
Refugees fleeing as Sri Lanka fighting picks up

Wednesday, 11 March 2009

Last Updated Wednesday, 11 March 2009

By C. Bryson Hull COLOMBO (Reuters) - Nearly 400 people fled Sri Lanka's shrinking war zone and a wounded cabinet minister regained consciousness after a suicide bombing blamed on the cornered Tamil Tiger rebels, officials said on Wednesday.

Sri Lanka's military has encircled the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a mere 37 sq km (15 sq miles) on the island nation's north-eastern coast and is fighting to finish a separatist war that has raged off and on since 1983. Troops killed 16 LTTE fighters in a series of battles on Tuesday and Wednesday, military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara said. The Tigers could not be reached for comment. Soldiers received 378 fleeing Tamil civilians on Tuesday, bringing the total to 1,054 since Friday, he said. More than 36,000 fled in early February when troops reached a former no-fire zone but the pace slowed to almost none in recent weeks. "Now it's picking up again," Nanayakkara said. He said 38,900 have fled this year. There are tens of thousands still in the war zone. Aid agencies, rights groups and the government have urged the LTTE to stop holding them by force as human shields. The government says 70,000 are there, while the Red Cross says there are 150,000. The Tigers insist people are staying out of choice, but refugees who have escaped say the rebels shoot those who try to run and are conscripting people, including children as young as 15, to fight with almost no training. The LTTE accuses the government of intentionally shelling civilians, which the military denies. It says troops have slowed their offensive to protect civilians. The government has rejected a Tiger ceasefire call as a ploy to buy time to re-arm, and pledged safe passage to civilians. Although few doubt the military shortly will destroy the Tigers as a conventional force, few also expect the group to stop carrying out unconventional attacks like a suicide bombing that killed 14 in southern Sri Lanka on Tuesday. Post and Telecommunications Minister Mahinda Wijesekara on Wednesday came off of life support but remained in intensive care at a Colombo hospital. He was among 35 wounded in the blast outside a mosque in Godapitiya, blamed on the LTTE. "He is stable but we'll have to keep him little longer at the ICU. Doctors are happy with his condition and he is on the path of recovery," Colombo National Hospital director Dr. Hector Weerasinghe said. The attack targeted a group of six ministers at a Muslim celebration. Wijesekara was the only minister hurt. The LTTE has not commented on the explosion. It rarely admits to such attacks despite proving the effectiveness of using the suicide blast as a weapon of war and inventing the "suicide jacket," an explosives-laden vest. The Tigers' use of hundreds of suicide bombings over the 25-year war has landed them on U.S., EU, Canadian and Indian terrorist lists. It also has created a high-security environment where Tamils are closely scrutinized by the military. The government says the checks are necessary because the Tigers repeatedly have used people disguised as civilians -- particularly women -- to carry out the attacks. Many Tamils say that scrutiny contributes to feelings of marginalization. The minority group has long complained that successive governments led by the Sinhalese majority have sidelined them since independence from Britain in 1948. (Additional reporting by Ranga Sirilal; Editing by Sanjeev Miglani) Courtesy: reuters.com