

Death in the afternoon



"Your purpose is not to negotiate with the criminals and their leaders. They must be crushed." So spoke Ayatollah Khomeini on Tuesday as he despatched one of his religious henchmen to Kurdistan, and appeared to shatter the hope that there might yet be a peaceful settlement between the Iranian regime and the Iranian Kurds who are demanding a limited form of autonomy. A few hours earlier negotiations had appeared to be leading to a formal ceasefire; the government is still talking as if there were one. Reports have it that 500 people have been killed in the Kurdish province over the past two weeks. So far 68 Kurds, including the two above preserved in ice blocks, have reportedly been executed.

platoons he has collected together may still not prove a match for the formidable army led by Mrs Indira Gandhi. Mr Charan Singh has already achieved a virtual merger with the anti-Gandhi Congress party, roped in the dissident Socialists and the Moslem League, and reached an electoral understanding with the united front of leftist parties. He seems well on his way to forging an alliance with the regional parties of Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and possibly Kashmir. Although his personal following is limited to northern India, his electoral combination has acquired a nationwide character, and it could yet prove to be the dominant force in eastern and southern India.

Ideologically, this combination makes no sense at all. Mr Charan Singh is an unabashed champion of the land-owning farmer, and has little love for socialism, let alone communism. As a Hindi linguistic chauvinist, he has always been regarded with suspicion by the regional parties in non-Hindi-speaking areas. His combination may have much electoral value,

but it hardly looks like a future government, and many of the parties in it may break away once the election is over.

The fact that so many diverse interests have banded together in it highlights the present isolation both of Mrs Gandhi and of the Janata faction led by Mr Jagjivan Ram. Mrs Gandhi's authoritarian streak has repelled even the most opportunistic regional parties, who know full well her reluctance to share power with anybody. The strongest party in Tamil Nadu, although an old ally of hers, is now part of Mr Charan Singh's coalition. Even the (pro-Moscow) Communist party of India, which hung on to her skirts for a decade, has now let go and joined hands with the Marxists, with which it had been at loggerheads since the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s. Now that these two parties have forged a united front along with minor socialist groups they are well placed to sweep the polls in West Bengal and Kerala and to make inroads in Assam. Despite all this however, Mrs Gandhi still shows much confidence.

Laos

After boat people, the hill people

FROM A CORRESPONDENT IN BANGKOK

The hospital was full, so they placed her on a concrete slab outside the front door. She was pathetically thin, her body ravaged by dysentery and starvation. The hospital attendant said she would be dead in a few days. This 10-year-old girl was one of the Hmong hill-tribe people from Laos who have fled to neighbouring Thailand. At the refugee camp where she lay—in the Thai province of Loei, 300 miles north-east of Bangkok—more than 37,000 of her people wait to be resettled. Thousands more linger in other Thai camps.

The Hmong say that the communist Pathet Lao government of Laos, and the occupying Vietnamese forces which support it, launch constant ground and artillery assaults against their mountain hold-outs, including the use of poison gas. The aim of this pressure, they say, is to drive the strongly anti-communist Hmong from the country.

The plan seems to be succeeding. From their cramped quarters in Loei, Hmong spokesmen talk of their people's plight in Laos: they have few weapons and too little ammunition and, worst, are desperately short of food. They say that the communist harassment is so severe that they cannot even grow subsistence crops. The choice many of them have made—to flee to Thailand—often means a southward trek of between one and three months. But even that escape route seems to be closing. Thailand already has something like 200,000 Indochinese refugees, a large part of them from Laos, and may shut its doors to new arrivals.

In one incident, which the refugees fear could point to a new Thai government policy, a group of nearly 200 Hmong got as far as a Laotian island on the Mekong river, the border between much of Laos and north-eastern Thailand. Their pleas for permission to cross the 400 yards of brown water to the Thai shore were rejected by Thai soldiers, who fired their rifles into the water to make sure the Hmong understood. On July 31st, three days after the group had reached the island, the Pathet Lao landed and forced them to return to the Laotian mainland.

The authorities in Bangkok deny that refugees from Laos are refused permission to enter Thailand and claim that local officials were responsible for the Mekong island incident. But, if the Thai government does refuse to take any more