

Sri Lanka Says 15 Tamil Rebels Killed



This photograph provided by Sri Lankan President's office, President Mahinda Rajapaksa, left, pays last respects to civilian brothers, Ruwan Kumara and Priyantha Kalum whose killings has been blamed on Tamil Tiger rebels, in Middeniya, about 130 kilometers (81 miles) south east of Colombo, Sri Lanka, Sunday, Jan. 20, 2008. Sri Lankan soldiers launched an overnight artillery assault on a flotilla of Tamil Tiger rebel boats off the northern coast, and separate infantry clashes elsewhere killed 29 insurgents and one government soldier, the military said Sunday. (AP Photo/Sudath Silva, President's office) (Sudath Silva - AP)

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COLOMBO, Sri Lanka -- Government soldiers attacked Tamil Tiger rebel bunkers across the front lines in Sri Lanka's embattled north Monday, triggering a battle that killed 15 guerrillas and two soldiers, the military said.

Backed by artillery and mortar fire, soldiers pushed into rebel-held territory in the northern Jaffna Peninsula and destroyed 24 rebel bunkers early Monday, said military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara.

He said the battle lasted for about an hour and killed 15 rebels and two soldiers. Nine soldiers were wounded, he said.

There was no immediate comment from the rebels, but a pro-rebel Web site reported that the insurgents beat back the advancing soldiers, killing three and wounding at least 15 others.

The report did not carry rebel losses.

It was not possible to independently verify the military's claims because the fighting took place deep in the northern jungles, where access is restricted. Both sides often release inflated casualty figures for their opponents while lowering their own.

Violence has intensified in the Indian Ocean island nation since the government announced early this month that it was scrapping a six-year-old cease-fire between the government and rebels, a pact that had largely been ignored in recent years. The truce officially ended last Wednesday.

At least 36 insurgents and one government soldier were killed in weekend clashes across the island's restive northern region, a flash point in the country's ethnic, separatist war.

Senior military officials have vowed to dismantle the rebels' de facto state in parts of the north this year, and to then hunt down the remaining rebels fighting in the jungle.

More than 400 people have been killed in renewed violence across the country since the government withdrew from the truce, according to military figures.

The Tigers have been fighting since 1983 for an independent state in the north and east for the country's ethnic Tamil minority after decades of being marginalized by Sinhalese-dominated governments. The fighting has killed more than 70,000 people.

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