

# Iranian minorities urged to unite

From Liz Thurgood in Tehran

The plight of Iran's ethnic minorities was brought into focus yesterday when the Kurdish leader, Sheikh Ezzeddin Hosseini, made an impassioned call for solidarity among Arabs, Baluchis and Turks in their fight for autonomy.

The sheikh had just come from what was described as "useful talks" in Qom—where, with Kurdish and Turkish representatives, he had discussed Kurdish demands with the Ayatollahs Khomeini and Hsari-iatmadari, two of the country's three most influential religious leaders. But few people believe he won much more from Khomeini than verbal, long-term promises.

"We want freedom for all political parties, a government that both defends civil liberties and respects the demands of Iran's ethnic minorities for autonomy," Sheikh Hosseini said. In reference to the increasingly hard-line political stand from the Islamic leadership in Qom, Sheikh Hosseini stated: "No one individual will rule our society. We won't allow dictatorship back into Iran."

The sheikh's implicit warn-

ing coincided with fresh reports of trouble from the oil-rich province of Khuzestan, where Arab minority groups are calling for a greater degree of self-rule.

Tehran Radio reported that gunmen of an "unofficial" militia attacked the town of Masjedez Soleiman. One person died and four were wounded as revolutionary guards attempted to force the militia out.

The clash erupted as authorities launched a vigorous drive to disarm militiamen terrorising the people of Khuzestan. The militia groups took control after the February revolution. On Sunday a clash in the port of Khorramshahr left 11 wounded.

"Imperialists and reactionaries" were trying to "divide and rule," Sheikh Hosseini said and urged all Iran's minorities — who make up perhaps 50 per cent of the country's 35 million people — to fight for autonomy. "Don't let religion divide us," he said. The minorities are generally Sunni Moslems. The Persian-speaking Iranians of the central plateau, as exemplified by Ayatollah Khomeini, are members of the unorthodox

Shi'a sect. "The Kurdish struggle is part of the Iranian struggle, and we will always be with the Iranian people."

Since the February uprising, two Kurdish rebellions have erupted, leaving as many as 300 dead. The question of Iran's ethnic minorities, suppressed by the Shah, is undoubtedly one of the toughest problems facing Iran's Provisional Government, which has been accused of stalling on Kurdish demands. Those range from a locally elected assembly and Kurdish-recruited gendarmerie and police force to linguistic and cultural rights.

Despite repeated Government pledges of autonomy for the provinces, a draft copy of proposed constitution published in a local newspaper largely ignored the rights of the minorities.

Last month Turkomans in north-east Iran suddenly rebelled against what they considered inaction on their demands not only for autonomy but also for a redistribution of land. The fighting only stopped when the Army moved in and the Turkomans, completely outnumbered, fled with their guns to the mountains.

The Government has tended

to blame the rebellions among the minorities on local Communists, but the Marxist-Leninist Fadayan-e-Khalq Guerrillas have in turn warned of "a plot by Shah loyalist mercenaries aimed at destabilising western Iran. General Palizban, Sardar Jafar and many former secret police agents were said to be paying mercenaries to rob, loot and kill."

Iran's provisional Prime Minister has appealed to the country's 10 million-strong labour force to cooperate with the Government in the task of reconstructing the economy. Dr Mehdi Bazargan, quoted on Tehran Radio, said pay rises granted indiscriminately to mollify angry workers during the last months of the Shah's regime, were excessive. Iran, he said, was staggering not only under the burden of economic problems created by past regimes, but also under the impact of strikes since the beginning of this year.

The Prime Minister did not mention unemployment, which officials at the Labour Ministry have put the number at less than one million. But a figure of more than three million is generally believed to be more accurate.

