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## More civilians escape as Tiger defences collapse

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Almost 500 civilians reached government-held areas on Saturday as the army foiled a last ditch LTTE attempt to thwart the ground offensive now in its final phase. The army had repulsed two large scale counter offensives last Thursday and Friday causing heavy damage to the LTTE. At least 150 LTTE cadres had been killed in clashes, mainly with the 58 Division, the army said.

A senior military official said that men, women and children arrived at Munani, Championpattu, Vettilerkerni and Chundikulam. According to him, the LTTE wouldn't have the time or the resources to effectively block civilian movements as the army gradually ate into the area under its control. "They are down to about 40 to 45 sq. km," he said, emphasising that this included the civilian safety zone as well. The army received the civilians against the backdrop of Friday's attack on people fleeing the Mullaitivu coast in boats. Friday's attack caused three deaths and wounded two. Over 40,000 people escaped the LTTE controlled area this year leaving fewer than 70,000 trapped in the war zone. Basil Rajapaksa, MP, told The Island that the government would welcome civilians reaching the areas under its control. He asserted that large groups of people would be able to escape as the army advanced further into the last LTTE bastion. The army battled strong LTTE units at Chalai, Pattikkirai, and Puthukudirippu east. Meanwhile, the 57 Division engaged in clearing operations at Vishvadamu had killed seven LTTE cadres during a confrontation with an LTTE group Saturday morning. "We recovered seven LTTE bodies," the army said. The 58 Division conducting operations at Puthukudiyirippu recovered 19 LTTE bodies, 18 T-56 assault rifles, one heavy machine gun, one 40 mm grenade launcher, three RPGs and five communication sets. (SF)Courtesy:Island.lk