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## Sri Lanka troops tighten siege of Tamil rebels

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by Amal Jayasinghe COLOMBO (AFP) &ndash; Sri Lankan government troops have tightened their siege of the last strip of land on the island still controlled by Tamil Tiger rebels and are poised for a final assault, the military said Friday. Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara told AFP that two columns of troops had consolidated positions along a strip of coastline in the northeast captured from the ethnic rebels earlier this week.

"The Tigers have no land escape routes left. We have troops in place to move in at anytime," another top military official said. "If not for the civilians still trapped inside, we would have gone in by now." Nanayakkara refused to say when the final assault would take place, asserting that troops "have to consider the civilians" still trapped in the territory held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Officials said sporadic fighting was continuing Friday, with the navy also fighting an offshore battle with LTTE rebels trying to flee by boat. Navy spokesman Mahesh Karunaratne said three rebel craft were sunk and 23 rebels killed. There was no comment from the Tigers, but the pro-rebel Tamilnet website said the guerrillas had sunk two naval craft in a sea battle. Tamilnet also said the Tigers had killed some 350 soldiers in fighting on Wednesday, a claim promptly denied by the military. The Tigers have been driven back by a prolonged military onslaught designed to finish the rebels' 37-year armed campaign for an independent Tamil homeland on the ethnic Sinhalese-majority island. At the height of their campaign, the LTTE controlled roughly a third of the island and had established a fiefdom with all the trappings of a separate state. The army says the rebels now hold a mere five square kilometres (two square miles). It also says it believes the Tamil Tigers' founder and leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, 54, is holed up with his last remaining fighters. President Mahinda Rajapakse on Thursday ruled out halting the offensive despite international calls for a truce to spare the lives of civilians. "We have no plans to go for a ceasefire with the Tigers, but they have a little time left to drop their weapons and surrender even though our military operation is at a final stage," Rajapakse said. According to the United Nations, some 50,000 civilians are still trapped in LTTE territory while as many as 6,500 civilians may have been killed and another 14,000 wounded in the government's offensive so far this year. About 110,000 Tamils displaced by the violence have been detained in congested government-run camps, where food, water and medical shortages have been reported. A peace mission on Wednesday by the foreign ministers of Britain and France, David Miliband and Bernard Kouchner, ended in failure -- although the two Security Council powers have promised to maintain pressure on the Sri Lankan government. Courtesy: yahoo.com