
Sri Lanka rebels facing 'imminent' defeat: minister

Thursday, 26 March 2009

Last Updated Thursday, 26 March 2009

COLOMBO (AFP) – Tamil Tiger rebels have lost more of their territory in northern Sri Lanka and their total defeat is now "imminent," a government minister said Thursday. Government troops have confined Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters to an area of 21 square kilometres (eight square miles), most of which is a government-declared safe zone, the minister said.

"Therefore, it is apparent that the LTTE are now at the imminent brink of defeat," said Keheliya Rambukwella, minister for foreign employment and the government's defence spokesman. Prior to the total collapse of a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire in January 2008, the LTTE ran a mini-state that spanned about a third of the island. Earlier this year, the military seized the political and military headquarters of the Tigers and vowed to completely defeat the rebels by April, a victory that would end one of the world's longest-running civil wars. There was no immediate word from the Tigers, who have been fighting for more than three decades to carve out a separate Tamil state on the ethnic Sinhalese-majority island. Verification of battlefield claims is impossible as independent journalists, most aid workers and international monitors are not allowed into the conflict zone. Rambukwella said the fighting was now moving into a phase of intense close-quarters combat. He accused the rebels of using the "safe zone" -- designated by the government so tens of thousands of civilians can keep out of the crossfire -- to launch attacks. "The LTTE is using the civilians as a shield and are carrying out their atrocities," the minister said. Human rights groups have also accused the LTTE of keeping civilians hostage, but have also said the government has been shelling them. Earlier this month, United Nations human rights chief Navi Pillay said she feared both sides could be guilty of war crimes. Courtesy: yahoo.com