
More flee as Sri Lanka rebels mount suicide attack

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By Ranga Sirilal COLOMBO (Reuters) - Tamil Tiger separatists counterattacked with a failed suicide bombing in heavy clashes that killed at least 14 rebels, as hundreds more refugees fled Sri Lanka's war zone, the military said on Tuesday. The suicide attacker, who wore a Sri Lankan military uniform, blew himself up on Monday a few meters from an army frontline in the last town held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the Indian Ocean island nation's north-eastern corner. The military, intent on crushing a 25-year rebellion once and for all, says the Tigers are corralled in a shrinking patch of jungle 30 km square (12 sq mile) along with tens of thousands of civilians the LTTE has kept as human shields. "A soldier on the frontline in Puthukudiyiruppu observed a military-uniformed man coming toward the (line) and when he moved ahead to search him, the terrorist exploded himself," military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara said. He said no soldiers were killed or wounded, but soldiers recovered the bodies of 14 LTTE fighters from other clashes in which troops were only wounded. The Tigers could not be reached for immediate comment. Both sides have been known to exaggerate enemy casualties while downplaying their own. While fighting was going on Monday, 619 civilians escaped to army-held areas, Nanayakkara said. That brings the total over three days to about 2,600 people, and since January to about 41,500. But many more -- estimates range from 70,000 according to the government to 150,000 according to aid agencies -- remain trapped in the war zone amid desperate circumstances and two warring parties fighting to the finish. **SUICIDE ATTACKS** The United Nations last week said some 2,800 have been killed in fighting since January 20, and warned both sides their actions may constitute war crimes. The government rejected the charge, and said the numbers were unsubstantiated and inflated. On Monday, the military said troops were within a kilometer of the narrow 12-km coastal strip the army has designated a no-fire zone, which satellite imagery made available to Reuters shows to be thickly congested with people. Military commanders say the Tigers' leadership, including founder Vellupillai Prabhakaran, are hiding among the civilians and directing their last stand from there. That, the oncoming onslaught and the Tigers' refusal to let people flee have put civilians at dire risk, aid agencies say.

Since February, the LTTE increasingly has been carrying out suicide attacks on the battlefield, often as a prelude to larger assaults, in what the military calls a sign of their desperation.

The Tigers are on U.S., EU, Canadian and Indian terrorist lists largely for their extensive use of the suicide blast during a civil war that erupted in 1983 as a fight for a separate state for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority. Suicide is an integral part of LTTE dogma. All fighters on duty wear cyanide capsules to be taken in case of capture and the group invented the suicide vest, an explosives-laden jacket worn by attackers and now widely copied by other militants groups. (Writing by Bryson Hull; Editing by Alex Richardson) Courtesy: Reuters.com