

The Guardian

Sri Lankan troops mop up Tamil Tigers as leader said to have died in bunker

Rebel fighters reported to be blowing



Supporters wave the Sri Lankan flag as they celebrate the return of Sri Lankan president. Photograph: Ishara S. Kodikara/AFP/Getty Images

Gethin Chamberlain in Delhi and Mark Tran Agencies in Colombo

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Sri Lankan troops were today mopping up the remnants of the defeated Tamil Tigers, amid reports that some rebel fighters have been blowing themselves up rather than surrender. A large explosion in a bunker prompted speculation that Vellupillai Prabhakaran, the Tigers' leader, and other senior commanders may have killed themselves.

The developments came a day after Sri Lanka's president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, announced the defeat of the Tamil rebels, and soldiers seized control of the entire coast for the first time in the 25-year war. The president is expected to formally announce the end of the war on national television on Tuesday.

The army claimed it intercepted radio communications that revealed a mass suicide plan and yesterday military sources said a body believed to be Prabhakaran's was recovered. Its identity was being confirmed. However, there was no confirmation of his death from either side.

Selvarasa Pathmanathan, the Tigers' chief of international relations, said the rebels had abandoned the fight and were laying down their arms. In a statement on the pro-Tamil website, TamilNet, he admitted that the three-decade long war was over. "This battle has reached its bitter end," he said.

The military claimed to have killed at least 70 rebels trying to flee by boat and to have boxed the remaining fighters into a 400-metre by 600-metre pocket of land.

It said more than 50,000 people had escaped from the fighting in the last 72 hours, clearing the way for troops to move in for a final push.

"We're relieved to hear that all civilians have come out of the combat zone," a UN spokesman said. More than 250,000 civilians fled the fighting in recent months, amid accusations that the rebels held them as human shields, a charge the Tigers denied.

The UN says 7,000 civilians were killed and 16,700 wounded between 20 January and 7 May. Health officials say more than 1,000 have been killed since then in heavy shelling that rights groups and foreign governments have blamed on Sri Lankan forces. The government has denied shelling the area.

As thousands of civilians made their way to safety, the whereabouts of the doctors who treated civilians inside the so-called no-fire zone, and who provided a running commentary on the scale of the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe, remained unknown. One of the doctors, Thurairaja Varatharajah, is reported to have been badly wounded trying to escape.

With a war that has killed more than 70,000 people nearing its end, Sri Lankans poured on to the streets, dancing and setting off fireworks. Rajapaksa, who was elected in 2005 on a platform of no autonomy for the minority Tamils, scheduled a news conference for Tuesday, after racing home from a visit to Jordan and kissing the ground upon his arrival, amid cheers from ministers and well-wishers. Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu and Muslim clerics blessed him.

"This victory will ensure a better future for the coming generations," said Prasanna Jayawardena, 38, who was lighting firecrackers in the streets of Colombo.

The race is now on to reach the thousands of civilians who have been caught up in the fighting. In Rome, Pope Benedict XVI appealed for aid groups to provide civilians with food and medicine.

Save the Children called for immediate and total humanitarian access to the estimated 40 government-controlled camps which are already sheltering more than 200,000 displaced people.

Branko Golubovic, the acting country director of Save the Children, said: "It is vital that all civilians coming out of the conflict zone have access to the government-controlled area as soon as possible and are given assistance.

"Aside from food and water, these people need medical attention. Many are injured and have not had access to treatment for some time. It's also important to get children into a safe place where they can start recovering from their trauma."

There are already 55,000 children below the age of 18 living in the camps, at least 20% of whom are malnourished.

International development secretary, Douglas Alexander, today announced that Britain would give a further £5m in aid to Sri Lanka.

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