
Sri Lankan military says 1,200 flee war zone

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By Scott McDonald, Associated Press Writer COLOMBO, Sri Lanka – Nearly 1,200 civilians have fled fierce fighting in northern Sri Lanka as government troops capture more territory from Tamil Tiger separatists, the military said Sunday. About 1,055 of the civilians, including 380 children, reached military-held areas over the last 24 hours near Puthkkudiyirippu, where battles between government troops and the rebels have been raging for weeks, military spokesman Udaya Nanayakkara said.

Puthkkudiyirippu is the last town held by the rebels, fighting since 1983 for a separate Tamil state in the island's north and east. Another 108 civilians fled the war zone by boat from the northeastern coast and reached safety further north on the Jaffna peninsula Saturday afternoon. Troops are pushing into the last major block of Tiger-held land from three angles, and a military statement said Sunday they had captured another small junction. Independent accounts of the fighting are not possible because access to the war zone is restricted. There has been a surge in civilians fleeing the area recently as the army pushes forward with an all-out offensive the government hopes will soon end the island's 25-year-old civil war. The rebel holdouts — along with tens of thousands of terrified civilians — are confined to about 11 square miles (28 square kilometers) of jungle and beach on the northeastern coast. Risks to the civilians have led the United Nations, European Union and numerous countries to voice concern. The U.N. has said 2,800 civilians caught in the fighting have been killed since late January, though the government disputes that figure. The U.N. estimates at least 150,000 civilians are trapped in the war zone. The government says the number is closer to 50,000 to 60,000, and accuses the rebels of using them as human shields in a bid to avoid defeat. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam 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 in the fighting. Meanwhile, in Colombo, thousands of ethnic Tamil civilians lined up at schools Sunday to register with police. A government order requires all people who moved to the capital from the north and east to re-register with police every several months. The process has drawn criticism from human rights activists who say it is part of an effort to intimidate Tamils. Police say it's only aimed at deterring rebel attacks on Colombo. The rebels — frequently using suicide attackers — have carried out bombings in Colombo and other places far from the fighting zone. The most recent strike blamed on the Tiger rebels was a suicide bomb attack earlier this month on government ministers leading a procession to mark a Muslim festival in southern Sri Lanka. It killed 14 people and severely wounded one of the officials. Courtesy: Yahoo.com