

Iranians take rebel Kurdish town



From Liz Thurgood in Tehran

The Iranian Armed Forces entered the rebel Kurdish stronghold of Mahabad yesterday under the cover of Phantom F-4 jet fighters.

The Army's entry came after seven hours of sustained aerial bombardment around the small town in Western Iran. Among the jets' targets were the local garrison, a school, and a bank. Rebel hilltop positions, quickly abandoned, also were pounded.

It was not known last night how many people had died in yesterday's fighting, but the Kurds say that more than 600 people have been killed in almost three weeks of bitter fighting with the central authorities.

The rebels, vowing to continue their struggle, fled into the surrounding hills as armoured personnel carriers, backed by columns of troops,

rumbled into the town from the north-east.

Witnesses reported many casualties and huge columns of black smoke spiralling from the bombed Kurdish arsenal where tanks and heavy vehicles, seized from the Army after the Shah's flight, smouldered last night. But the fleeing Kurds reportedly managed to keep most of their light weapons after a general evacuation order early in the morning. Vowing to be "your nightly guests," the Kurds promised almost certain problems ahead for Ayatollah Khomeini and his Government.

The Kurds, it seemed, originally had tried to defend their town with anti-aircraft guns on hilltops. Inside Mahabad, Kurdish gunmen fired at Government aircraft from behind curtained windows as women and children took shelter in makeshift bunkers

or streamed out of town.

But the Kurds were no match for the Government which during the past week concentrated more than 100 tanks, mostly American M-47s, in a tightening noose around Mahabad. Mahabad was almost empty when the Urumieh 64th Division drove in shortly after noon yesterday.

CHOLERA has killed five people and threatens all Iran, the Health Ministry said yesterday. Tehran was among 20 cities where more than 200 cases of a strain of cholera, had been reported.

Posters still hung from walls urging the Kurds to be prepared for "justice" or face "Khalkhal"—a reference to the Ayatollah's judge who summarised justice in the western province has sent 80 Kurds before Islamic firing squads.

In Tehran, meanwhile, a Kurdish delegation reportedly was distributing copies of an appeal to Khomeini for a ceasefire and the reopening of negotiations. In reply, the Iranian leader repeated an earlier message that those Kurds who returned to the arms of the nation would be well treated, but those who refused would be considered traitors and "given due punishment."

Unlike earlier Government victories in Kurdistan, the fall of Mahabad was seen as a serious psychological blow in the Kurdish struggle for autonomy. Mahabad, declared an independent republic after the Second World War, was where the Kurdish pulse beat hardest, and until recently was home to the Kurdish Democratic Party leadership.

With the fall of Mahabad apparently complete, Baneh appeared to be the Iranian

military's next target. Colonel Iraq Sepehr told the State Radio yesterday that the 28th Infantry Division was only 6 miles outside the small town, believed to have been a key supply post.

The recapture of Baneh might prove difficult. Unlike Mahabad, which lay in rolling agricultural land on asphalt roads, Baneh is high in mountainous terrain and accessible only by dirt tracks.

In Tehran, the Government spokesman was quoted yesterday as saying that four Israeli soldiers, two Iraqi officers, and a Frenchman with false press credentials had been arrested in Kurdistan. This, Mr Sadegh Tabatabaee said, was adequate proof of the foreign, Zionist-inspired plot against Iran.

Meanwhile, unknown gunmen have destroyed part of a railway bridge in the oil-rich pro-

vince of Khuzestan where Arab-speaking Iramians fought bitterly earlier in the summer with forces loyal to Khomeini.

The first article of Iran's new Constitution was approved yesterday by the Assembly of Experts, heavily weighted in the mosque's favour. Only a minor amendment was made to the article saying that Iran is an Islamic republic, but the voting pattern (84 to three with three abstentions) was expected to be widely repeated in coming weeks.

