
Over 100 Tamil rebels killed in fierce clashes

Monday, 09 March 2009

Last Updated Monday, 09 March 2009

COLOMBO (AFP) — More than 100 Tamil Tiger rebels have been killed in two days of fighting in Sri Lanka as they tried to break a military stranglehold, the defence ministry said on Sunday. They died when the army beat back a series of counter-attacks Friday and Saturday by the Tiger rebels against advancing government forces in the district of Mullaittivu in the northeast.

Fresh fighting erupted on Sunday with heavy casualties reported among the rebels, military officials said, without giving further details. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who were in control of large swathes of the north and east of Sri Lanka less than two years ago, have now been cornered in a small patch of jungle. "As the Mullaittivu battle reached its last phase, the LTTE terrorists made several desperate attempts in vain to infiltrate the military forward defences," the defence ministry statement said. "Over 100 terrorists were killed and as many injured since Friday." The government accused the Tigers of deploying heavy mortars and artillery guns inside a designated security zone where large numbers of civilians have gathered to shelter from the fighting. Concern over the danger to non-combatants has mounted as government troops fight to wipe out the remnant rebels, with the International Committee of the Red Cross saying hundreds of civilians have been killed in crossfire. With the Tigers encircled Sri Lankan military leaders have said they hope to crush the guerrillas by next month -- a victory that would end 37 years of armed conflict on the island. Sri Lanka's top defence official, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, said recently that the offensive against the Tigers had been slowed in a bid to ensure the safety of civilians whom he said were being used by the rebels as human shields. Rajapakse, President Mahinda Rajapakse's younger brother, said the military has stopped using long-range weapons and air attacks against remaining Tiger rebels, who are known to mingle with civilians. The government calculates more than 36,000 civilians have escaped from the LTTE and sought shelter in relief camps in the island's north. Nearly 500 more civilians fled Saturday, the military said, adding however that three people were shot dead by the rebels Friday as they tried to leave. Sri Lanka officially estimates that 70,000 non-combatants remain trapped, but the United Nations says that number could be about 200,000. Reports from the battle zone are impossible to verify as journalists, aid groups and international monitors are banned from travelling freely in the area. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon last week reiterated his call for a swift halt to the conflict to avoid further civilian casualties. "He strongly deplores the mounting death toll of civilians in the area of fighting, including a significant number of children," his office said in a statement. The Tigers, who have fought since 1972 for a separate Tamil homeland in Sinhalese-majority Sri Lanka, have not commented on the latest fighting, but their recent calls for a conditional truce were rejected by the government. Courtesy: Google.com