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Sri Lanka: More Than 80 Rebels Killed

By The Associated Press

Colombo, Sri Lanka—Two days of heavy artillery and mortar fire have killed more than 80 Tamil Tiger warriors, and a United Nations spokesman warned of an impending humanitarian crisis in areas cut off by fierce fighting.

Sri Lanka's air force destroyed a strategic Tamil sea base in the north, killing an unknown number of rebels, said military spokesman Maj. Upali Rajapakse.

Despite the continuing violence, Sri Lanka's president told United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan the doors were still open for peace talks with the rebels, the government said.

Rajapakse said the separatist Tigers had been using the sea base to launch recent attacks on government positions in the Jaffna Peninsula, which the Tigers claim as the cultural homeland of the country's 3.2 million ethnic Tamils.

About 800 rebels and security forces have been killed in fighting in Jaffna since Aug. 11, when rebels made a major push to retake the government-held, Tamil-majority peninsula.

Violence has increased in the past few weeks in the north and east, where the insurgents have been fighting for more than two decades for a separate homeland from the Sinhalese dominated government.

The country appears to be spiraling back into all-out war although a cease-fire brokered in 2002 nominally remains in place.

Most of the fighting has been focused around the eastern port of Trincomalee and in Jaffna, where the 500,000 residents remain under a 22-hour curfew and food, water and other staples are running low.

The U.N. announced Saturday that only minimal aid has been able to reach the tens of thousands of people who have been displaced by the fighting, saying it was "deeply concerned" about the humanitarian situation in Jaffna and other areas where the government has restricted access.

"Certainly we are deeply concerned about the water and food and sanitation problem," U.N. spokeswoman Orla Clinton said. "If we don't get access, then yes, it will be a humanitarian crisis. Aid agencies need unconditional and immediate access."

The government said it would send 3,800 tons of food and other aid to Jaffna.

The U.N.'s refugee agency estimates that about 170,000 people have fled their homes since April, when a rebel attack on soldiers in Trincomalee sparked ethnic clashes and the fighting flared anew.

In his phone call with Annan, President Mahinda Rajapakse assured him the government would provide assistance to U.N. agencies to conduct their humanitarian relief work.

With food scarce, private shop owners are hiking the price of basic goods while long lines formed at state-owned shops. Access roads to the north have been cut, electricity is limited and shelling and artillery fire are heard most nights.

However, Jaffna's top government official, K. Kanesh, denied there was an acute shortage of food.

"In a situation like this, there are certain difficulties," he said. He said the government was doing the best it can.

Jaffna's human rights department said it had received a complaint from about 300 people taking refuge at a welfare center in Mandativu, an islet off the peninsula, that the government had not provided them with any food. Kanesh said the claim was not true.

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