
Sri Lanka: groups give false info on civil war

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The Associated Press The Sri Lankan military Wednesday accused international organizations of giving false information on the island's civil war, saying rebel sympathizers have "infiltrated" the groups.

The accusation comes amid tense fighting in the war-ravaged northern region, where the military says 38 rebels were killed in the last day. The battles in a shrinking strip of land along Sri Lanka's northeast coast have trapped tens of thousands of civilians in deteriorating conditions. The government accuses the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam of using the people as human shields in a bid to avoid defeat in a 25-year civil war. "We still find there is undue support coming from various quarters and various agencies" for the LTTE, defense spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told a news conference. The Tamil Tigers have relied on a large international support network, and Rambukwella said it was still active despite the huge military setbacks suffered by the rebels and that over the past decade "they have certainly infiltrated certain personalities into these agencies." Rambukwella refused to name any specific agency. The government has routinely rejected figures put forward by international groups on the number of trapped civilians and the number of dead. Rambukwella repeated government criticism about a report by the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights last week that said the army had shelled inside safe "no-fire" zones set up for the civilians and killed more 2,800 civilians since Jan. 20. The military has denied such shelling, and Rambukwella said the numbers mirrored figures given on a pro-rebel Web site. It is not possible to get independent accounts of the clashes because the war zone — estimated at 10.8 square miles (28 square kilometers) — is restricted to journalists. The United Nations said last week that 150,000 to 180,000 people were trapped in the war zone, while Rambukwella said the figure was now about 50,000 to 60,000. Army spokesman Udaya Nanayakkara told the same news conference that about 45,000 people have escaped into government-controlled areas since the beginning of the year. He accused the rebels of firing on the civilians to stop them from leaving. Nanayakkara also showed pictures of what he said were LTTE bunkers set up in the safe zones. He said 38 rebels had been killed in the latest fighting around Puthukkudiyiruppu, the last town held by the rebels. The military does not give figures for its casualties. The Tamil Tigers began fighting 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 in the fighting. Courtesy: iht.com