a team and mesh in both with the diplomatic circle in Kabul as well as with the local population, besides officials of interest and concern to us.

The diplomatic circle in Afghanistan was a severely restricted one with less than 20 resident missions at best and several premises boarded and locked with just caretakers looking after them with no personnel of diplomatic status. Predictably the largest mission was that of the Soviet Union, consisting of several hundreds of staffers and technicians covering a vast complex on the road to the Darul Aman palace, but with only a handful of diplomatic officers, the most visible ones being Ambassador Boris Pastukhov and his Minister-Counsellor Zamir Kabulov (a well informed and highly competent professional who spent long years in the area, circulating between Kabul and Islamabad.) My meetings with Ambassador Pastukhov were regular but somewhat formal about once every two months and covered a tour d'horizon

which revealed little more than what I had already known or learned about from the normal diplomatic backchat in Kabul. Zamir was more informative and open, even cynical sometimes of the capacity of the government to survive the dictation from Moscow. Understandably, these were most difficult times for Soviet diplomats and they could not be expected to be very confiding in respect of the challenges Kabul was facing during that fragile transitional period between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of the new Russian Republic as well as of the Confederation of Independent States (CIS). Of the other major Warsaw Pact missions that continued to function in Kabul, the only prominent ones were those of Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland. With the US and the UK embassies closed down, the premises were handed over into the charge of local overseers, one of them being Paul Matthew an affable and resourceful old Malayali-Christian gentleman with long association with Ariana Airlines, whose wife Rose who ran the British Council library. Of the other few western missions mainly represented at Cd'A level, those of France and Italy were quite active, with the affable and conscientious David Lockwood, Resident Coordinator of the UN also seen often in their company. For West Germany, a middle-aged German lady helped keep the mission property in repair and circulated somewhat freely within the diplomatic community but her status as a diplomat seemed dubious. Of the others, in varying orders of prominence, visibility or alacrity in pro-active diplomatic outreach were the Heads of Missions of Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, China and Indonesia. With most of these I was able to maintain close and constant contact and a good degree of informality. The Pakistani Cd'A, Fida Yunus, a distinguished and taciturn Pashtun diplomat, reportedly from the Special Branch, was unfailingly polite and generous in his manner but stolid and unrevealing of anything substantive especially towards me. Much of the information about the Pakistani reaction or response to immediate issues I was able to retrieve from the Turkish Chargé, Aykut Cetirge, who was genial, informative and readily forthcoming in his observations. My contacts with him were to prove especially useful in later months when his deputy Avni Bortsali moved on to take a position in the UN Office in the team of Benon Sevan. Though I knew

Benon personally and was in close touch with him, having this additional connect with the UN team proved quite useful during the critical period after 16 April 1992. With Indonesia, we were close neighbours, since their residence was next door to the Indian mission in Shahr e Nau. Their Chargé Havid was also a regular partner in tennis at the residence. The Chinese were generally low-key with few direct insights or comments. Though well grounded in Dari and Pashto, they received much of their information and analysis from the Pakistanis and locals than from the diplomatic grapevine. My own leverage with the Chinese was strengthened as a result of some serious “technical” assistance I was able to offer to them. During one of their visits to the Indian residence, the Chinese Counsellor was bowled over when served Chinese spring rolls by me. This was a delicacy, commonplace in Chinese but unavailable in Kabul. The trouble was: none of the Chinese Embassy wives knew how to “prepare” the dough for the crepe that made the rolls! In China they were used to just buying the crepe off the store shelves. This being impossible in Kabul, their yearning remained un-assuaged till my cook’s arrival in Kabul. On request, Bharat went personally to the Chinese mission to teach these wives the finer points of this uniquely Chinese savory. After two weeks I was invited to judge the fruits of his efforts and, in the process, invited to partake in a fine Chinese banquet too.

One of my most memorable meetings with the President and Mrs. Fatana Najibullah took place during the turn of the year. I had, during the previous months, had several meetings with the President, but this was the first time I had been invited to a casual dinner for my wife and myself. This was the first of three visits that my wife and father-in-law paid to me in Kabul along with my daughters, it was also the first time that she was invited to meet with the President and the First Lady. Dinners in Kabul, at the time, were pretty brisk affairs beginning around 6 pm and ending in time for people to be back before curfew at 8 pm. We arrived a little before 7 pm and were greeted most warmly by both President and his wife. We were all seated in traditional Afghan style on the floor with the food served collectively in big common platters. The President was in his element and at his charismatic



best. Not only did he display complete confidence and self-assurance when he spoke to us of his professional past and medical studies, but also when he dwelt on his ideological proclivities and relationships in the PDPA. He scrupulously avoided dwelling on personalities but did not flinch, while speaking of his strong commitment to the Parcham faction, to also stress the strength and salience of his Pashtun-ness for the larger stability and future of the country. Speaking to him, I had little doubt that I was speaking to an Afghan leader who, despite the complexities and political pressures he faced from various mujahedeen factions, believed he had the strength and political leverage even at that time to be able to keep them at bay or at least in play. I queried him about some personalities that I had known only vaguely - I had seen Dr. Anahita Ratebzad in Belgrade in the late 1970s when I was posted there and Babrak Karmal whom I had only met once - and others like Mahmud Baryalai whom I had met infrequently in Kabul and enjoyed talking to. Najib was gracious and showed no personal animosity though he was prepared to speak only perfunctorily of them. Then, diverting from these comments and speaking in Urdu as he did for much of that evening's conversation, he engaged knowledgeable with my wife for some time about her passion for Indian classical music. He spoke extensively and feelingly about his experience with the Indian leadership especially with Rajiv Gandhi and his great respect for Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Speaking generally about his personal and political life, the President spoke affectionately and cajolingly of his wife and himself belonging to rival Pashtun clans that had historically battled each other. Then, allowing the conversation to take a chilling turn, Najib declared his total commitment to the national cause and said that in "siyasat" there was no place for relatives or friends. There were only reasons of state. Smiling genially at Fatana, he declared to us that if, for the good of his country, he felt called upon to take the life of his own wife, he would be quite prepared to do so. The only choice he would be willing to offer her in deference to their personal relationship would be how she would die! Recalling this conversation even today, my wife, Malini admits being unable to control her trepidation.

One of the more interesting sidelights of this conversation, however, was the President's reflection on the developments taking place in the Soviet Union. Reflecting on the confused political situation in the Soviet Union and the power struggles there, the President reiterated strongly his belief that *perestroika* would strengthen Gorbachev and help him consolidate his position in the country. Najib was convinced that despite the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan, his country's strategic links with Moscow would remain intact for some time and that both Gorbachev as well as the senior military hierarchy in Moscow were committed to securing and supporting a stable government in Kabul and would not provide a channel for extremist Islamic influence into the already vulnerable Central Asian states of the USSR. That his confidence was grievously misplaced became evident only by the momentous events that unfolded in Moscow during August of the coming year.

### **Crosswinds in 1991**

With the advent of the New Year 1991, pressures from the mujahideen for an economic blockade of Kabul as well as their periodically shelling of the city increased, causing deep impact upon the local population. The capture of Khost in March 1991 had resulted in such looting and destruction as well as cruel treatment of the surrendered local officials that a huge pall of fear spread among government operatives elsewhere in the country causing ambiguity and mistrust even among potential defectors from the government ranks. After the Tanai episode of early 1990, Najib's suspicion of his own party comrades especially the senior Khalqis inside the country became so pronounced that his behavior began to arouse criticism even among fellow Parchamites who saw in his excessive secretiveness and reliance only on a small coterie of supporters and close associates a sense of heightened insecurity.

Meanwhile, in India, following the collapse of the V P Singh government by the end of 1990, the installation of the caretaker Chandrashekar government did not result in any qualitative change in the approach towards Afghanistan. The visit over New Year's Day of 1991 by the Minister for Commerce, Law and

Justice Subramaniam Swamy was mostly pro-forma with little exchange of substance. Despite a long laundry list of requests from the Afghan side for Indian help in a range of basic commodity as well as infrastructural needs for the Afghan economy, the new government was able to make only marginal upward adjustments in India's economic assistance or commodity support to the Kabul government beyond a basket of items covering food and agricultural supplies, equipment and essential spares covering the transport industry and civil aviation sector, medical supplies and hospital equipment connected with the upkeep and expansion of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health (IGICH) in Kabul as well as a spectrum of pharmaceuticals and consumer goods that made their way through Dubai. One item of India's assistance to Afghanistan that attracted particular attention and interest from the local authorities was the regular demand for "Jaipur foot" as well as for the camps set up by Indian doctors from time to time to meet the unending needs of the civilian population disabled and maimed by the mine explosions through the length and breadth of the country. This, more than any other item roused the lasting gratitude of the Afghan people towards the government and people of India. The main hurdle to any substantial raise in Indian assistance, however, was the difficulty caused by Pakistan's steadfast refusal to allow unobstructed transit to Indian goods across its territory into Afghanistan. As Afghan's economic travails increased, one issue that was discussed continuously between the two sides over several months was the prospect of a substantial food assistance package to that country. Though the formal offer of commodity credit as well as a food grant covering 50,000 tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan was announced only after the Najib visit of May and that of the Vice President in September 1991, this matter was first discussed during the visit of Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, Mr Abdul Wakil, in February 1991. There was little doubt that this was a generous gesture and reflected a genuine commitment on the Indian side to help its neighbour in its hour of need. However, the delivery of this significant assistance was fraught with such delay, confusion and uncertainty that it became a festering sore in our relations, affecting in no small measure Afghan goodwill towards India and even raising questions

about the credibility of our commitments. Admittedly a major mitigating factor in this entire fiasco was the impossibly complex nature of the logistics of aid delivery, involving transportation through a roundabout route from northern India to Bombay, then their being loaded on commercial vessels to the Soviet Union port of Odessa, and thereafter traversing almost the entire length of a rapidly disintegrating Soviet Union before arriving at Termez near the northern Afghan border town of Hairatan from where they were expected to be taken delivery of by the Afghan government. In the event, the consignment spent more than a year in transit, suffered major trans-shipment delays at ports as well as severe depredations during transit and transportation within the territory of the USSR. By April 1992, supplies had not arrived in Hairatan. Over the succeeding months the entire consignment disappeared without trace amidst the convulsions and confusions attendant upon the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of the new CIS.

But even as the saga in the Soviet Union was unfolding, from India came the deeply shocking and convulsing report of the LTTE terrorist attack on May 21, 1991 at an election rally in Sri Perumbudur in Tamil Nadu that caused the death of Congress leader and former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. As news of this tragedy spread like wildfire, I was contacted by Doctor-Sahib himself seeking confirmation of the reports. Najib was distraught and actually wept on the phone. He spoke in moving terms of his friendship and deep personal loyalty towards Rajiv Gandhi and the debt he and his party owed to the family. The following morning, the top leadership of the party and other cabinet members streamed into the residence to record their condolences. The President himself flew to Delhi to attend the funeral and to be at the side of the family in this hour of its sorrow. He stayed on for brief meetings with the caretaker government and with the senior Congress leadership and returned to Kabul within two days.

Just days before these tragic happenings in India, in New York, the UN publicly unveiled the contours of a “five-point peace plan” which Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar described as the result of consultations “with all segments of the Afghan people” in Peshawar, Teheran, within Afghanistan and with elements of

the entourage of former King Zahir Shah in Rome. Benon Sevan, who was now into the second year of his “good offices” as head of OSGAP, had visited Kabul in April 1991 during which time he came to see me at the residence. After catching up on personal friends and happenings, Benon described his consultations and the UN’s own plans for a broad package of proposals in very general terms. He labored on to me about the time he had to spend in Islamabad liaising with the mujahedeen groups and hoped this would finally result in a viable process that would result in a stable “broadbased” government in Kabul. As worded by the UN, the five-point proposal appeared sensible and potentially acceptable to all Afghan parties though I expressed my skepticism about the Pakistani government encouraging its own surrogates in the mujahedeen to build a consensus around them. In essence the UN plan called for: a) the preservation of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence and nonaligned and Islamic character of Afghanistan; b) recognition of their right to determine their own form of government free from outside intervention, subversion coercion or constraint; c) providing acceptable transitional arrangements and necessary assurances for free and fair elections in line with Afghan traditions to help set up a broad based government; d) ending arms supplies “to all Afghan sides by all”; and, finally, e) providing aid and assistance to help refugees as well as for the economic and social reconstruction of the country.

In the wake of a strong Congress election victory, the newly formed government of Narasimha Rao brought a much steadier direction to India’s Afghanistan policy. The late summer also saw the arrival in Kabul of Smt. Nandini Singh, a charismatic Kathak dancer of the Jaipur style as part of an ICCR cultural delegation. The brief visit and scintillating programmes served to boost spirits both inside the mission as well as among the friends of India in this beleaguered city starved of cultural activity. During the visit in September of Vice President Mohtat to Delhi, India welcomed the UNSG’s five-point peace proposals announced in May 1991 while publicly reiterating our position against “any form of external interference” in drawing up a political settlement and

stressing the need to take into account the “legitimate interests of all concerned.” The Government of India also committed to continue its economic assistance to Afghanistan, which, *inter alia*, included the deputation of experts and grant of scholarships for Afghan nationals for study in India and an agreement to supply 50,000 tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan on a grant basis. Over the next two years, our offers of economic assistance included refugee relief supplies, medicines and medical equipment of over Rs. 5 crore value sent bilaterally as well as through the Office of UN Coordinator for Afghan Refugee Rehabilitation. (UNOCA)

Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, some of the worst fears of Najib came to light when a coup attempt by the military and KGB against Gorbachev brought confusion and disorder at the highest levels in the Kremlin and eventually proved abortive. While the abortive coup exposed most graphically the extent of the divisions within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, as also within the army and the KGB, the issue was not so much that Gorbachev was able to survive the attempted coup. While his own authority was seriously undermined, what was most surprising was the curious mix of sheer political brinkmanship and courage that brought his arch-rival, Boris Yeltsin to a position of absolute dominance over the political situation and, in the process, precipitated the very collapse of the Soviet Union itself. Yeltsin had long been talking of dismantling the structure of the Soviet Union and ceding independence to the constituent Republics. Recognizing the parlous condition of the economy, he also made it clear that he was determined to cut back on the country’s international commitments and commit himself to introducing more wide-ranging market reforms. But what was most disastrous for the Kabul government was the decision by Moscow to call a halt to the continuance of fuel supplies, of food and all other forms of aid to Afghanistan. Bereft of fuel and food supplies from the Soviet Union, Najib would remain hopelessly handicapped. More than this, the regular inflow of cash from his patrons in Moscow had helped him keep his troops, and militias, including local warlords like Dostum provided for and under his control. The sudden cutting off of these lifelines too, without advance discussion or

consideration of alternatives left the Afghan leadership high and dry and rudderless.

The joint US-USSR announcement in September of the stoppage of arms deliveries with effect from January 1, 1992 also came as a huge shock. While the agreement spoke of discontinuation of weapons deliveries to all Afghan sides, it was followed by only a pious expectation that “a ceasefire and cut-off of weapons deliveries from all other sources would follow this step.” It was clear then, too, to many in the diplomatic corps in Kabul that any similar commitment of halting the supplies to the mujahedeen would only be notional since Pakistan was not going to make any express commitment to this effect. The statement reaffirmed the Geneva Accords and recognized the right of the Afghan people to determine their own destiny free from outside interference and through an inter-Afghan dialogue leading to the formation of a “new broad-based government through an electoral process that respected the Afghan political and Islamic traditions.” It also vaguely called for a “credible and impartial’ transition mechanism. As if to add insult to injury, in November, the Jami’at-i-Islami mujahedeen leader, Burhanuddin Rabbani was welcomed in Moscow in his putative capacity as foreign minister of the AIG. After meeting him, Boris Pankin, the new Soviet foreign minister “confirmed the necessity for a complete transfer of state power to an interim Islamic government.” While the reference to an interim government would not have seemed too far ahead of the UN Plan, the reference to an Islamic government carried a subtle inflexion for Najib. As if in concert, from Pakistan, Hekmatyar continued to reject the UN peace plan saying that there is no question of accepting a settlement under the Najibullah regime. It was equally clear from these varying voices that Pakistan’s ruling military establishment was keeping ready its earlier plan aimed at capturing Kabul by force even if the rest of the mujahedeen leaders were to agree on the UN peace plan. In the event, on the eve of the successful implementation of the UN peace plan in Afghanistan, the ISI, through Hekmatyar and several thousands of non-Afghan volunteers, led hundreds of trucks loaded with weapons and fighters to the southern part of Kabul.

Maintaining composure in the face of these new challenges, Najib proactively proposed the start of talks between Kabul and the council of mujahedeen commanders as well as the leaders of parties and groups based in Peshawar and Tehran as well as the followers of ex-King Zahir Shah living in Europe and the US. He also proposed the enforcement of a ceasefire throughout the country. At the UNGA in New York, Prime Minister Khaliqyar warned against the folly of any side seeking “military supremacy” and supported an “intra-Afghan dialogue” but cautioned against those who wished to negate the role of Afghans inside the country. Calling for “direct, face-to-face and unconditional talks” with the opponents of the regime, he proposed these talks in the presence of “neutral third parties” and suggested mediation by the UN or countries interested in the Afghan problem.

As winter approached in the capital, despite an atmosphere of suppressed tension, the full import of the events around the world had yet to fully sink in for us. I recall spending long hours in the Turkish mission with Aykut Cetirge and his wife discussing the millennial cultural ties linking the Khorasan region that produced the likes of Rumi and Khusrau with both India and the Ottoman lands. The occasional presence of Iranian Chargé Taherian in our midst added to an experience of an entire alternate cultural universe of intellectual depth and richness that, given my diplomatic postings, I had seldom felt ever before. This was also the time when the Indian mission received news of the visit to Afghanistan of the film crew from Bombay with Amitabh Bachchan, Danny Denzongpa and Surendra Pal on location shooting for the film *Khudah Gawah*. Though we were to realize much later that this proposal for filming was first proposed to the Afghan side by Rajiv Gandhi on behalf of his friend Amitabh Bachchan and agreed to at the highest level by Najib, it was sadly to take place after the tragic death of the former Prime Minister. The news of the arrival of AB and his crew in Kabul was received by us somewhat suddenly and I was able to receive confirmation from the star of his willingness to come to the residence for dinner only by around noon of the same day. But with the enthusiasm and spirit of my colleagues in the mission as well as the incredible



talent and resourcefulness of my chef, we were able to mount a massive “bada khana” for around 100 persons at very short notice with the presence of a wide range of Afghan notables, one vice president, a clutch of ministers and the two brothers of President Najibullah, (Roushan and Ahmedzai) as well as a large number of youngsters from the families of the senior leadership. Amitabh and his fellow actor colleagues were generous to a fault, both with their time and their enthusiastic appreciation of the warmth and support of the Afghan hosts towards the film crew. I recall my side conversations with Mukul Anand and Surendra Pal during that evening when both spoke excitedly of the serendipity of the occasion and of the warmth and hospitality they experienced in their interactions with the common people in the country. For my chef Bharat, the labours of the day were more than compensated when he got a personal photograph with Big B all to himself.

### **April Nemesis and Descent into Chaos**

On assuming office on 1 January 1992 as the new Secretary-General of the United Nations, it was natural that Boutros Boutros Ghali would look to the implementation of the UN plan for Afghanistan as one of his immediate priorities. To many outsiders, the agreement on “negative symmetry” negotiated between Washington and Moscow in September of the previous year marked a reasonable and effective way to end the 13-year old brutal civil war that left over a million dead, five million displaced and the country itself despoiled and in abject ruin. In Pakistan, though the UN Plan was officially endorsed, with some quarters regarding it as a “second-best option,” it was clear that the option of continuing attrition against Kabul was still strongly favoured by influential sections in the official hierarchy. Many rebel factions in Peshawar also remained ambiguous not so much for political reasons as for tactical reasons of how they would position themselves in the impending battle for control over territory.

With the UN now finding itself under compulsion to drill down on details of implementation of its five-point plan and to clarify how it would manage the transition, early in the year, Benon Sevan began his bewildering rounds of shuttle diplomacy

between New York, Islamabad, Peshawar, Kabul and Teheran. On his trips to Kabul, I was mostly on his list of callers, but he was careful not to be too specific about the Secretary-General's thinking. Some things were however clear. While the UN plan had called for a "broad based government", Foreign Minister Pankin's statement in Moscow in November 1991 had referred to an "interim Islamic government." It was becoming increasingly clear that for Benon, the first step would be to persuade Najib to loosen his hold on power in Kabul. In doing this, Benon realized that he had first to shift the discourse with Najib from sharing power with a broader coalition, which was now unsustainable, to agreeing to resign and transfer his power to an interim authority. While Najib was realistic about his own limited prospects of remaining in power, he was adamant he would not capitulate to the mujahedeen. His effort was to use the UN to leverage some kind of a broad-based government including elements from within the country, moderate elements from the diaspora and from the Peshawar AIG with whom he had already been in touch. He also sought international guarantees of a stable transition with security and safety for his own collaborators in the event of a handover. As General Tokhi mentioned to me, Najib was too much of a patriot to allow confusion and instability in the wake of a handover.

On March 18 1992, following intensive consultations with Benon Sevan, the President of Afghanistan made a statement assuring his government's full support for the Secretary-General's efforts and declaring that he "will not insist on my personal participation in the proposed Afghan gathering hosted by the Secretary-General's part of the UN peace process." He also agreed that once an understanding was reached through the UN process for the establishment of an interim government in Kabul, "all powers and all executive authority will be transferred to the interim government." The statement was transmitted on the same day by the Afghan Mission in New York through a letter from Foreign Minister Abdul Wakil to the Secretary-General and issued as an UN official document on 20 March 1992.

Inside the country, Najib's announcement set off alarm bells. In the north, Dostum, who during the winter months, had tried to

reach out to Ahmad Shah Masood with suggestions for a loose alliance to counter any Pashtun-dominated interim authority that would emerge in Kabul, now moved additionally to try and persuade the Hizbe-e-Wahdat, as well as Syed Mansur Naderi and Abdul Momin repeating these concerns. Meanwhile, by end-March he took over the garrison in Mazar-i-Sharif and announced the formation of a National Islamic Movement or Jumbish-e-Milli Islami. From Kabul, some Pashtun officers moved southwards to join with Hekmatyar and Abu Sayyaf, while Tajik army officers sought to embrace Masood's advancing forces, indicating willingness to switch loyalties. There was also speculation that top Watan party leaders and army commanders, like Nabi Azimi and Mohammed Asif Delawar were in touch with Masood. Some of these contacts including that by Abdul Wakil were being made with the knowledge of Najib and intended to prevent any impending bombardment of Kabul, thus affecting civilian lives there. But each leader, it would seem, was also pushing a private agenda. Meanwhile, by end-March, Fatana Najib, accompanied by her mother and her young children had also quietly moved out of Kabul to Delhi, joining her sister Laila, whose husband was ambassador in India.

On 10 April, Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali issued a statement in Geneva announcing progress in Benon's efforts to move forward the political understanding among the various segments of Afghan society. He now stressed the need to establish "a pre-transition council" of impartial personalities to which all powers and executive authority could be transferred.<sup>3</sup> Once this body was established and assumed power, he said, he expected there would be a cessation of hostilities, a declaration of general amnesty, guarantees of safety and security for all Afghans, respect for human rights, protection of property, opening of commercial routes etc. Looking at the process from hindsight, it was striking

---

3 See Phillip Corwin: *Doomed in Afghanistan: A U.N. Officer's Memoir of the Fall of Kabul and Najibullah's Failed Escape*, 1992(I did not meet Corwin. He refers to an Indian CdA at the time rather than a regular Ambassador. He also seemed unaware that I met Benon Sevan regularly at his request. I was also in touch with Avni Botsali. Some of his facts are, I feel, differently nuanced, though, by and large, reliable.)

that, as the process was reaching its last mile, the UN had not considered any plan by which to counter foul play on any side. When Najib suggested the need for some kind of UN enforcement capacity on the ground, this was ruled out as unrealistic given the time frame. At the time, however, the simple sequence being suggested to Benon was for a Najib resignation to be followed by the setting in place of a military council within the army and then the transfer of executive power to a pre-transition council.

During Benon's visit to Kabul on 12 and 13 April 1992, I did not meet him. But on the evening of 15 April, I was called by Tokhi to his office and informed of the decision Najib had taken to leave Kabul as soon as the UN could arrange for his move, which would probably be the same night. Shortly after this, around 10 pm, Najib spoke to me personally on the phone to express his gratitude for the arrangements that were already firmed up for the UN to take him to Delhi as a first stop. He had not decided what he would do from there. It was clear to him that though his own family still remained with Ambassador Sarwar in the Afghan residence in Delhi, this situation was also likely to change. He was grateful for the understanding of Indian leaders, but at no point did he raise the question of asylum for himself in India. While there was nothing I could do during the night, I had informed Delhi of what it could expect and waited with bated breath for information the next morning of the President's safe arrival in Delhi.

Though an early riser, I was awakened the following day shortly after 3.30 am by a phone call from the UN-OSGAP and told that Dr. Najibullah wished to speak to me. Within minutes Najib came on the line and informed me in slow, deliberate and unexcited tones that his planned departure had not taken place due to "extraordinary circumstances" and that he was lodged at that moment in the UN compound. I asked whether I could see him immediately and he said that would be good. I was able to get to the UN compound within less than half an hour and was met straightaway by Najib, Ahmadzai and Tokhi. Doctor Sahib and Tokhi were able to describe the sequence of events without frills and despite their outward calm, I was conscious of the level of stress he was experiencing. After some moments of

silence and suppressed tension in the presence of some middle-level UN officials, we were assured that Benon Sevan was also in the compound and would be shortly with us. With the arrival of Benon, we sat together with Benon to consider the overall situation afresh. After recapitulating the situation briefly, almost immediately, he asked whether India would consider offering asylum to Najib. I was somewhat taken aback at the directness of the request, but said this would require to be considered by the Government of India and asked whether the UN was specifically requesting this from us. He said he was prepared to make a formal request. I said I would send such a request to Delhi as soon as possible. Benon was deliberately ambiguous as to whether the request for asylum covered moving the former President immediately away from the OSGAP compound into the Indian residence or whether it represented an offer to receive him in India. I had little doubt in my mind, and indeed in our previous conversation, Najib had also made it perfectly clear that he had little interest in or intention of moving from the UN compound unless it was to get out of the country. This was particularly so, now that he was without an official position in the country. He had told me in no uncertain terms that he considered his safety and security a solemn responsibility of the United Nations since all the actions he had taken had been fully in accordance with the UN plans and understandings arrived at with the Secretary-General and his Special Adviser. In the event, I was able to have a quick conversation with MEA in Delhi and was informed without much delay of Foreign Secretary Dixit's response that "it would not be advisable at the current juncture for the Government of India to consider grant of asylum for the former President." For my own information, I was told that if Najib had already been on his way to India, or was on Indian soil, it would have been a somewhat different situation. Apart from it being our considered opinion that his security was far more assured inside the UN compound than anywhere in an Indian diplomatic premises, we were convinced that his presence on one of our properties would make our functioning inside Afghanistan untenable. Even though we were conscious of the Afghan tradition of protecting anyone who sought refuge in their homes, I was personally unconvinced

that this would be recognized as applicable in the case of the Indian residence. What I feared most was a kind of “wild card” strike by elements from the Hekmatyar outfit. Any action by us locally was also likely to exacerbate the already difficult relationship India had with the mujahedeen groups with whom we urgently needed to establish a stable *modus vivendi* for the future.

During the next few days, though Benon Sevan tried frantically to look for ways to get Najib out of the UN compound and to a relatively safe place, he was equally anxious to avoid any insinuation either from the rump government in Kabul or from the mujahedeen groups now raring on the gates of the city, that the UN was complicit in any plot to secretly spirit the erstwhile dictator out of the country. The fact was that such a move was part of a deal that was known inside the country as well as outside and one that was seen as critical to ensuring a stable transition. When called upon to actually move into action, the so-called pre-transition team was unprepared to make its way to Kabul. If Benon had, nevertheless, managed to get Najib out of the country, the UN would have been able to claim credit for a stable transition even if the different mujahedeen armies were to blast their way into the capital as actually happened and engage in a vicious internecine struggle for the spoils of power. It was only Dostum’s last-minute action, meant to provide him a local upper hand that caused a grave upset to the UN plans. Even so, if Benon had arrived in Kabul by the UN plane earlier and personally accompanied Najib to the airport, the chances of his being challenged by the authority of Dostum or Azimi was unlikely. The absence of a senior enough UN functionary in the car-cade taking Najib to the airport and the absence of any Plan B were critical lacunae in the UN plan. Indeed, the rumours of the suicide by Ghulam Faruq Yaqubi, Najib’s security chief, the same morning had caused much speculation at the time, with some diplomats suspecting that it may not have been a suicide. Many felt Yaqubi may have been killed for complicity in the flight of Najib, perhaps by Azimi, who discovered the attempted flight in time, ordered an airport lockdown and changed the password of the final ring of airport security with the collusion of Dostum. But Benon had discussed

the transition plans with Azimi just a few days earlier. Despite the confusion, some details appear irreconcilable and the only explanation for the UN's failure could be treachery by a key actor in the equation. In the eyes of most observers, this key actor was Dostum. Meanwhile, the complaints of Foreign Minister Wakil and others about Najib's flight carried little credibility. Similarly the Pakistani offer of asylum was specious and dishonest. Najib was so completely opposed to the idea that Benon quickly rejected it. In the event, the UN was compelled to take the only honest and viable approach that is to keep him in the compound while working out possible options.

During the days that followed, a rump government functioned nominally under Abdul Rahim Hatif but its key operational figure was General Nabi Azimi. Though Massoud was invited to enter Kabul, he was unwilling to do so, absent a political settlement worked out and agreed in Peshawar by all parties. But he was equally determined to pre-empt any other mujahedeen leader from seizing power by force. As the security situation in the capital became increasingly tense, Hekmatyar saw this as yet another opportunity to activate his long-held plan to seize Kabul. Though rumours of conflicting armies vying to enter the capital were rampant, we were blissfully unaware, at the time, of Hekmatyar's threat to "*march into Kabul with our naked sword.*" Reports of the dramatic arguments on phone between Hekmatyar and Masood were completely unknown to us.<sup>4</sup>

The Peshawar Agreement signed on 24 April 1992 set up an Islamic State of Afghanistan to replace the Najibullah government. The interim government was led by a Supreme Leadership Council, headed by Sebghatullah Mojaddedi, who would take charge for a period of two months. Masood was appointed Defence Minister and Hekmatyar invited to serve as Prime Minister. But Hekmatyar had refused to sign the accord. Though he tried to prevail over groups like the Harakat-Inquilab-e-Islami and the Khalis faction to join him, these groups held back, preferring to support the Peshawar accord. Hezb forces entered the city from the south

---

4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Kabul\\_\(1992-96\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Kabul_(1992-96))

and west but were quickly pushed back. From the north Jami'at and Shura-i Nazar entered the city. Meanwhile, the Islamic Jihad Council and Security Commission set up under Mojaddedi tried to keep some semblance of security in the city. On behalf of the rump government, Abdul Wakil expressed happiness that the rival mujahedeen factions had agreed to support the UN's effort at transition and hope for a general ceasefire that would bring security and safety to the citizens of Kabul. But this was far from what the armed groups were preparing for. On 27 April, other major parties like Jumbish-e-Milli, Hizbe Wahdat, Ittihad and Harakat also entered the city. Though Kabul was formally under the control of the groups working under the Peshawar Agreement, the situation could hardly be described as stable. Driven out of the capital, Hekmatyar's Hezbe Islami kept its forces within artillery range and was able to commence severe bombardment of the central districts of the capital almost within days. Meanwhile with a large number of roving bands of mujahedeen of diverse affiliations -- including criminals released from the Pul-i-Charkhi prisons just days earlier -- roaming in the centre of Kabul, the capital city had begun its descent into chaos and anarchy.

Meanwhile, with the departure in January of Ambassador Pastukhov of Russia, replaced by Ambassador Evgeny Ostravenko, and of other senior Eastern European ambassadors, I was stuck with the unenviable responsibility within the small diplomatic community in Kabul of officiating as Dean and effectively the spokesperson of the corps for the security and safety of the lives of diplomatic personnel in the capital. Along with the arrival of the mujahedeen bands by road, I recall going as Dean to the airport along with other diplomats to witness the arrival on 28 April of an aircraft carrying mujahedeen leaders as well as Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the Saudi intelligence chief, Turki al-Faisal, (I also seem to recall but am unclear now whether the team included General Jawed Nasser) and my old friend from Beijing and New York days, Riaz Mohammad Khan who was then Director-General, Afghan Affairs. Though being Dean kept me well plugged in with the other diplomats and, therefore, updated on developments, for my colleagues in the mission and myself



it was also a deeply onerous responsibility, there being little knowledge or understanding among the rag-tag mobs of rebel fighters roaming around the city of how diplomats were to be treated. Our first move was to warn all diplomats to stay indoors and stir as little as possible from the city centre. When moving they were to ensure they had some form of security or accompaniment at least and to keep each other as well as other missions informed all the time of their whereabouts. Though the Indian mission was thinned out considerably, it still had around 16 members including security staff. Having just one driver in the mission, I had often to drive the flag car myself and on one particular occasion, when, after seeing off departing staff at the airport, I was driving the flag car by myself, while returning to the chancery, close to the Interior Ministry in Shahr-e-Nau, I was diverted to make a slight detour. This was very close to the chancery and in radio (walkie-talkie) contact with my colleagues, but within minutes, I found myself in a completely alien environment and in the midst of a traffic jam with firing involving a group of Jauzjani fighters. Though a little distant from the melee, I was accosted by one of these fighters and asked to get out of the car. I was intimidated and initially worried that the intention may have been to commandeer the flag car. Though frightened, I opened the door but refused to get out merely shouting the words “*Safeer, Safeer*” and displaying my ID. The disbelief of the man did not seem to abate and I was briefly worried that I was facing a life-threatening situation. By sheer luck, however, the young ragamuffin fighter seemed impressed by my formal attire and soon waved me off impatiently out of harm’s way. It was an incident that was never repeated again, and though I received severe reprimands from my colleagues in the mission for having exposed myself to such risk, I had personally learned a lesson. In due course, the mujahedeen fighters also grew more accustomed to recognizing markings and numbers to differentiate diplomatic cars from other vehicles.

The Interim Government led by Mojaddedi proved hopelessly incapable of bringing together mujahedeen forces around the Peshawar Accord. Hekmatyar remained adamant in his demand for the withdrawal of Dostum’s forces from Kabul. When

Hizbe Islami forces tried to shoot down a plane carrying President Mojaddedi within a week of the government's May 25 peace offer, this became a last straw for the coalition controlling Kabul. The period from 30 May 1992 saw some of the worst fighting between the forces of the Jumbish-e-Milli and the Hizbe Islami forces in the southern part of the city with both sides using heavy artillery and rockets, causing untold number of civilian deaths and injuries. Intense fighting also took place in the environs of the Interior Ministry, which was near the Indian Chancery. By that time, all personnel of the mission had moved to the chancery, and we had for days on end to keep ourselves confined to the basement of the chancery for our safety. During periods of respite from the bombardment, I was able, from time to time, to visit the Foreign Ministry, which was then under the effective charge of Minister of State Hamid Karzai. Our meetings were cordial and he was direct and unabashed about his own connections with India. Indeed, on more than one occasion, he took the initiative of taking me over to meet with President Mojaddedi, who also spoke warmly of the "Sirhind connection" of the Mojaddeds and the spiritual debt he owed to India. Both leaders were, however, careful to balance these nostalgic comments with regret over the wrong policies followed by successive governments in India in backing the "communist" government of Najibullah and being unwilling to engage with the mujahedeen armed groups. Karzai even suggested that India had wrongly assumed that the dependence of the mujahedeen groups upon US and Pakistani support and assistance had reduced them to surrogates of these powers and incapable of following independent policies in Afghanistan. Looking to the future, Karzai assured me of Kabul's interest in stable ties with India and sought help from us in meeting the urgent economic needs of the country.

After two months, the government of Mojaddedi found itself under pressure to hand over power to the Jami'at leadership, and Burhanuddin Rabbani took charge as President with effective leadership being exercised by Masood. Minister of State Karzai was replaced in the Foreign Office by Najibullah Laffraie with Salman Gailani as the nominal Minister of Foreign Affairs. Many Jami'at Ministers like Dr. Abdul Rahman, Minister for Civil

Aviation remained in their respective Departments. Our ties with the Ministry of Civil Aviation remained close, from Ministers Tarzie and Wadir Safi under the Najibullah government to Dr. Abdul Rahman under the mujahedeen governments, mainly on account of our critical dependence on the Delhi -Kabul air connection maintained by Ariana and Air India. This connection was subjected to severe strain by the insecurity in Kabul airport due to continuous bombardment from the suburbs as well as the critical shortage of supplies and parts faced by both airlines. By end April 1992 until around late September, regular commercial flights between Delhi and Kabul were cut off and with that, our connection with Delhi was effectively severed. Contact with the Ministry of External Affairs was maintained only through a very tenuous dependence on borrowed satellite phones but mostly through ham radio!

Meanwhile insecurity within the city grew as a result of the fierce fighting between Ittihad and Wahdat forces in the Hazara areas and along the road to the Darulaman palace which had resulted in grievous damage to the palace itself and more importantly to the nearby national museum which had left many of the invaluable historical artifacts, antiques and collections looted and despoiled. I also recall visiting a bombed Jamhuriyat Hospital close by in the company of some United Nations colleagues and witnessing the desperate plight of the civilians - men, women and children - caught in the crossfire. It was a staggering sight of blood and gore, of torn limbs and battered body parts. During the following days, we became aware of the steady exodus of civilians from the capital as a result of the sickening bombardments. I was informed by Ambassador Ostrovenko of the growing threat to the security of the Russian mission, one of the few diplomatic missions in that part of town. As concerns for the physical safety of the diplomatic corps in general began to increase, I had to draw the attention of the Foreign Office to the need for them to look at some way to systematically organize the evacuation of the hundreds of Russian diplomatic personnel along with those of the other missions. The western missions like the French and Italian as well as the Poles and Bulgarians were mostly reduced to single figures. Those of

Iran and Pakistan remained out of these discussions and were, anyway, increasing their inflow of personnel. But missions like China, Turkey, India and Indonesia and personnel of the UN also faced similar need for further thinning out. This would not be possible without some form of agreed pause in the bombardment to allow for evacuation. But there was little possibility of any kind of understanding between the government and its tormentors from the south. Our efforts with the Foreign Office extended fitfully through three months and it was only by end-August that I was able to receive an assurance from the ministry through the intercession of Ambassador Amir Osman of Pakistan, of a period of assured pause in the bombardment of the airport area, during which we could arrange the evacuation of Kabul's remaining diplomatic personnel. This process was agreed for the morning of 28 August between 5 am and 9 am. While Russian Ambassador Ostravenko had undertaken the massive logistics involved in transporting his own personnel from western Kabul to the airport area, I recall vividly having to organize the rounding up of the thirty or so junior staff and family members from the missions of Poland, Bulgaria, Indonesia, China and India and of putting them up for the previous night in the Indian residence, amidst the routine electricity blackout, coping with small Honda generators, with a little more than ten women and children put up on mattresses in the drawing room overnight and then getting readied during the early hours of the following morning to be driven to the airport. When we reached the airport, we had found that, of the three Russian aircraft designated to fly in and ferry us to Dushanbe, one had already landed in advance and had been loading the Russian staff members. Some of our European colleagues joined them in the first aircraft. When that aircraft had loaded its passengers, it taxied to the edge of the tarmac for takeoff as the second aircraft descended to the airstrip and made it to the edge of the terminal. The few Asian diplomats and staff were originally earmarked as passengers in the third aircraft. However, due to some logistical delays in the arrival of the Russian buses, at the last minute, our people were asked to embark onto the second aircraft, numbering some twenty five or so in all. Following a similar pattern of take-off maneuvers, this aircraft started to move to the edge of the

tarmac waiting for the third plane to land. This was when intense rocket attacks on various parts of the airport began. At first, we were in disbelief and felt these were just stray shells that may have accidentally struck this part of the airport. It soon became clear that the airport was under attack and the Russian aircraft were being targeted. The second aircraft, after waiting for the next one to land, swiftly proceeded to take off using as little of the runway as it could. Meanwhile, as the third aircraft taxied to the terminal, it was hit by a rocket on the nose of the aircraft, which caught fire. It also appeared that one of the pilots flying that craft was hit. With incredible presence of mind, it appears in hindsight, the struck aircraft radioed the one that had just taken off and asked it to return to the landing strip currently under shelling to retrieve the wounded crew member. Amidst the din and haze of the bombardment, I recall being present in the open at the terminal, witnessing these events. The second aircraft returned to the runway and, as it taxied on the runway, the wounded crew member was literally thrown into the aircraft by a group of intrepid Russian troopers. It then took off. By this time, the fuselage of the third aircraft, now abandoned by its crew, had caught fire and began to blaze. It remained on the Kabul tarmac for years, half burnt and a reminder of the treachery of that day.

Within days of these events, in end-August itself, President Rabbani made a brief transit visit to Delhi, when he reiterated the intent of the new mujahedeen government to develop normal relations with India. He also sought the continuation of India's traditional assistance to Afghanistan. On its part, the Narasimha Rao government could not but make a cold and realistic assessment of the need to maintain a fair equation with Kabul, so that our overall equities in this country could be kept minimally protected in the face of Pakistan's increasing influence. The fact, however, was that, over the months since the fall of Najib, Pakistan had been able to keep India out of successive regional and UN-sponsored meetings dealing with the Afghan crisis by falsely alleging that India had supported the Soviet intervention, that it was also opposed to an Islamic state being set up in Kabul and that not being a direct neighbour of Afghanistan, India had no *locus*

*standi* in the situation there. Our attempts to re-establish ties with the Pashtun tribal leadership were also proving to be increasingly difficult. Though the presence of Najibullah's family in India and the government's unconditional offer of continued support to them were fully justifiable in keeping with Pashtun traditions, it had the practical and indirect effect of inhibiting other leaders from engaging with us as long as Najib remained a potential political force even while restricted in the UN compound in Kabul. That said, the clear resentment among some mujahedeen leaders against the bristling interference and generally overweening influence of the ISI in the affairs of the Islamic Jihad Council was being severely felt especially by elements within the Jumbish e Milli and Shura-e-Nazar. It was thus not surprising that in September, at the request of Dostum and with the approval of the Jami'at government, the Ministry of External Affairs saw the utility of sending a special mission headed by Ambassador Hamid Ansari not to Kabul but to Mazar-i-Sharif. The mission carried with it a considerable supply of humanitarian assistance comprising mainly of medicines and medical supplies for use by the government and its partner groups in the north. I was informed of the arrival of this mission only at the last minute and was able with the help of the Kabul's military commander to fly to Mazar from Kabul and be present during its very brief stay there. The meetings with Dostum were cordial and business-like and it was clear that new leadership especially of the North had begun to realize that the quest for control of Kabul and the continuing civil war around the country was assuming the familiar shape of an ethnic confrontation between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns, which would be a bitterly fought and long-drawn one. For India, whose ties had traditionally been with the Pashtun tribes of southern Afghanistan, this was going to present a unique Hobson's choice. Delhi was now being forced to look at developing new options across the Pashtun barriers towards non-Pashtuns like Masood and Dostum. I recall travelling back with Ambassador Ansari on the IAF aircraft with a load of over a hundred winter melons gifted by Dostum, which had to be left behind in the aircraft and which we hoped would have served as our collective tribute to the Air Force station in Delhi for safely ferrying the mission to Afghanistan.

Within a week, I was able to benefit from a temporary improvement in the security situation in Kabul airport to return to the city to complete the final month of my tenure in this ravaged but beautiful country. While in Delhi, I was able to transmit some of the messages and letters from Najib to his family. Through the period of his detention in the UN compound, my opportunities to meet with him had become steadily more and more rare for a variety of reasons. However, through a variety of indirect methods, including the use of some former KhAD colleagues who had now infiltrated the mujahedeen government and were present even in the Protocol Department of the new Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I was sent confidential messages and letters written by Najib for his family, which I was able to transmit to Delhi. Meanwhile, the mission was able to build firm ties with the Civil Aviation Minister Dr. Abdul Rahman as well as Minister of State Najibullah Laffraei in the Foreign Office which served us in good stead. After the supply of medicines to Dostum, similar requests were also made for replenishments of supplies and equipment for the IGICH, even though there were reports that it was likely to be renamed merely as the Kabul Institute of Child Health. Meanwhile, the city itself was still divided between the different mujahedeen factions and it was becoming increasingly difficult to move from one part of the city to the other. Most insecure were the western parts of the city as the Wahdat and Ittihad braced for a further round of bloody confrontation. In our own part of central Kabul too, though the general law and order situation was stable as between the government forces under the Jami'at and Jauzjani fighters, the latter were not the epitome of self-discipline and were known to be involved in random cases of confiscations of vehicles and petty theft affecting the local population. There were, however, few cases of actual harassment or physical assault involving foreigners or diplomats. For the Indian mission, one additional matter of concern was the fact that we had, in the premises of the Indian residence, a petrol and diesel pumping station for exclusive use of the Indian mission but which had attracted the envious eyes of many of the armed groups roaming around the city and looking for valuable bounties. But even these ragtag bands of fighters needed their occasional moments of relaxations and

respite and, especially during weekends, around nightfall time, we often witnessed the skies of central Kabul agog with celebratory outbursts of tracer bullets bursting across the skies in a bizarre spectacle of light, colour and rat-a-tat sounds. Though, initially we were unsure whether they presaged a fresh round of attacks, we soon learned to distinguish these celebratory forays from their more murderous variants.

By the end of October 1992, I was ready to leave the capital and had paid my final farewell calls on President Rabbani and the Foreign Office as well as received a somewhat lavish farewell dinner from Foreign Minister Salman Gailani. On both sides, the usual pleasantries were observed and, especially on the Afghan side, there was no shortage of hyperbole and extravagant reference to the relations between our two countries. But far more touching from my perspective was the personal sorrow of parting ties with the friends and acquaintances that I had built up during the preceding months of my stay in the capital. One such acquaintance was a tailor I had known over the months before the fighting began in the city. This grand old man of ninety, Khalifa Mohammad Hassan, had a tailoring outlet in Shahre Nauthat which was devastated during the April fighting in the city that also took the life of his only son. Closing his shop, the old man moved to the northern suburbs and prior to my departure, I was able to get an idea of his location only with much difficulty through the good offices of our interpreter Qureshi. On the day before my departure from Kabul, I was able to get to his home traversing areas controlled by different factions and negotiating prior free passage with them. When I reached his premises, he received me outside his home and took me down to the basement where he plied me with tea, fresh and dried fruit and spoke warmly of his regard for me and for India. He said he had known that I was due to leave because he had seen clips of my farewell meeting with President Rabbani on TV the previous evening. He then stated in a simple, direct manner: “Your coming to see me today is more important than your meeting with the President!” Seeing that I was a little nonplussed by his statement, he paused and explained: “As Ambassador, you had to see the President before you left. You



did not have to see me. But, still, you came. Your meeting with me is therefore more important.” I was driven to tears by the honest and dignified simplicity of that statement.

## Epilogue

I left Kabul late in October 1992 before the Ittihad-Wahdat confrontation in Kabul reached its bloodiest phase. The April events had the effect of eroding the authority and legitimacy of the Afghan state structure in a manner that has remained largely unrestored to this day. As one scholar remarked, “From being a buffer state, Afghanistan became a ‘marketing corridor’ for a growing illicit economy.”<sup>5</sup> The divide between Pashtun and non-Pashtun, far from being bridged over the years, has grown inexorably. For an elite that has traditionally flourished mainly through rent-seeking and external subventions, almost since its founding, Afghanistan’s leaders have shown little interest in or capacity to develop stable institutions of governance or a rule of law. For these to take root, the country will have to develop an indigenous equivalent of the Iranian “bazaari” middle class or even a diaspora-driven entrepreneurial community that can sustainably reinforce the externally driven investment in infrastructure and services around the country. But for this to happen, most importantly, the jihadi mindset will have to be replaced by a sense of national purpose that is anchored in values like poverty eradication, education and skills development, restoration of small business and trades as well as of the agricultural and extraction livelihood practices of its pre-opium past. Despite the efforts of the current government, especially its sub-national governance initiatives, it will take some time before these goals and values are truly entrenched among its people.

---

5 See Jonathan Goodhand: *Frontiers and Wars: the Opium Economy in Afghanistan*. *Journal of Agrarian Change*: Vol 5 No 2 April 2005. pp 191-216

