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The Doc Number KR0000879; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986)

pg. A4

Kurds pull back from armed conflict in Iran, but tension remains

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Marivan, Iran—The order for Kurdish militiamen to withdraw from this eerie ghost town in northwest Iran came before sunrise yesterday as the irregulars in their traditional turbans and baggy trousers loaded ammunition and grenades into vehicles and pulled out after 12 days of holding the city against central government forces.

Dogs barked and sheep bleated in the moonlight as the Pesh Marga (Committed to Death) forces with their vintage assortment of Soviet, Israeli and U.S. rifles scrambled through this city 12 miles from the Iraq border.

The sudden move came after women, children and other noncombatants evacuated Marivan last week in expectation of a pitched battle with government forces; Marivan is the latest flashpoint in the showdown between the Kurdish autonomy movement and the Tehran government.

Through his several hundred men had vowed to hold the city to the death, the young, bearded Kurd commander said that the pullout would avoid bloodshed and destruction and provide a chance for a peaceful settlement.

The government troops had just released 16 hostages grabbed 10 days ago but refused to meet Kurdish demands that the Tehran-commanded Revolutionary Guards be relieved of security duties in the city. Eleven persons were killed and 30 injured two weeks ago in clashes between Kurd protesters demonstrating against distorted radio-television reporting of the events here and against these Revolutionary Guards.

The hostilities led to the Kurdish takeover and evacuation of noncombatants as the Army troops assembled in a post just over the hill from Marivan.

Meanwhile, several thousand persons marching from Sanandaj to Marivan in support of Kurdish demands for autonomy

ended their fifth day with plans to continue to the hillside camp where women, children and the Kurdish militia were staying outside Marivan. March organizers said the demonstrators would march into Iraq if the government did not yield by tomorrow.

The marchers appeared in good spirits as they set out yesterday morning from their overnight camp site along a stream surrounded by barren brown hills, just 16 miles east of Marivan.

Sunstroke in 130-degree heat, feet blisters and stomach problems forced a number to retire from the hilly, unshaded road over 94 miles of stony washboard road.

About 60,000 persons had started from Sanandaj, capital of Kurdistan province, but most soon turned back after a few miles. Other Kurdish villagers along the well-planned journey provided food and water as well as new marchers, lining the roadside to cheer the travellers and to toss candies to them.

The Kurdish protest symbolized by Marivan and by the march is aimed at securing self-rule for the four million Kurds in northwestern Iran, denying central Islamic rule in the country and objecting to what they call biased reports against Kurds in government media.

On a dusty hillside along the route organizers explained their purposes. They blamed the Tehran government, and the Islamic leadership in Qom, for sending in Revolutionary Guards to terrorize Marivan and to enforce rule by feudal landlords over Kurdish peasants.

The Tehran government has also employed remnants of the old Iraqi Kurdish separatists of the late Mustafa Barzani to put down Iranian Kurdish autonomists, they claim. Mr. Barzani's two sons have been paid to lead these forces, with a camp at Dezly, just inside the Iraq border, and a liaison office in a palace near Tehran built by the shah for the older Mr.

Barzani, the march spokesman said.

The shah backed Mr. Barzani in his feud against Iraq until 1975.

"These people may call themselves Kurds but they are not Iranian Kurds, they are not our people but are fighting against our people," the young organizer said. Iranian Kurds want self rule in Iran, not independence or union with the eight million Kurds in neighboring countries, the marchers emphasized.

"We are not separatists and we are not Communists," said Mubeb Balban, who studied computer science at the University of Maryland five years ago.

Like a number of the march officials, he was armed for potential troubles with a small-caliber automatic strapped over his black and white laced sash.

Communist is a common denunciation exchanged by opponents in Iran. But the rhetoric of some marchers was spiced with such telling phrases as "class struggle," forces that are "progressive and anti-bourgeois," and so on. A banner erected over the route proclaimed the soviet of the farmers as the route to suc-

cess.

Most of the marchers were young people, many of them reportedly students and civil servants, rather than the peasant farmers who watched them as they harvested their wheat crops with hand scythes or tended their sheep flocks.

The march was organized by the Society for the Defense of Freedom and Revolution.

The improvement of these peasant farmers' lot necessarily involves a struggle with the feudal landlords, who ironically profited most from the shah's land redistribution program, Mr. Balban explained. "There is a socialistic aim," you could say, he added.

But the struggle in Iran's Kurdistan—an area 100 by 400 miles—is as much over recognition of national identity and cultural difference as over economic revolution. Other national groups in Iran—Arabs, Azarbaijanis, Baluchis and Turkmans—have taken advantage of a weak revolutionary government in Tehran to agitate for regional autonomy. The government and Ayatollah Ruhollah

Khomeini have promised recognition of the ethnic groups but have failed to deliver in the recently published draft constitution for the Islamic republic.

Though they are among the poorest of Iranians in their mountainous northwestern corner of Iran, the Kurds supported the shah, who deftly let them run their own affairs while he financed Mr. Barzani's separatist campaign in Iraq. Forgiven was the Soviet-backed Federated Republic of Kurdistan that lasted less than a year until 1947, when the shah recovered the territory with western assistance.

Since the Islamic republic of Ayatollah Khomeini came into being this spring, stressing Persian nationalism and Shia Muslim orthodoxy, the Kurds have rebelled. Their Sunni Muslim religion is less strict—one source of current friction is the open sale of forbidden liquor smuggled in from Iraq on the streets of Kurdish cities.

The resentment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards is also keen. Kurds want self-rule in their territory and use of their language in schools and local government,

which is not a tall order because of its great similarity to Persian.

Sensitively to distorted reporting of their goals led to the violence and confrontation in Marivan. Kurds and government troops battled each other in Sanandaj in March after a dispute about grain deliveries. Dozens were killed a month ago in Naghadeh when Revolutionary Guards broke up a Kurdish autonomy meeting. The Kurds then left the town and have not returned.

Similarly, the Kurds abandoned Marivan to prevent destruction of the city. Machine gun and rocket attacks by government forces had killed one Kurd and wounded several others over the past week, city defenders said.

Army tanks sent toward Marivan were reported still stalled miles away yesterday as Kurds continued to lie in the roads to stop their advance. With the pullout by Kurdish militia forces the armor is unlikely to be needed but road scrapers were busy levelling the gravel track toward the city, a sign that tanks could be soon rolling in that direction.

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