

The Economist

INTERNATIONAL

Iran

From Allah's earth

FROM A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

The unremitting persecution of Iran's Bahai community is one more sign of the ascendancy of the Hojattih, the far-right group of mullahs who originally called themselves the Anti-Bahai Society. The Hojattih hold the Bahais to be the earth's most satanic beings, with communists coming second worst. They are dedicated to removing the Bahais from the face of "Allah's earth". President Reagan has now asked world leaders to join him in appealing to Ayatollah Khomeini not to carry out death sentences against 22 Bahais awaiting execution in Shiraz; the likelihood of his being listened to is tiny.

The Bahais are considered Islamic heretics by the Iranian regime. The largest of Iran's religious minorities, the Bahais were founded in 1844 by the Bab of Shiraz and have members in many parts of the world. There were about 300,000 in Iran but many have fled since the ayatollahs took over. Those who remain are in hiding—and in danger. The Hojattih, who spent years compiling lists of their names, were able to lengthen their lists last year when a charitable fund helping needy Bahais was taken over and its documents confiscated. So far, 121 Bahais have been executed and more than 200 are in prison.

Bahai adults are not allowed to work and Bahai children are banned from any sort of schooling. Many parents have sent their children to stay with Moslem friends or undetected Bahai relatives so that they can continue their education. In some instances the regime offers a "reprieve" for Bahais who renounce their faith. Few have done so though there have been a handful of showcase conversions with much attendant publicity.

Compared with the Bahais, Iran's other two main religious minorities, the Jews and the Christians, have been left alone. They are not allowed to run their own schools but can practise a subdued version of their own faiths. Their leaders are periodically advised on the type of sermon they should be giving. This advice has included a call for recruitment to the war with Iraq, and many Armenian Christians have responded.

The Bahais have no way to fight back against the regime. Communism, the Hojattih's second enemy, presents more resistance. Hojattih influence was largely responsible for the closing down of Iran's Tudeh (communist) party which led, last month, to the arrest of nearly 4,000 suspected party members. It also

led to the hasty removal of Iran's naval commander, Captain Bahram Afzali, who was once considered one of Tudeh's ace cards within the regime.

The Hojattih have now extended the fight against communism to a fight against Iran's Kurds. Earlier this year the non-communist Kurdish Democratic party released a statement saying that the Soviet Union should be considered "a friend of Iran". This statement may have been intended to shock the west into paying more heed to Kurdish demands for autonomy. The right-wing mullahs, however, are using it as evidence that the Kurdish Democratic party has gone over to the Soviet Union and needs to be wiped out for ideological as well as political reasons.

With Hojattih support, Iran's army and revolutionary guard have launched an offensive against the Kurds in the hope of blasting a path through their mountain province and opening a new front against Iraq. So far the Kurdish guerrillas are more or less holding them back but the fighting is fierce and will grow fiercer.

Guatemala

Bad timing

FROM OUR CENTRAL AMERICA CORRESPONDENT

As a high-level Guatemalan delegation to the United States was assuring receptive Americans that a Guatemalan election would be announced "not later than March, 1984", with voting probably the following June, President Efraim Rios Montt was declaring at his regular televised Sunday sermon that an election would be put off indefinitely "until the nation was ready". He claimed that more time was needed to reorganise the electoral register and that the nation's suspended political parties (recently reinvigorated with the prospect of elections) also needed to be modified. This unexpected volte-face has thrown Guatemalans and Americans into confusion.

General Rios Montt, an evangelical Protestant, has wrought great changes in Guatemala since he was thrust to power by young officers in March, 1982. Most of the licensed killing in urban areas, a feature of the brutal regime he succeeded, has been curbed. The 4,000 left-wing insurgents who last year controlled most of the rugged north-west of the country (about a third of its territory) have been badly hit and dispersed, many fleeing into southern Mexico.

This success is due largely to a counter-insurgency drive, known as *Techos, tortillas y trabajo* (roofs, tortillas and work). With the help of Israeli advisers, it has



succeeded where a similar campaign in neighbouring El Salvador, pushed by American advisers, has failed. Some 100,000 Guatemalans have been organised into a civil defence force armed with weapons ranging from rifles (some flintlocks) to machetes. Anybody who resists recruitment risks being summarily shot. Money, food and work go to those who collaborate with the government.

Small patrols—another technique El Salvador's government could copy—have rooted the guerrillas out of their strongholds. But the price of this success has been very high. Civilians thought to be in sympathy with the guerrillas have been killed in large numbers. Some 100,000 refugees who have fled to southern Mexico tell horrendous tales of the murder of whole hamlets and the sadistic butchery of women and children to deter other villagers from joining the left. The country's Indian population, amounting to 60% of the whole, has borne the brunt of these army killings, which still continue. In addition, about 1m Indians have been made homeless by the continued fighting.

General Rios Montt has survived a number of coup attempts, all from the far