

Jalalabad Devastated But Quiet

Afghan Rebel Drive Apparently Failing

By Mark Fineman
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JALALABAD, Afghanistan, May 10—The Afghan rebels' offensive against Jalalabad, which appears thus far to have failed, has left an urban nightmare of twisted metal, shattered glass, ruined streets and tens of thousands of abandoned homes.

After more than two months of intensive rebel artillery attacks, most of the city's buildings are scarred by shrapnel from an estimated 130,000 rockets. All but a few shops are closed, their owners gone. No vehicles are moving in the streets. Only soldiers dare to venture out. Most of the people are gone, either killed or driven away as refugees to Pakistan or some safer region of war-torn Afghanistan.

The few still here spend most of their time in underground shelters trying to escape the rocket fire.

[Afghan army officers quoted by the Associated Press said their forces have advanced up to 25 miles along two fronts in an offensive begun Sunday against insurgents surrounding the city.]

Western reporters, allowed to visit the city today for the first time since the rebel offensive began March 7, could see clearly that the fighting had become a standoff, a siege not likely to end in much of a victory for either side.

It was equally clear that the Soviet-backed government of President Najibullah was still in control of Jalalabad, which lies 45 miles from the border with Pakistan and is the only real government stronghold between Pakistan and Kabul, the Afghan capital, about 94 miles to the west.

Today's visit was a public relations gain for Najibullah, whose Marxist party has managed to stay in power despite the withdrawal, completed in February, of 115,000 Soviet troops—ending nearly a decade of Soviet military presence.

The government flew 13 Western journalists into the heart of Jalalabad by helicopter and returned them to Kabul uneventfully.

Rebel rockets were fired without effect at the Soviet-built Mi-8 helicopters as they clattered through mountain passes where the rebels have set up anti-aircraft positions.

The press party was taken on a 4 1/2-hour tour. Officials offered supporting evidence for several contested claims.

When the rebel drive on Jalalabad began, it was viewed as decisive by U.S. and Pakistani officials. The offensive began just two weeks after the rebels had formed a provisional government at their base in Pakistan, and Jalalabad was to be the rebel capital inside this country.

In their reports on the offensive, the guerrillas have focused on intense battles for the Jalalabad airport. But today, the press party visited the airport and found it to be firmly under government control.

The building housing the terminal and control tower is a scarred shell, crowded with troops. The runway is severely cratered.

No round of rebel fire fell on the airport during the visit, and the air force commander there, Lt. Col. Jahangir, declared: "We can just cut these extremists up like small birds. There is power here, and they are not able to capture us."

An effort was made to show the city as a sort of paradise lost, the result of a military campaign gone awry. The escorts pointed out a high school, a mosque, a Sikh temple and scores of residential neighborhoods that had been shattered by the rebel rockets.

The party was then taken 10 miles west of the city to look at a 26-year-old hydroelectric power station, Soviet-built and unscathed by the fighting. It provides electric power for all Jalalabad.

At the Nangrahar provincial hospital, its director said that since the rebel offensive began, 128 people had died in his hospital, one of several in the city, and that 3,000 others had been treated for injuries—1,000 of them in the first two weeks of the offensive. Another official said that 2,000 Jalalabad civilians had been killed or injured in the past two months, 60 percent of them children. The 1982 census put the population at 57,825.

The eastern front commander, who did not give his name, said the rebels had suffered a "shameful defeat." He alleged that one in every three rebels killed or captured was either a Pakistani or Arab adviser. He said that many of the advisers had been mutilated and dumped into rivers by angry Afghan villagers or the rebels themselves.

Lt. Gen. Manoki Mangal, the provincial governor, said, "Fortunately, the armed forces of Afghanistan are fully supported by the people." He refused to estimate how much of the population remained but said that "you see for yourselves that Jalalabad is alive."

In general, the city seemed more peaceful than Kabul, suggesting that the offensive might be over.