
At least 15 killed in Sri Lanka suicide attack

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COLOMBO (AFP) — At least 15 people were killed on Tuesday and another 60, including a government minister, were wounded in a suicide bombing in southern Sri Lanka blamed on Tamil Tiger rebels, officials said. The attacker targeted politicians attending a function at a mosque in the town of Akuressa, and came as the ethnic rebels continue to lose ground in the face of a fierce government offensive on their shrinking northeast base. The attacker targeted politicians attending a mosque in Akuressa

Some 20 people, including Postal Services Minister Mahinda Wijesekera, were wounded in the attack. He was reported to be fighting for his life in a local hospital. Culture Minister Mahinda Yapa Abeywardene was initially listed as wounded because he was covered in blood, but was given the all-clear and found to have been covered with the blood of other victims. "We were talking in procession and just passing the entrance to the mosque when there was a blast. I thought it was a big fire-cracker," Abeywardene told AFP by telephone from Akuressa, 160 kilometres (100 miles) south of Colombo. "My clothes were covered in blood and I started running. Later I realised that I was not hurt, but I had blood from someone who was hit in the blast. "There were lot of school children and I fear a lot of them were wounded." Military spokesman Udaya Nanayakkara blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). "It is an LTTE suicide bombing," Nanayakkara said. The guerrillas carried out a similar attack in April 2008, killing highways minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle as he took part in a national celebration ahead of the traditional New Year. There was no immediate claim of responsibility from the Tamil Tigers over the latest attack. The pro-rebel Tamilnet website however reported that at least 74 civilians -- many of them children -- had been killed and 100 others wounded Monday and Tuesday in army shelling of LTTE -controlled areas in the north. It accused the Sri Lankan army of engaging in "intensified indiscriminate shelling" of known civilian areas. The government insists it is trying to protect civilians and accuses the Tigers of using them as "human shields." Two years ago, the Tigers -- who have a long and bloody record of suicide attacks -- controlled large swathes of the north and east of this South Asian island, but have suffered a series of major setbacks. weekend as they fought to defend the small area of territory still under their control. On Sunday, the government said its plan to defeat the LTTE once and for all had entered its "final phase". The Sri Lankan government bans most journalists and aid workers from the north of the island, meaning such claims cannot be verified. The government withdrew from a Norwegian-brokered truce at the start of last year, after accusing the Tigers of using the peace process to re-arm. Courtesy: google.com