
South India hunt for fleeing Tamil Tiger rebels

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By D. Jose THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, India (Reuters) - Heavily armed commandos locked down a stretch of the southern Indian coast on Monday and began a house-to-house search for a group of suspected Tamil Tiger rebels from Sri Lanka, police said.

Jacob Punnoose, police chief of Kerala state, told Reuters the police had information that Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels were trying to flee impending defeat at the hands of Sri Lankan troops in their bloody 25-year civil war. Indian police and special commandos surrounded Thykkal village, close to the teeming coastal city of Kochi, suspecting that the rebels had landed there in a small boat, he said. "The area is thickly populated. We are not allowing any person or vehicle from the village to move out," Punnoose said by phone from Thykkal, where he was monitoring the operation. "All houses in the area are being searched. So far we have not got any trace of the fishing boat or the men." Sri Lanka's military is close to victory over the LTTE, having cornered the rebels in a small area in the north of the island - the remnants of territory they have fought since 1983 to turn into a separate state for the Tamil minority. Sri Lanka's navy killed 26 Tamil Tigers and destroyed four boats during a six-hour sea battle on Monday, the navy said, amid naval concern that LTTE fighters and leaders could try to escape to India by sea. Indian police blocked roads leading to Kochi and checked all incoming vehicles. Other cities in Kerala were on alert. Security was tightened at vital installations. Naval helicopters and coast guard ships were also looking for the LTTE boat, Punnoose said. India says the LTTE is a terrorist group and wants its founder, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, extradited, alleging he ordered the assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 to avenge an Indian military campaign against the Tamil Tigers in the 1980s. (Writing by Kritivas Mukherjee, editing by Tim Pearce) Courtesy: reuters.com