

# Remarks on Signing Proclamation 4908, Afghanistan Day

## March 10, 1982

I can't help but say -- thank you all very much -- but I can't help but recall that I was in Iran on the day that the first coup took place by the Soviet Union in their overthrow there of the government.

I take particular satisfaction in signing today the proclamation authorized by Joint Resolution No. 142, which calls for the commemoration of March 21st as Afghanistan Day throughout the United States. This resolution testifies to America's deep and continuing admiration for the Afghan people in the face of brutal and unprovoked aggression by the Soviet Union.

A distinguished former Secretary of State, William P. Rogers, is coordinating the observance of Afghan Day in the United States. He not only has my strong support but that of former Presidents Carter, Ford, and Nixon and former Secretaries of State Muskie, Vance, Kissinger, and Rusk.

The Afghans, like the Poles, wish nothing more, as you've just been so eloquently told, than to live their lives in peace, to practice their religion in freedom, and to exercise their right to self-determination. As a consequence, they now find themselves struggling for their very survival as a nation. Nowhere are basic human rights more brutally violated than in Afghanistan today.

I have spoken on occasion of the presence of unsung heroes in American life. Today, we recognize a nation of unsung heroes whose courageous struggle is one of the epics of our time. The Afghan people have matched their heroism against the most terrifying weapons of modern warfare in the Soviet arsenal. Despite blanket bombing and chemical and biological weapons, the brave Afghan freedom-fighters have prevented the nearly 100,000-strong Soviet occupation force from extending its control over a large portion of the countryside.

Their heroic struggle has carried a terrible cost. Many thousands of Afghans, often innocent civilians, women and children, have been killed and maimed. Entire villages and regions have been destroyed and depopulated. Some 3 million people have been driven into exile -- that's one out of every five Afghans. The same proportion of Americans would produce a staggering 50 million refugees.

We cannot and will not turn our backs on this struggle. Few acts of international aggression have been so universally condemned. The United Nations has repeatedly called for the withdrawal of Soviet forces. The Islamic Conference, deeply troubled over this assault on Moslem religion, has four times condemned the Soviet occupation. The nonaligned movement has added its voice to the demands for withdrawal of foreign troops.

Most recently, as you've been told, the European Parliament took the leadership in advancing the idea of a worldwide commemoration of Afghanistan Day. On behalf of all Americans, I want to thank the members of the European Parliament for this action and welcome today the participation of Egon Klepsch, Vice President of the European Parliament, and his distinguished colleagues.

I also want to express the hope that people the world over will respond with eagerness and determination. And in that connection, I want to express my particular appreciation that we're joined here today by members of the parliaments of Japan, Kenya, Panama, Thailand, and Austria.

We must go beyond public condemnation of the Soviet puppet regime in Kabul to bring relief and an early end to the Afghan tragedy. We have a human responsibility to the Afghan refugees. The United

States has given generous support to the U.N.'s refugee effort. And I'm pleased to announce today an additional commitment of \$21.3 million worth of food. This contribution will bring the total U.S. support for the refugees to over \$200 million in the past 2 years. But I ask that all Americans supplement these funds with personal donations to organizations which work with Afghan refugees and the cause of a free Afghanistan.

Beyond this, the United States is determined to do everything politically possible to bring the Soviet Union to the negotiating table. We and our allies have made clear that Afghanistan will remain a central issue in U.S.-[Soviet] (FOOTNOTE) Government and East-West relations as long as Soviet forces continue to occupy that nation. We have used, and will continue to use, every available opportunity, including the last meeting between Secretary Haig and Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko, to urge the Soviets to enter into genuine negotiations for a peaceful settlement of the Afghan crisis.

(FOOTNOTE) White House correction.

In that spirit I want to address the claim made by the Soviet Union -- that its troops entered Afghanistan and must remain there as a result of foreign intervention against the Kabul government. The world is well aware that this is nothing more than propaganda designed to divert international attention from the sordid reality. The foreign interference in Afghanistan comes from the nearly 100,000 Soviet armed invaders. The United States has consistently followed a policy of noninterference in Afghanistan's internal affairs. We similarly supported the nonaligned character of the previous Afghanistan Governments. The fire of resistance in Afghanistan is being kindled and sustained not by outside forces, but by the determination of the Afghan people to defend their national independence.

We and most other members of the international community have repeatedly stressed to the Soviets both publicly and privately that we have no objectives in Afghanistan beyond those set forth in the U.N. General Assembly resolutions. These are the withdrawal of the Soviet forces, the free exercise of self-determination for the Afghan people, the restoration of Afghanistan's nonaligned status, and the safe and honorable return of Afghan refugees to their homes. Unfortunately, the Soviet Union has to date rejected all attempts to move toward an internationally acceptable solution.

In 1980 it refused to receive emissaries of the Islamic Conference, who wished to travel to Moscow to discuss a political solution. In 1981 it was the British foreign minister who was rudely rebuffed when he presented a very sensible proposal of the European Community for a two-tiered international conference, which is still on the table. Finally, the Soviets have evaded the issue, insisting that the U.N. Secretary-General seek a solution in Kabul, Islamabad, and Tehran rather than at the source of the aggression in Moscow.

The Soviet Union bears a grave responsibility for the continuing suffering of the Afghan people, the massive violations of human rights, and the international tension which has resulted from its unprovoked attack. The Soviet Union must understand that the world will not forget, as it has not forgotten the peoples of the other captive nations from Eastern Europe to Southwest Asia -- who have suffered from Soviet aggression. This is the meaning of Afghanistan Day, that the Afghan people will ultimately prevail.

Coincidentally, the day after Afghanistan Day, this country plans to launch the third Columbia space shuttle. Just as the Columbia, we think, represents man's finest aspirations in the field of science and technology, so too does the struggle of the Afghan people represent man's highest aspirations for freedom. The fact that freedom is the strongest force in the world is daily demonstrated by the people of Afghan. Accordingly, I am dedicating on behalf of the American people the March 22d launch of the Columbia to the people of Afghanistan.

And in that same spirit I call on all Americans to observe Afghanistan Day in their thoughts, their prayers, their activities, and in their own renewed dedication to freedom. With the help of those

assembled here today, the unanimous backing of the Congress, and the support of the American people, I'm confident that this day will mark a true celebration, and not just for freedom in Afghanistan, but, for freedom wherever it is threatened or suppressed the world over.

Now, I shall sign the proclamation.

Note: The President spoke at 12:01 p.m. at the signing ceremony in the East Room at the White House.

<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/31082b.htm>