
Sri Lanka says final standoff with Tigers approaches

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By Ranga Sirilal COLOMBO (Reuters) - Sri Lanka's military on Thursday said it has one kilometre left to go before trapping the Tamil Tigers separatists in a no-fire zone, along with thousands of civilians at grave risk in the 25-year war's final act.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa, under pressure to craft a political deal, has called for a meeting with parliamentarians allied with the Tigers but they have refused until the government resolves the humanitarian crisis faced by civilians trapped in the fighting. "Now the area is 21 sq km (8 sq miles) and only 1 sq km left other than the safe zone," military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara said. The Tigers also tried a counterattack on Wednesday, which soldiers repelled. A total of 30 rebels were killed altogether on Wednesday, he said. The Tigers could not be reached for comment. The military-declared no-fire zone and the remaining kilometre outside of it are all that remain of 15,000 square km the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) held less than three years ago and tried to turn into a separate nation for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority. The military has not revealed what it will do once it reaches the no-fire zone, but diplomats are urging it to besiege the Tigers instead of moving in to attack them, risking civilian lives in the process.

[ID:nCOL488079] President Rajapaksa invited members of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) to talks this week. But the LTTE-allied TNA on Thursday told a press conference they would not talk with Rajapaksa until the civilian crisis was resolved. "Any political discussions, to be purposeful and meaningful, must follow such resolution," TNA leader R. Sampanthan said. He said 40-50 civilians were being killed daily by artillery and air attacks. The government denies attacking civilians. Fears are high for the safety of the tens of thousands trapped inside the no-fire zone.

[ID:nCOL428628] The United Nations says the Tigers have forcibly kept people there as human shields or conscripts, and has warned the government against shelling the safe zone. It says that 2,800 civilians have been killed since Jan. 20. The government says it is not firing into the no-fire zone and that the U.N. numbers are unsubstantiated, while the Tigers say people are staying with them out of choice. Facing imminent conventional defeat, the Tigers for the first time in years unleashed surface-to-air missiles against a pair of Sri Lankan air force helicopters evacuating casualties on Wednesday. Both missed their targets, the air force said. That weapon has been noticeably missing from the Tigers well-equipped arsenal, and the military has used Mi-24 attack helicopters to great tactical advantage. The former Tiger commander Karuna Amman, now a non-cabinet minister in Rajapaksa's government, told Reuters in a recent interview that a large cache of shoulder-fired rockets were lost during the Dec. 26, 2004 tsunami. (Writing by Bryson Hull; Editing by Valerie Lee) Courtesy: reuters.com