Tamils on the run in a war zone

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Tamils living in bunkers, surviving on rations Just 17 days old, the girl was fast asleep in the slender arms of her mother, whose hip was bandaged where the bullet had struck. Born in a bunker in the heart of Sri Lanka's northern war zone, to a lullaby of shelling and gunfire, she escaped last week in a fishing boat with her mother.

Now they are IDPs, internally displaced persons. They are exhausted and frightened but relieved to have reached safety after a year on the run in rebel territory. Interviewed yesterday at a military hospital, the mother provided a rare glimpse of life inside the strip of beachfront where the Sri Lankan Army is trying to finish off the country's separatist rebels. The United Nations described the situation in the conflict area as a "bloodbath" yesterday after a hospital official said that almost 400 had died in a weekend artillery barrage that the rebels and the government blamed on each other. As many as 50,000 civilians remain trapped behind rebel lines, according to UN estimates, but the government says the number is much lower. More than 200,000 have already fled. "There are a lot of people, everybody living in bunkers," said the mother, Veena Dhanalakshmi, 32, as she cradled her infant on a bench outside the open-air hospital ward. Mrs. Dhanalakshmi was living in a village near the northern Jaffna peninsula with her husband and their two children when the war got too close for comfort, and they fled toward the south. The army was coming and as the Tamil Tigers retreated, the civilians went too. The rebels gave them no choice. They threatened to shoot anyone who tried to abandon them, Mrs. Dhanalakshmi said. The family travelled on foot, sleeping in the jungle and surviving on humanitarian rations trucked into rebel country by the International Committee of the Red Cross, she said. Four months ago, they reached Mullaivaikal, a coastal town inside the government-designated No Fire Zone, where the rebels are now surrounded and fighting what many believe will be their last stand. To Mrs. Dhanalakshmi, it looked like a battlefield. Bodies lay everywhere along the roads, she said. Everybody was on the run and they couldn't risk stopping long enough to bury the dead. It was never quiet, she said. The shelling and shooting never seemed to stop. Nobody dared leave their bunkers, which is where Mrs. Dhanalakshmi delivered her daughter with the help of an old woman who acted as a midwife. The baby soon developed a heat rash from the heat of the bunker, but the main problem was food. The ICRC brought in shipments but she said it wasn't enough. Rice and sugar could be purchased but only at inflated prices beyond her means. The options were to stay and risk starving, or to leave and risk defying the rebels. They decided to go. They found a fishing boat with a functioning outboard and, when a Sri Lankan Navy patrol appeared last Friday, they made a break across the waves. There were 15 in the small skiff. As they were heading offshore, the rebels started shooting and the navy returned fire, she said. A bullet hit her hip but she doesn't know which side it came from. She made it to the navy vessel, but some died along the way, she said. Because of her injuries, she and the baby were airlifted aboard an Air Force helicopter to the hospital here. Puwaneswari Kandesamy, 46, also escaped from Mullaivaikal that same day. At 2 a. m., she went to the beach with her family and tried to wade across the frontline. The rebels and the army started firing, so she waved her white frock, then waited until daybreak before trying again. She made it, although she was shot in the shoulder. But most didn't, including her husband, 19-year-old son and daughter-in-law. All died along the way, caught by the wild flurry of bullets that the two sides exchanged through the night. Mrs. Dhanalakshmi said she has been treated well by the military and at the hospital, and that her wound was healing. The baby, who remains nameless, was also in good health, she said. She does not know what has happened to the rest of her family. Her husband and other children boarded the navy ship but she was separated from them due to her injury. Asked how she felt about the Tamil Tigers, who have led a three-decade rebellion for the creation of a Tamil homeland, she smiled. "When they started, they said they are fighting for the Tamil people, but if they say so, how can they shoot us?" sbell@nationalpost Courtesy: Nationalpost.com