Iran says battle is on for Kurdish stronghold of Mahabad

From Reuters

Iran announced last night it had launched the battle for Mahabad, the Kurdish rebel stronghold. Kurdish forces defending the town said Government forces had been crushed.

The State radio said heavy fighting was going on outside the city after Government forces launched an air and ground attack on Kurdish positions. It quoted a spokesman for the joint military staff as saying its forces, using aircraft and artillery, had pounded rebel emplacements and was now heading for Mahabad.

A spokesman for the banned Kurdish Democratic Party, which is leading the Kurdish rebellion, said the Government side was using helicopter gunships to cover its advance.

Other Kurdish sources said the attack was launched by a Government column of 26 tanks, but that the advance had been halted 25 miles from the Kurdish stronghold by guerrilla gunfire.

The joint military staff spokesman was quoted by the radio as saying Government forces had entered the rebel-held border town of Piranshahr, inflicting heavy casualties on Kurdish forces in mopping-up operations as far as the Iraqi frontier.

Iran last night accused the four major international news agencies of being Zionists-controlled, and of spreading false reports about the situation in Kurdistan.

Government spokesman Sadeq Tabatabai, without naming the agencies, said: "The four biggest news agencies, whose leaders are Zionists, reflect totally false reports about Kurdistan. The Islamic Republic Army does not kill the people. Counter-revolutionaries kill the people."

The raids were seen as an attempt by the Kurds to stem the concentration of Government armour, troops and Islamic guardsmen around Mahabad.

The Interior Minister, Mr Hasem Sabbaghian, on Saturday night rejected any further talks with Kurdish negotiators. Mr Sabbaghian described the KDP leaders as trouble-makers and traitors. He also said Iran had warned Iraq against giving the rebels aid and cover, because "destructive activities in Iran were not in the interest of our Moslem neighbours."

Although the Iraqi Embassy here later issued a statement denying that any such notice had been served, Mr Sabbaghian's warning coincided with reports that Iran's Foreign Minister had met the Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein at the non-aligned conference in Havana to discuss the Kurdish crisis.

In a note handed to the Iranian Government over the weekend, the Turkish Government denied any involvement in the recent Kurdish troubles. The note, handed to the Prime Minister by the Turkish envoy here, stressed Ankara's desire for friendly relations and stated that reinforcements had been sent to the Iranian border to prevent further possible attacks.

Meanwhile, Ayatollah Khomeini has said he was ready to go to Kurdistan to quell the uprising if necessary. "I cannot be a passive spectator to the break-up of our country and the martyrdom of our youths," Ayatollah Sadeghi, from the central desert town of Yazd, quoted Khomeini as saying at a meeting in Qom last Thursday.
Liz Thurland adds: Over the past two days, the Kurds have launched a series of attacks, leaving at least 40 dead. In a televised address late Friday night, a demoralised Prime Minister urged Iranians to return to Tehran, and take control of the Government. Mr. Mir-Hossein Musavi, he said, had been rejected by the Kurds. An army had recently tried to hand in transport vehicle not far from his resignation, but the offer, Mahabad. Another six gendarmes were killed at an outpost, the Ayatollah, farther west and two members