Sri Lanka military says 25-year war in final act

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By C. Bryson Hull COLOMBO (Reuters) - Sri Lanka's military said on Sunday troops had confined the Tamil Tiger rebels to a no-fire zone, where the last act of the 25-year separatist war will play out with tens of thousands of civilians still trapped. Three separate units killed at least 420 rebels after surrounding them in a triangle-shaped single square kilometre (0.5 square mile) during a three-day battle, the military said.
That means the remaining rebel-held area is less than 20 square km (8 sq miles) of coconut groves on the Indian Ocean island's northeast coast where the United Nations has said the Tigers have kept more than 100,000 civilians as human shields."The only uncleared area left is the no-fire zone," military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara said. "We have recovered over 420 bodies over the last three days."Troops confirmed they had killed the head security officer for Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) founder and leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran, Gaddhafi; the head of the LTTE's female fighters, Vidusha, and commander Theepan. And there were signs the elusive Prabhakaran was near: soldiers found a bullet-proof car he was believed to have been using which was torched. The state-owned Sunday Observer newspaper said troops found his birth certificate and photo albums. The Tigers could not be reached for immediate comment and it is difficult to verify casualty figures given by either side since independent observers are generally barred from the war zone and both sides have been known to distort them. SIEGE TO START The arrival of troops at the no-fire zone signals the beginning of what diplomats and aid agencies say will be the most difficult and possibly deadly phase of a military campaign that has in less than three years put the Tigers near conventional defeat. The best choice, diplomats say, is besieging the area, since it would offer the most protection for civilians there. Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Gotababya Rajapaksa, the top civilian in charge of the war, told Reuters soldiers would be in no hurry, especially since intelligence reports show dissension against the LTTE brewing in the area. "Time is not a factor here. Our major concern is to get these civilians out of the LTTE-controlled area. Very soon, you will see a lot of civilians coming out and making the task of the military easier," he said. At least 62,100 people have fled from Tiger-held areas since the start of the year, and about half that number since the army neared the no-fire zone. That is despite the Tigers shooting at them, according to those who have escaped. The Tigers, Human Rights Watch and the United Nations have all accused the military of shelling civilian areas, which the government denies as a propaganda ploy to try and build international pressure for a truce so the LTTE can re-arm. Sri Lanka's military has swiftly done what had, over the course of a war that started in 1983, become thought of as an impossible task -- recapturing nearly all of the 15,000 square km held by the Tigers in the island's north and east. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa has vowed the LTTE will either surrender or be destroyed. The Tigers have so far refused to give up their fight for an independent state for Sri Lanka'a minority Tamils, who complain of discrimination by successive governments led by the Sinhalese majority since independence from Britain in 1948. (Additional reporting by Shihar Aneez, Editing by Dean Yates)Courtesy: reuters.com