

Troubles Erupt in Iran's Border Areas: Disorders in Border Regions Challenge Iran's New Rulers

By Ronald Koven Washington Post Foreign Service

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By Ronald Koven

Washington Post Foreign Service

TEHRAN, March 19—Major difficulties have erupted for the Iranian revolutionary government in eastern and western frontier regions.

The troubles underscored the disorganization of the month-old Islamic revolution and the extent to which the central government risks losing control in various separatist-inclined regions.

In the west, up to 150 persons were reported killed in fighting between Kurds and the military. In the east, Iran closed the border with Afghanistan in a dispute over the movement

of refugees and armed tribesmen across the frontier.

With a national referendum scheduled for March 30 on the establishment of an Islamic republic, the country's many regional ethnic groups have maximum leverage now to get pledges of strong autonomy from Tehran. Otherwise, the Kurds, Baluchis, Turkomans, Azerbaijanis and the Arabs of the southwest could be tempted to vote "no" in the referendum.

For this and other reasons, not least the apparently complete lack of logistical preparation for the vote, there is widespread speculation that the referendum may be postponed.

In the west, there was heavy fight-

ing in one of the main Kurdish towns between autonomists and a local military garrison. The fighting, in which there was a number of casualties, apparently ended after more than 24 hours with an official cease-fire following the personal intervention of revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

In the east, Iran closed its borders with Afghanistan to prevent an influx of refugees, only to be accused by the pro-Soviet government in Kabul of doing so to cover up for the infiltration of 4,000 Iranian troops within a group of 7,000 refugees turned back at the border by the Afghans.

Informed sources dismissed the idea

that the demoralized Iranian Army could mount such an operation, but they noted that heavily armed Baluchi tribesmen have been taking advantage of the anarchy in the region to infiltrate from Iran into Afghanistan to help fellow tribesmen in revolt against Kabul.

The refugees turned back by Iran were presumably fleeing fighting between Afghan forces and Shiite Muslims in Afghanistan, who are coreligionists of the majority of Iranians led by Khomeini.

The accusations by the Afghan government were backed up by an editorial in the Soviet Communist Party

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newspaper Pravda warning Iran to keep hands off Afghanistan.

The Iranian government denied for the second day in a row that it has any desire to mix in Afghan affairs. The Tehran government apparently felt the need to reiterate its denial because of a strong statement by one of the leading figures in the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari of Qom, accusing the Afghans of massacring thousands of Shiites including 170 religious figures. He called on Moslems throughout the world to rally to the cause of the Afghan Shiites.

Shariatmadari is senior to Khomeini in protocol, and his statement was widely seen as a bid to reassert his standing as leader of the Iranian Shiites.

Reports from Kurdistan in the west were sketchy, but the Tehran government's strong reaction made it clear that it was taking very seriously the situation in the region, which has a history of separatism.

The troubles appeared to be largely confined to Sanandaj, one of the larger Kurdish towns near the border with Iraq, which also has a large rebellious Kurdish minority. Kurds apparently loyal to the most separatist-inclined of the major political tribes in Iranian Kurdistan took over a police barracks, the police headquarters and the radio station before surrounding the military garrison and kidnapping its commander.

Reports of deaths in the fighting ranged from 4 to 150. This followed even sketchier reports of fighting in another, smaller Kurdish locality, Ghorveh, near the large center of Hamadan, with numerous deaths and wounded. Reports of that fighting



By Dave Cook—The Washington Post

were backed up by a British doctor, who runs a hospital there, who said his staff had treated a large number of wounded.

It seems established that the fighting in Sanandaj started after both the local Revolutionary Committee and the military refused requests to distribute arms and ammunition to the local Kurds to defend themselves against the large Iranian minority in the town. The Iranians were reportedly heavily armed by the Revolutionary Committee, led by local Iranian religious leaders.

More fundamentally, however, there seems to have been growing unrest in the region since Khomeini issued a statement dubbing a moderate Kurdish leader, Ahmad Moftizadeh, as the "Kurds' sole religious and political leader."

This was an obvious attempt to undercut the much stronger autonomy

demands voiced in Kurdistan by a leading religious figure, Sheik Sayed Ezzedin Husseini, elected after the Islamic revolution by left-of-center Kurds as the spokesman for their demands.

The localized nature of the fighting seemed to be confirmed by a broadcast statement by a leading Kurdish leftist that the other Kurdish towns are quiet. Sanandaj has a population of 80,000 and none of the other Iranian Kurdish towns is much larger. The Kurdish population of Iran is estimated at 1.5 million to 2 million, out of a national total of about 34 million.

The Tehran government was clearly worried that the troubles could spread to all of Kurdistan. The government announced that it was rushing revolutionary militia to Sanandaj to enforce the cease-fire that was to have gone into effect at 6 p.m. local time. It was not specified exactly what was meant by revolutionary militia. The regular army is clearly in no condition to reinforce its local garrison in a remote area.

Military garrisons in other remote regions where the troops are overwhelmingly Iranians stationed among other ethnic groups are thought to be among the few army units to have remained intact since the revolution.

Shiite Moslem leader Khomeini appealed today to the Kurds, who are Sunni Moslems, as "being part of the same nation and the same Koran," the Moslem holy book.

"We do not have any differences with our Sunni brothers," Khomeini said. He decried any attacks on the police or the army, which, he said, has "returned to the people."

Gen. Mohammed Vali Qarani, the new armed forces chief of staff, called the Sanandaj rebels "counterrevolutionaries" who will be "severely punished."