

Doc. Number: KP000104

Rebels brace for Iranian Army assault on Kurdish stronghold of Mahabad

Tehran, **Iran** (AP)—Kurdish forces braced yesterday for what could be the climactic battle of their rebellion in mountainous western Iran—an assault the government said it was sending against the Kurdish stronghold of Mahabad.

"We are going to crush the rebels on the command of God," the interior minister, Hashem Sabaghian, proclaimed on the state radio.

Kurdish leaders mobilized their own troops, saying a fight for Mahabad would be the "battle of their destiny." The heavily defended city is headquarters of the outlawed Kurdish Democratic party, which seeks autonomy for Iran's 4 million

Kurds.

A Kurdish Democratic party official, reached by telephone in Mahabad, said government forces would be welcome in Mahabad "if they came as friends. But at present we are faced with an army which regards us as enemies so we have no other choice but to try and defend our existence with our fingernails and teeth."

In the radio broadcast, Sabaghian said government troops were within 4 miles of the city and he was "warning the Kurds for the last time" not to follow the lead of the KDP.

Amid reports that government armored columns were poised to move on

the city as early as last weekend, a Kurdish mission went to Tehran last Sunday to explore the possibility of a negotiated settlement. But it ended negotiations without an agreement and said yesterday it was going home. The Kurdish leadership in Mahabad called a general mobilization and the government in Tehran said the Army was ready to move on the city.

Meanwhile, Tehran's official press reported scattered combat in other towns populated by Kurds, and the government took new steps to crack down on journalists. It summoned publishers of closed-down newspapers to a prison so officials

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Kurds' forces braced for Iranian attack

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could investigate their reporting. A correspondent for the *London Daily Telegraph*, Christopher de Kretser, was ordered out of the country on a claim he had failed to apply for press accreditation and had sent "untrue reports" to his newspaper. He became the seventh foreign correspondent expelled from Iran in 11 weeks.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the religious leader who inspired the Islamic revolution that ousted Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi last winter, has called on the Army to crush the Kurdish revolt. He has also banned the KDP and called for its leaders' arrests.

Last weekend, in the most intense fighting so far in Kurdistan, government troops broke a rebel siege of the military garrison at Saqqez, 50 miles south of Mahabad, using tanks, artillery, and helicopter gunships. Mahabad, with a population of 100,000, is considerably bigger, and Kurdish rebels have vowed that any fight for it will be tougher than the fight for Saqqez.

Government media reported yesterday that 14 persons from both sides had died in scattered fighting in the previous 72 hours. One fight was reported at the Army garrison at Saqqez, which the official Pars news agency said was besieged anew by Kurds Friday night. Pars said they were beaten back by Army troops assisted by American-made F-4 Phantom fighter jets, used for dropping flares.

The Kurdish central command in Mahabad said Iranian Air Force Phantoms also strafed villages around Sardasht, 75 miles south of Mahabad, yesterday.

The status of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan was uncertain after he appealed to the people in a midnight television address Friday night to ask Ayatollah Khomeini to come to Tehran and assume the reins of government. On Saturday, state radio repeatedly announced that it, too, would broadcast Mr. Bazargan's speech but then said that