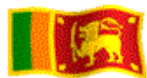


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Freedom at last

OVER 122,000 VANNI CIVILIANS SEEK REFUGE IN GOVERNMENT:

from RANIL WIJAYAPALA in Puthumattalan

The 58 Division troops backed by the Commando and Special Forces troops yesterday continued their humanitarian operation to rescue the civilians trapped inside the Safe Zone after reaching the Eastern beachfront dividing the Safe Zone into two enabling more civilians to arrive into the military controlled areas as huge influx of civilians continued till yesterday evening.

The Security Forces were able to rescue more than 62,000 within the last 48 hours ending midnight yesterday and more than 10,000 other civilians are awaiting to reach the Security Forces controlled areas. This brings the total number of civilians who fled the LTTE grip to over 122,000.

"More than 58,000 civilians have arrived in military controlled areas by land and another 4,000 by sea", Army Commander Lt. General Sarath Fonseka told the Daily News.

A huge influx of civilians were reported from the 58 Division area as more than one km long queue to enter Security Forces held areas was witnessed even by yesterday evening.

The Security Forces engaged in this humanitarian operation facilitated the arrival of tens of thousands of civilians into military controlled areas by providing them water and food as they reached the Security Forces controlled areas crossing the lagoon in Puthumattalan and Ampalavanpokkanai area. The Army Commander said the operation to rescue the civilians trapped inside the No Fire Zone was planned in such a way that civilians could reach the military controlled areas by land and also by sea as ground troops manned the beach fronts without enabling the LTTE to prevent the civilians fleeing by sea.

"The civilians fleeing from the No Fire Zone are arriving towards Navy operating some 20 km away from the Safe Zone in Chundikulam and Nayaru", the Army Commander said.

He said the troops engaged in the process of expanding their defences within the Safe Zone yesterday launched an attack on the last remaining Sea Tiger base in Puthumattalan compelling the Sea Tiger leaders to flee from that base.

The Army Commander said that the Security Forces are expecting another 10,000 civilians from the Safe Zone within the course of the next few hours leaving all the Tiger leaders there in the No Fire Zone. The 58 Division which started humanitarian operation from Mannar in the Western coast made a record yesterday reaching the Eastern coast of the No Fire Zone after a 175 km march from Mannar to Puthumattalan.

The 58 Division managed to expand their defences towards the eastern beach front after capturing the Puthumattalan hospital, Ampalavanpokkanai hospital complex by yesterday evening.

"The 58 Division troops backed by Commando and Special Forces troops further expanded their defences towards the North with the objective of the linking up with the 55 Division which is also heading towards the No Fire Zone from the Northern direction", 58 Division GOC brigadier Shavendra Silva told the Daily News.

He said that during their march towards the eastern coast the troops launched an attack on LTTE vehicle killing Batticaloa leader Ramanan and three of his body guards.

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