

Iran says battle is on for Kurd rebel stronghold of Mahabad

From Reuter in Tehran

Iran announced last night it had launched the battle for Mahabad, the Kurdish rebel stronghold. Kurdish forces defending the city 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 Zionist-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 Zionist, reflect totally false reports about Kurdistan. The Islamic Republican Army does not kill the people. Counter-revolutionaries kill the people."

of a medical team at Saqqez, which the army captured seven days ago.

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 Hashem 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 Irano-Turkish border to prevent any "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 Sadoughi from the central desert town of Yazd, quoted Khomeini as saying at a meeting in Qom last Thursday.

Liz Thurgood adds: Over In a televised address late the past two days, the Kurds Friday night, a demoralised have launched a series of Prime Minister urged Iranians attacks, leaving at least 40 dead. to ask Ayatollah Khomeini to return to Tehran, and take control of the Government. Mr Bazargan confirmed that he had recently tried to hand in his resignation, but the offer, he said, had been rejected by the Ayatollah.

In the worst of several raids, 15 Government volunteers were killed yesterday, when the Kurds ambushed an army transport vehicle not far from Mahabad. Another six gendarmes were killed at an outpost farther west and two members