
Sri Lanka military says rebels 'giving up' fight

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by Amal Jayasinghe COLOMBO (AFP) – Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers are "slowly giving up" their fight against advancing government troops, the island's military said Friday as it appeared poised to capture the last tiny strip of rebel territory.

A military spokesman told AFP around 10,000 civilians had managed to flee to government areas, and that there was now "hardly anybody left" in the rebel zone on the northeast coast. "They are slowly giving up. They are blowing up whatever arms and ammunition they have," Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara said of the remnants of the once-powerful separatist army. The navy said it had captured the family of a top Tamil Tiger military commander -- Sea Tiger chief Colonel Soosai -- as they tried to escape by boat. But there was no sign of rebel chief Velupillai Prabhakaran. President Mahinda Rajapakse also vowed that "all territory will be freed from Tiger control" by Sunday morning. There was no immediate word from the rebels, but the pro-Tiger Tamilnet website said the narrow beach and lagoon area from where the rebels have been mounting a last stand was engulfed in smoke. It said close-quarter combat had been raging since Friday morning. The massive final push against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who have been fighting for a separate state since the 1970's, came despite last-ditch diplomatic efforts to save the lives of thousands of trapped Tamil civilians. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's chief of staff, Vijay Nambiar, was rushing to the island in a fresh effort to stop the carnage, but was only expected to reach Colombo late on Saturday. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the only neutral organisation working in the conflict area, said its staff were "witnessing an unimaginable humanitarian catastrophe." Former colonial power Britain also said it wanted an investigation into alleged war crimes, while the United States announced it was blocking a two-billion-dollar International Monetary Fund bailout package for Sri Lanka. Hundreds of civilians have been reported killed in indiscriminate shelling over the past week, adding to the thousands left dead since the rebels were pushed into a corner at the start of the year. Sri Lanka's ITN channel showed footage of escaping civilians. A fleeing Tamil woman told the channel that "there are people dead everywhere, on the streets and everywhere." The government maintains that the Tigers are using civilians as human shields and they need to be rescued. Any civilian deaths inside Tiger territory have been blamed on the rebels. The UN's human rights chief Navi Pillay, however, has said both sides may be guilty of war crimes. "The UN's estimate, if it is accurate, of over 6,500 civilian deaths since January is truly shocking and appalling," Britain's junior foreign minister Bill Rammell said, calling for a probe into "whether war crimes have been committed." British aid Minister Douglas Alexander also pointed out that preventing ICRC access was "a fundamental violation of international humanitarian law." "This deplorable situation rightly brings international condemnation of both parties to the conflict," he said. A string of peace missions in recent months have ended in failure, and on Thursday the Sri Lankan government -- determined to keep the upper hand against the LTTE after more than three decades -- repeated it would not cave in to pressure. Courtesy: yahoo.com