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# Rebels Use 150,000 As 'Shields'; Sri Lankan War; Civilians 'only weapon left' for Tigers: officer

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Nick Meo (On 26th March, Nick Meo visited Killinochchi, Elephant Pass and Paranthan and met groups of IDPs who have crossed over to cleared areas) The Sunday Telegraph National Post The haunted eyes of the grandfather who had just escaped from the Tamil Tigers at their most furious betrayed the horror he had left behind him. "I want to live, not die, and that's why I have come here with my family," he said.

The exhausted businessman was safe in a Sri Lankan army base after weeks trapped with 150,000 other civilians in a seven-square-mile strip of land on Sri Lanka's northeast coast, short of food and fresh water and incessantly pounded by shells. The rebels of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who for the past 26 years have claimed to be fighting to protect Sri Lanka's Tamil ethnic minority, have forbidden the refugees to leave--on pain of death. But as the civil war grinds slowly towards its end with the Tigers apparently facing final defeat, conditions within their enclave have become so grim that in the past week alone an estimated 5,000 men, women and terrified children have risked their lives to flee. Many have been shot by rebel gunmen and some of those caught have been executed. The elderly man, wearing a grimy T-shirt and sarong and clutching a single bag that contained all that remained of his possessions, had managed to get out that morning. He described how he had gathered his family and friends, as quietly as possible in the dead of night, before slipping past guards. They had been wading across a muddy lagoon towards Sri Lankan army lines when things went wrong. "We left at 2 a. m. today in a group of 23 but the Tigers fired at us and only 12 of us arrived here," he said as his bewildered granddaughter, aged seven, looked on. "I do not know what has happened to the rest. We became separated in the confusion." The survivors were sheltering in the northern town of Killinochi, once the Tigers' capital. What the man had to say about the Tigers would have been unthinkable for a subject of their dictatorial mini-state a few weeks ago. "The people do not like the Tigers any more," he said angrily. "They are trapped by them and they are scared. They want the Sri Lankan army to rescue them." At their peak, early this decade, the Tigers controlled almost a third of Sri Lanka's territory -- governing it with an iron fist while neglecting to develop its economy, spend money on schools or provide medical care. Much of the money that poured in from sympathizers abroad to support the cause was creamed off by corrupt leaders. Three years ago, the island's government launched an offensive that has steadily driven the rebels from almost all the territory they held in the north and east. Now the Sri Lankan army believes that the Tigers are finished militarily. All that stands between them and defeat is their ruthlessness in using civilians as a human shield. The Sunday Telegraph was the first British newspaper to visit the Tigers' former capital since it fell in January, flying in by helicopter which skimmed low over the jungle canopy as the door gunner scanned below for guerrillas. One of the architects of the Sri Lankan victory is Brigadier Shavendra Silva, a commander whose proudest boast is that his 58 Division has killed more than 5,000 Tigers since it began its bloody push north in 2006. He said the rebels could let all the civilians go free if they wanted to. "They were forcibly taken," he said. "That's the only weapon that the LTTE has left. They wanted human shields so we could not bomb them, and they needed a pool of recruits so they could keep on fighting." Young Tiger fighters who have been captured alive have terrible stories to tell of the life they led within the enclave. Sennappu, a 25-year-old teacher, was forcibly recruited and sent into battle after just a month of weapons training with the Tigers' standard kit: an AK-47 for fighting and a cyanide capsule in case of capture. Assigned to a bunker in command of six younger women, she could not hold out for long and when they were surrounded two of her comrades decided to blow themselves up with a hand grenade. She begged them to surrender as shells exploded around them. "Mathuvanthy, who was 23, really believed in the Tamil Tigers' cause. She preferred death to surrender," Sennappu said. "Nalliessa, who was 18 and had not long passed her O&rsquo;levels, had been told she would be tortured if she fell into the hands of our enemies in the Sri Lanka army. She killed herself because she was terrified of capture." Sennappu is now safe, but fears that her friends and relatives may well have been press-ganged as the Tigers' position becomes ever more desperate. In recent weeks, gangs of Tiger gunmen have been roaming civilian camps under their control, at first taking one recruit from each family and then grabbing anyone over 14, putting guns in their hands and forcing them to the front line -- where their life expectancy can be measured in days, or sometimes hours. Fears are growing that the Tigers want mass civilian casualties, forbidding the refugees from leaving so they are killed by army shelling. Sri Lanka's President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, appealed at the weekend for the separatists to lay down their arms, to ensure the safety of the trapped civilians. Another frightening scenario is a mass suicide: Tiger cadres are ordered not to be captured alive, and they may be willing to force their families and neighbours to die with them. The intensity of the battle is clear in what the Sri Lankan army calls the "liberated zone." There was nothing to be seen of thousands of people who had lived in Killinochi, a ghost town now full of stray dogs and wandering goats.