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# The Big Question: Is the world's longest-lasting civil war finally coming to an end?

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Why are we asking this now? The Sri Lankan military said over the weekend that it was now in control of the entire western coast of the country, having captured the key strategic area of Pooneryn. This stronghold has been under the control of the Tamil Tiger rebels (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam &ndash; LTTE) since 1993 and the capture of the city means that for the first time in more than a decade government forces have in their grasp a land route all the way to a ferry that can easily bring supplies to the northern city of Jaffna.

What does this mean for the Tamil Tigers? The reported breakthrough will cut off the local supply routes of the Tamil Tigers. "We have completely taken over Pooneryn. We have gone up to the town, and control the roads from Pooneryn to Paranthan," the military spokesman, Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara, told reporters. To celebrate the victory, the government declared a week of celebrations, starting today, to honour the military. Why is this strategically important? For the past month, the Sri Lankan military has said it was poised to take control of the Tamil's de facto headquarters of Kilinochchi. For many weeks, fighting has been heavy at a number of points encircling the town, though reports suggest the rebels are dug in behind a series of trenches and other defences. By pushing up the west coast of the country, the government's troops have now effectively encircled Kilinochchi on three sides. The rebels will fight bitterly to retain control of this city, but for government troops it would be a major strategic and morale boost were they to seize it. The rebels would be forced to retreat through the jungle to the port of Mullaitivu where they would be surrounded on all sides. Will this military action end the civil war? "My clear message [to the Tigers] is to lay down their arms and come forward for discussions with us forthwith," said President Mahinda Rajapaksa, in a speech broadcast on television. "The laying down of their arms is the greatest service they could do for Sri Lanka." The government insists it is in the act of 'finishing off' the rebels and ending a war that has raged for a quarter of a century. However, the leading Tamil politician V Anandasangaree, of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), has already criticised a resolution passed by the legislature of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu seeking a ceasefire in Sri Lanka "as shocking and totally unacceptable". What is the conflict about and why has it been going on so long? Violence has flared on and off with various twists between the Tamil Tigers and the forces of the Sri Lankan government since 1983. The Tigers argue that the ethnic Tamil people of the country have faced institutional discrimination from the largely Sinhalese-led government since liberation from British rule (in 1948) and they say they are fighting for a separate homeland. How many people have been killed so far? At least 70,000 people have been killed in a very bloody and bitter civil war, though more recent studies suggest that the actual mortality could be many times that. After international prodding, in particular from Norway, the two sides agreed to a ceasefire in 2001. This was never particularly effective and by 2005 hostilities were under way again, with the government driving the Tigers from the east of the country. Has this split the Tigers? There was a split in the Tigers' forces. In January this year, much to the consternation of the international community, the Sri Lankan government announced that it was withdrawing from the ceasefire agreement. The announcement coincided with a bomb blast in the capital city, Colombo, which killed five people and injured dozens more. Why has the fighting increased this year? President Mahinda Rajapaksa won his election campaign in 2005 on a platform that stressed a tough and uncompromising military stance against the rebels. Since the government announced in January that it was formally pulling out of the ceasefire, he has vowed to destroy the militants by the end of the year. What is his strategy? He believes that pressing ahead with his "war for peace" will help secure political support ahead of an election scheduled for next year. He said the operation will not stop until "every inch of land is recaptured and each and every terrorist is killed or captured". A reported \$1.5bn has so far been spent on this wholesale assault and the military claims that it has killed at least 6,300 rebels. Like so many aspects of this conflict &ndash; effectively taking place out of sight of the rest of the world and with journalists barred access &ndash; such claims are impossible to verify. What does appear clear is that the latest phase of the conflict has resulted in thousand of refugees. The United Nations says that up to 200,000 people could be forced from their homes as the violence intensifies. What has been the response of the Tigers? Under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran the Tigers have developed the use of suicide bombers to strike at both military and civilian targets across the country. They have repeatedly shown their ability to attack in the capital, Colombo, despite massive security operations having been launched by the government. A special unit of militants known as the Black Tigers is responsible for most of these attacks: they assassinated the Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993 and Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. This year, the Tigers have carried out numerous attacks, including the bombing of trains and buses. In April a bomber killed the Minister for Highways and Road Development, Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, and 12 others. What will happen next? Having gathered a new momentum in June that broke a stalemate &ndash; capturing a series of important towns in a flurry of fighting &ndash; it appears as if the government is determined to push on and try to take Kilinochchi. However, even if that were to happen, it would not necessarily ensure victory for the government. Not only could the battle-hardened Tiger fighters fall back to Mullaitivu, where they can still get supplies, but they could also regroup in the jungles, something they have done before. After losing ground in the 1980s and 1990s, the Tigers fought their way back and recaptured lost ground, though analysts point out that the government forces are

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now several times stronger in number than in previous confrontations. Will this result in more suicide bombings? Many believe there could be a jump in the number of suicide bombings in Colombo as the Tigers' position becomes more desperate. Yesterday, government jets continued to pound rebel positions in the Muhamalai area of the Jaffna peninsula. There were no details as to casualties. Can there be a resolution to the Sri Lankan conflict? Yes \*The Sri Lankan military seems determined to destroy the Tigers. \*International pressure has led President Rajapaksa to call a meeting of an all-party committee seeking a political compromise. \*The Tigers are believed to be cash-strapped as a result of a crackdown on overseas funding. No \*Even if the government seizes the key strongholds, the remaining rebels will melt into the jungle and continue a hit and run war. \*The government is most unlikely to give way to the rebels' demands for autonomy. \*The Tigers' leadership is as uncompromising as that of the government. a.buncombe@independent.co.uk (Courtesy: Independent)