Sri Lanka to open escape routes from war zone-officials

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By C. Bryson HullCOLOMBO (Reuters) - Sri Lanka plans to open two safe routes to let tens of thousands of civilians trapped in a war zone escape and has invited the Red Cross to help, a senior Sri Lankan official said on Thursday. Sri Lankan soldiers have cornered the Tamil Tiger separatists in an area of less than 45 square km (17 sq miles) in the Indian Ocean island's north-eastern shore, aiming to deliver a final blow to a separatist war that has raged off and on since 1983.
Aid agencies say tens of thousands of civilians are being kept at gunpoint by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) inside a military-demarcated no-fire zone on the coast, a sandy 12-km strip of coconut groves with water on both sides. "One route will lead north past Challai and the other south past Mullaittivu town. The ICRC has been invited to facilitate the movement along these routes," the official told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is the only agency allowed a permanent presence in the war zone. It said one of its Sri Lankan workers was killed and his nine-year-old son wounded by shrapnel outside the no-fire zone on Wednesday. Two military officials and another senior government official also speaking on condition of anonymity confirmed the plan, which was decided by the president's security council on Thursday. The military officials cautioned the announcement may not come for a day or two since troops are fighting heavy battles to secure the last parts of the areas they need to open the routes. The current no-fire zone is the second demarcated by the army. When troops reached the edge of the first one which was further inland, nearly all of the roughly 37,000 people who have successfully fled the fighting this year came out in a flood. RED CROSS STANDS READY The Red Cross in Geneva said the idea has been under discussion but a spokesman said he was unable to confirm whether the Sri Lankan government had made a formal request yet. "Should there be an agreement from all parties involved, the ICRC stands ready to facilitate the movement of civilians as long as these movements are voluntary," spokesman Simon Schorno said. The LTTE could not be reached for comment with most communication in the war zone severed. It has insisted that people are staying voluntarily despite accusations from witnesses, aid agencies and rights groups that they were shooting people trying to flee and forcibly recruiting people, including children as young as 15. The Red Cross has successfully negotiated the evacuation of 2,769 sick and wounded people from the no-fire zone by boat, and ferried in medicine and food on its return trips. A group of 356 was taken out on Wednesday, the ICRC said. The United Nations and others have said there are around 200,000 people trapped in the war zone, while the government says the number is no more than 70,000. The army's commander, Lt-Gen. Sarath Fonseka, has ordered commanders to take "maximum precautions keeping the civilian factor in mind at all times," the military's official web site www.nationalsecurity.lk quoted him as saying. The pro-rebel web site, www.TamilNet.com, said on Thursday artillery fire into the no-fire zone had killed 78 civilians, but it did not name its sources and had no pictures. The military denies firing inside the no-fire zone and has repeatedly accused the LTTE of trying to manufacture a civilian crisis to get international pressure for a ceasefire, which it has done in the past and used as a period to re-arm. The LTTE is on U.S., EU, Canadian and Indian terrorism lists after a 25-year civil war in which it fought to establish a separate state for Sri Lanka's minority Tamils. (Additional reporting by Ranga Sirilal in Colombo and Stephanie Nebehay in Geneva) (Writing by Bryson Hull; Editing by Sugita Katyal)Courtesy: Reuters.com