
Sri Lanka says seizes hospital from rebels

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By Scott McDonald, Associated Press COLOMBO, Sri Lanka – The Sri Lankan army Thursday seized the last remaining medical facility held by separatist Tamil Tiger rebels in the north of the island, a military official said. Military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said the troops took the facility near Puthukkudiyiruppu after launching an operation Wednesday.

"We took complete control this morning," he told The Associated Press. "The hospital building was intact, but we are not sure about any of the equipment." There was fighting during the operation, Nanayakkara said, but no word yet on casualties on either side. In early February, more than 300 patients were forced to flee the hospital because of fighting. The taking of the hospital comes a day after the military said a senior rebel leader was killed in fighting in Puthukkudiyiruppu, the last town held by the rebels. The rebels could not be reached for comment, and it was not possible to verify the reports independently because reporters are barred from the coastal war zone. The town is about 175 miles (280 kilometers) northeast of the capital of Colombo in a shrinking area held by the Tamil Tigers. The death of Sabaratnam Selvathurai on Wednesday would be a boost for the government as it appears poised to defeat the group after more than 25 years of civil war. The Tamil Tigers have fought since 1983 for an independent state for the Tamil minority, which suffered decades of marginalization at the hands of governments dominated by the Sinhalese majority. More than 70,000 people have been killed. Nanayakkara said fighting in the area was going slowly because of worries about civilians. Human rights and aid groups have voiced concern over tens of thousands of ethnic Tamil civilians trapped in the shrinking sliver of land still under rebel control. "The concern is the civilian factor, we have to go slow," Nanayakkara said. He estimated there were fewer than 500 Tigers still fighting, although they had also forced some civilians to fight as well. Nanayakkara said about 12,000 government troops had surrounded the area. "We are clearing the area house by house, street by street." Selvathurai, whose nom de guerre was Thamilenthi, was in charge of the Tamil Tigers' financial unit. The head of the political wing, S.P. Tamilselvan, was killed in 2007. The leader of the Tigers, Velupillai Prabhakaran, is thought to be still in the war zone. Courtesy: Yahoo.com