UN accuses Sri Lankan rebels of recruiting worker

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The Associated Press Colombo, Sri Lanka: The United Nations on Monday accused the Tamil Tigers of seizing one of its staff members and pressing him into service, as the rebels struggle to avoid a defeat in a shrinking war zone in northern Sri Lanka.

A statement from the U.N. in Colombo said it "fears for the safety of one U.N. national staff member, and three dependent family members who were forcibly recruited over the weekend by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)." The charge comes as the Sri Lankan military said more than 1,500 people had fled the war zone in the last several days. The government accuses the rebels of using civilians as human shields in a desperate attempt to avoid defeat as the military closes in to finish off a 25-year civil war. The United Nations statement said the worker and family members, including a 16-year-old girl, were forced inside a government-declared "safe zone." It did not describe what the rebels asked the group to do. It said another U.N. staff worker taken two weeks ago has not been released despite repeated requests. The rebels are struggling to hold onto a shrinking swath of land — estimated at 13.5 square miles (35 square kilometers) — on Sri Lanka's northeast coast. The United Nations says 150,000 to 180,000 people remain trapped in appalling conditions in the rebel area, although the government says the figure is much lower. Military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said the 1,500 civilians had crossed the front lines to seek protection from the military over the weekend. The fate of the civilians trapped in the war zone has become a matter of international concern, with the United Nations saying 2,800 had died since late January. The government says the figure is unsubstantiated. The Tamil Tigers have a history of forcible recruitment, including of children, since they began fighting in 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 in the fighting. Nanayakkara, meanwhile, said the military suspected that Tamil Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was probably still in the war zone. Speculation has been widespread about the location of Prabhakaran — who has vowed not to be captured alive — with local news reports speculating he could be in South Africa or Malaysia. "There is a possibility Prabhakaran is still there," Nanayakkara said. 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. Prabhakaran commands an almost fanatical allegiance from his troops. The leader and his men each wear a string around their necks with a cyanide capsule to commit suicide to avoid capture. TamilNet, a pro-rebel Web site that has become almost the sole voice of the rebels since they were driven out of their de facto headquarters in Kilinochchi in early January, has not commented on Prabhakaran's whereabouts.Courtesy: iht.com