

Sri Lanka halts firing of heavy weapons

by UPI

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka -- Sri Lanka said Monday it has stopped using heavy weapons in a bid to spare the lives of civilians trapped in a Tamil rebel-held "no-fire" zone.

The country's defense ministry said it has also stopped launching air strikes in the northeastern Sri Lanka enclave held by the remnants of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Colombo Page reported.

"Government of Sri Lanka has decided that combat operations have reached their conclusion," an official statement said. "Our security forces have been instructed to end the use of heavy caliber guns, combat aircraft and aerial weapons which could cause civilian casualties."

Government forces will "confine their attempts to (rescue) civilians who are held hostage and give foremost priority to saving civilians," the statement said.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa, stopped short, however, of ordering the cease-fire sought by the international community, The Times of London reported. The newspaper said it wasn't clear what, if any, effect the declaration would have since the army has said for weeks that it is using only light weapons.

LTTE rebels said the army already violated the declaration with two airstrikes Monday, The Times said.

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