Sri Lanka says rebels encircled in fierce fighting

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By Scott McDonald, Associated Press COLOMBO, Sri Lanka – Sri Lankan troops have surrounded dozens of Tamil Tiger separatist rebels during fierce fighting in the island's north in a drive to end a 25-year civil war, the military said Thursday.

The rebels — who once commanded a de facto state across a large swath of the island's north and east — have been pushed into a small sliver of coastal land measuring just 8.4 square miles (21 square kilometers), on the northeast coast. In the latest fighting, the military said government troops had surrounded a group of rebels in an area less than half a square mile (1 square kilometer). A statement on the Defence Ministry's Web site also said its forces had cut a supply route to the rebels in the Puthkkudiyirippu area. It said the bodies of 13 rebels had also been recovered. Accounts of the battles cannot be verified because independent journalists are barred from the war zone. Although there has been heavy fighting in the same area for weeks, the government says it is close to crushing the rebels, formally known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. President Mahinda Rajapaksa said earlier this week the military was exercising restraint dues to concerns about civilian casualties. Tens of thousands of civilians are trapped in the war zone. The military says the rebels are holding them as human shields in a desperate attempt to avoid defeat. But the rebels say the people do not want to leave and have asked for their protection. More than 23,000 civilians escaped last month, and the government estimates there are 30,000 to 40,000 still trapped. A U.N. human rights official will visit Sri Lanka starting Thursday to discuss the welfare of those who have fled the war zone and are living in government-run camps. Walter Kaelin, the representative for Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on the rights of internally displaced people, will meet government and aid officials and visit camps during his five-day visit, according to a U.N. statement. The Tamil Tiger rebels have fought since 1983 to create an independent homeland for ethnic minority Tamils, who have faced decades of marginalization by successive governments controlled by ethnic Sinhalese. More than 70,000 people have been killed in the violence. Courtesy: Yahoo.com