

Sri Lanka says military sweep ongoing

by UPI

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka -- Sri Lanka says although major combat operations have ended, troops were still sweeping a corner of the country to end the Tamil Tiger insurgency.

In turn, the rebels say they may be confined to a tiny area on the island's northeast coast, but will not surrender in their fight for their own ethnic homeland, the Voice of America reported. The rebels also say airstrikes by the government are ongoing.

The VOA said the central government is under intense pressure from the international community to accept a cease-fire and allow access to civilians trapped in the small war zone.

Monday, Sri Lanka said it had 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 Lankan enclave held by the remnants of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, 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 was using only light weapons.

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