Sri Lankan war in endgame, 100,000 escape rebel zone

Thursday, 23 April 2009
Last Updated Thursday, 23 April 2009

By C. Bryson Hull and Ranga Sirilal COLOMBO (Reuters) – Thousands more civilians surged out of Sri Lanka's war zone on Wednesday while soldiers and Tamil Tiger rebels fought the apparent endgame of Asia's longest-running war despite calls to protect those still trapped.

In the third day since troops blasted through a massive earthen wall built by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and unleashed the exodus, the military said at least 100,000 people had been registered for onward transit to refugee camps. Among those who came out was the LTTE's ex-spokesman Daya Master, a former schoolteacher who was the Tigers' voice to the English-speaking world for years and arranged media visits to the self-declared state the separatists had fought to create. The military said he was the most senior rebel to surrender, an act that is in contravention of LTTE founder-leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran's dictate that followers wear cyanide vials to be taken in case of capture. He surrendered along with the translator for the late LTTE political head S.P. Thamilselvan, as troops thrust deeper into a former army-declared no-fire zone that is now the last battleground in a war that erupted in 1983. For a third straight day, the military progress drove the Colombo Stock Exchange higher, traders said. It closed up 1.4 percent, near a three-month high. The military says troops now control all but 13 square km (5 sq miles) of the Indian Ocean island, where the remnants of the LTTE and Prabhakaran fought to create a separate state for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority. "Confrontations are taking place. Whenever we come across LTTE cadres, we are fighting them. The rescue operation is continuing," military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara said. The number of people who have fled this year is now around 173,439, according to the military tally. UN CONFIRMS EXODUS The United Nations confirmed this week's outflow. "It is 60,000 plus and counting, and we have heard various reports of up to 110,000 coming out," said the U.N. spokesman in Colombo, Gordon Weiss. He cautioned the reports were preliminary and not confirmed. The LTTE has accused the military of fabricating the numbers and of capturing people it says are staying by choice. It has ignored all calls to free civilians while urging a truce, and on Tuesday vowed no surrender despite facing overwhelming firepower. Independent confirmation of battlefield accounts is difficult because outsiders are generally kept out. Dashing the LTTE's hope India would step in to help a group it trained in the 1980s, Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee on Wednesday told reporters: "We have no sympathy for the terrorists, but every sympathy for the civilians." In Washington, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton criticized Sri Lanka for the civilians' plight. "I think that the Sri Lankan government knows that the entire world is very disappointed that in its efforts to end what it sees as 25 years of conflict, it is causing such untold suffering," Clinton told a U.S. Senate hearing. France and other countries also raised alarm about those still trapped. The International Committee of the Red Cross on Tuesday warned the situation was "catastrophic" for the 50,000 or more still there with little, food, water or medicine. In New York, U.N. diplomats said the Security Council was expected to hold an informal meeting at 2100 GMT on Wednesday to hear a report by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's chief of staff Vijay Nambiar, who visited Sri Lanka last week. China and Russia so far have opposed attempts to bring up Sri Lanka at the council. Earlier, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said France and Britain would try to send ships to Sri Lanka to evacuate the people. POLITICAL PROCESS French Ambassador Jean-Maurice Ripert told reporters the LTTE "have to stop fighting, they have to surrender, they have to join the political process and of course they have to free the hostages." The massive civilian presence in the no-fire zone had been the last crucial defense for the Tigers, who refused repeated calls from the United Nations, Western governments and neighboring India to release them. They ignored a two-day pause by the government last week. Sri Lanka's government has rejected LTTE and international calls for a new truce, saying it cannot allow a group designated as a terrorist organization by more than 30 countries to use the time to rearm as it has done before. Aid agencies have warned refugee camp conditions could quickly turn poor with the anticipated population doubling, but Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa has ordered extra food and relief supplies to be sent. After the conventional end of the war, Sri Lanka will face the challenges of healing divisions between the Tamil minority and Sinhalese majority, and boosting a $40 billion economy suffering on many fronts including a weakening rupee. Sri Lanka is seeking a $1.9 billion International Monetary Fund loan to ease a balance of payments crisis and boost flagging foreign exchange reserves. (Additional reporting by New Delhi, Paris, Brussels, United Nations and Washington bureaux) Courtesy: yahoo.com