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Sri Lanka Presses Assault as Civilians Flee Fighting

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NEW DELHI — The Sri Lankan military said Wednesday its soldiers were fighting their way through a lethal and dwindling “no-fire zone” on the country’s northeastern coast — the last bit of territory held by separatist Tamil rebels — as thousands of civilians continued to stream out of the area.

The military said on its Web site Wednesday that 58,000 civilians had escaped overland from the former safe zone in the past two days, and 4,000 more had been ferried away in boats. Another 10,000 were gathering Wednesday to leave, the military said.

“It is 60,000-plus and counting, and we have heard various reports of up to 110,000 coming out,” said Gordon Weiss, a [United Nations](#) spokesman quoted by Reuters in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo. Mr. Weiss emphasized that the U.N. reports could not be confirmed.

The exodus created a situation that the International Committee of the Red Cross said was “nothing short of catastrophic,” as tens of thousands more civilians remained in the zone, apparently trapped.

There is no reliable estimate of how many civilians remain in the area. Aid agencies guess there are 50,000 to 100,000.

It remained difficult to verify reports and claims made by the military, the government and the rebels: The military has sealed off the conflict area to independent journalists. Several foreign correspondents who cover the region have been informed that their names are on a no-entry list, effectively barring them from going to [Sri Lanka](#) even as tourists. (Sri Lanka has not responded to repeated requests for journalist visas from The New York Times and the International Herald Tribune.)

The Red Cross said in a statement that hundreds of people had been killed or wounded in the recent fighting. At least 4,500 have been killed since mid-January, a senior United Nations official said.

Several countries, along with the United Nations, have called on the government and the rebels to allow safe passage for those civilians trapped in what appears to be the last battlefield of a conflict that has lasted more than two decades. Those calls have been largely ignored.

The government had issued an ultimatum on Monday for the separatist rebels to give up. But a senior rebel official, Seevaratnam Puleedevan, said by telephone that the rebel group, formally the [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam](#), or Tamil Tigers, “will never surrender,” according to Reuters.

Sri Lankan soldiers broke through defensive earthen berm on Monday, advancing into the roughly five-square-mile patch of land between a lagoon and the sea where the rebels have made their stand. Civilians

quickly poured through the breach in a chaotic exodus, and more civilians continued to escape on Wednesday, the military said.

The rebels, on a pro-Tamil Web site, accused the military of killing 1,000 people and injuring more than twice that number. Earlier reports, including video shown by the Sri Lankan military to a handful of journalists based in Colombo, suggested that rebel fighters had shot and killed civilians trying to flee.

Last week, the military declared a two-day pause in fighting and called on the rebels to let civilians leave. The rebels again called for a cease-fire and talks, which the government rejected.

Several countries, including the United States, have urged the government to halt fighting once more in order to negotiate a civilian evacuation.

On Tuesday, President Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka called that “unnecessary” in light of the civilian exodus this week.

United Nations envoys have been sent to Sri Lanka several times recently. But they have yet to persuade the rebels to consider a negotiated disarmament, or the government to ease up on the fighting long enough for the evacuation of noncombatants.

A portrait of the carnage has only partly emerged from those who have managed to get out. A survey in mid-March conducted by [Unicef](#) found that among children under 5, one in four were malnourished. An aid agency tending to the injured said one in four had limbs amputated.

Mark McDonald contributed from Hong Kong.

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