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Kurds shelled, strafed in battle for town; heavy losses reported

Tehran, Iran (AP)—Artillery and helicopter gunships pounded Kurdish forces last night in the western town of Saqqez. Kurdish sources claimed the rebels had killed 80 soldiers in the largest battle since fighting began 10 days ago between government forces and rebels who want autonomy for Kurdistan.

Helicopters dropped flares over the Kurdish defenders and made strafing passes as government troops on the outskirts of Saqqez fired mortars into the center of town. No figures were available on rebel casualties, but reporters at the scene said the toll was heavy on both sides.

Kurdish sources said about 2,000 heavily armed Kurdish fighters were in Saqqez, holding out against a greater number of government troops.

The Army had moved artillery close to the town of 40,000 inhabitants, but withdrew when the Kurds began firing with light cannon and recoilless rifles, reporters said.

Sources said the Kurds controlled a bridge between the town and the main road leading to Sanandaj to the south, but the Army was expected to move up reinforcements and heavier weapons at daybreak. Reporters saw a column of tanks moving towards Saqqez.

Medical teams were trying to enter the town to help the wounded but were pinned down by the heavy fighting, reporters said.

There was no indication who provoked the latest round of fighting. The Kurds had been reported avoiding clashes with the more heavily armed government troops sent to Kurdistan province in the previous 36 hours.

Earlier yesterday, 25 government soldiers were killed in a rebel ambush, the official Pars news agency reported.

In a brief message distributed by Kurdish sources in Tehran, Sheikh Ezzedin Houssein, leader of the province's four million Kurds, called on Iranians to defend the Kurds because "it is becoming clear now

the government is leading the country to a new dictatorship," and warned them "not to believe the poisonous lies which are being spread under the noble name of religion."

He said the Kurds "will not stop fighting for one moment until Kurdish aspirations are met within a united Iran." For centuries the large Kurdish population in northwestern Iran has fought for independence, but they now say they want autonomy within the nation of Iran.

Reporters in Kurdistan said yesterday that troops and revolutionary guards entered the town of Kamyaran, south of the region's chief city, Sanandaj, disarmed the local population and declared martial law. "The town was dead and no traffic was permitted to pass through for five hours," a reporter said.

At Sanandaj, where the government has a large air base, reports said C-130 troop transports "flew in constantly" taking men and supplies to bolster the growing number of troops assigned to Kurdistan.

The chief of the armed forces, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Houssein Shaker, in a message to the Kurds, claimed the troops were not being sent to Kurdistan to suppress them but were "simply returning to where they used to be," Pars reported.

He said "The Islamic Republic Army pledges to bring peace and order to the Kurdistan area and crush any kind of armed resistance."

While attempts were under way to control the Kurds, ethnic Arabs in Khuzestan warned that if their spiritual leader is not permitted to return home by tomorrow "we will react strongly."

Sheikh Shobeir Khaqani was whisked away by government forces in July after the minority Arabs clashed with revolutionary guards in the port city of Khoramshahr.

The Arabs, also seeking a degree of self-rule for their ethnic minority in a mostly Persian nation, could deal a severe blow to the government if they sabotaged

the oil installations, which now are under heavy guard.

In early July Arab activists claimed responsibility for bombs that damaged oil pipelines. Pipelines leading to the world's biggest oil refinery, in Abadan, were shut down for 10 days.

Iran may have key to N-weapons, expert says

Los Angeles (AP)—Iran may have gained a key part of the technology needed for nuclear weapons production from a small Los Angeles laser manufacturing firm that received financing from the government of the now-deposed shah, a scientist says.

The federal government approved the sale, though officials at the Department of Energy contend the process of enriching uranium with laser beams, the system purchased by Iran, is faulty and will not produce the promised results, according to James Kratz, chief of DOE's nuclear export branch.

However, Dr. Jeffrey Eerkens, who holds the patent on the system, said Wednesday the DOE evaluation at the government's Los Alamos nuclear laboratory was carelessly done with second-hand information.

"The proof of the pudding is that I did get enrichment when I used this process—and that the equipment I used at the time is now considered extremely primitive," he said.

Dr. Eerkens said the lasers sold to Iran were not specifically meant for enriching uranium.

The lasers and associated equipment, said to have cost \$2 million, arrived in Tehran last October, but the overthrow of the shah combined with the absence of technical assistance are likely to preclude their use for some time, the Los Angeles Times reported Wednesday.