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# Sri Lanka nears victory in long war with Tamil Tigers

The Army has squeezed the rebels into a small patch of jungle since seizing their last major stronghold Sunday. But they could still mount a messy counterinsurgency.

**By Simon Montlake** | *Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor*

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Bangkok, Thailand - Sri Lanka has edged closer to its military goal of defeating the Tamil Tigers, a rebel movement whose violent struggle for an independent homeland has spanned 26 years and shaped a generation of political strife.

Government troops said Sunday they had captured the town of Mullaittivu, driving the rebels from their last garrison and into a shrinking patch of jungle. Army chief Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka went on national television to declare that 95 percent of the war was over and that victory was imminent. "The end of terrorism is near and we will definitely win," he said.

The fall of Mullaittivu is another blow to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which has held the coastal town since 1996. Earlier this month, the military overran Kilinochchi, the LTTE's administrative capital, and seized a strategic road to Jaffna peninsula in the north.

General Fonseka said Sunday the retreating rebels were in a narrow strip of land measuring about nine miles by 12 miles (20 km by 15 km). Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been trapped by the fighting.

The rapid retreat by one of Asia's longest-running and most ruthless insurgencies has fanned talk of a deliberate ceding of territory in preparation for a protracted guerrilla war. Military commanders have warned of this tactic, as well as of retaliatory terrorist attacks in Colombo, the capital. The LTTE has long used suicide bombers to strike at the heart of Sri Lanka's government.

But another possibility is that the rebels are flailing in the face of a Sri Lankan military that is better equipped and trained than in past battles. Their fighters may also be rudderless: The military has claimed that their commander, Velupillai Prabhakaran, could already have escaped by sea to Southeast Asia.

"The Tigers are putting up a lot less resistance than many expected at this stage of the battle," says Alan Keenan, a senior analyst in Colombo for the International Crisis Group.

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### Civilian casualties mounting

As the conflict continues, civilian casualties are mounting, to the alarm of UN officials who have urged both sides to minimize suffering to civilians.

Last Thursday, a hospital was shelled, killing at least 30 people. The attack was blamed on the military, which denied firing on the hospital. The pro-rebel Tamilnet website said several people died Sunday when government mortars landed near a UN-run aid warehouse.

The endgame in Sri Lanka's civil war remains murky. Flushing insurgents out of their jungle redoubt is complicated by the presence of civilians, whom human rights groups accuse the LTTE of using as shields in the conflict.

The government fears that militants will avoid a final surrender by melting into the displaced Tamil population in the north.

What is certain is that the separatist movement will probably regenerate unless the government destroys its political and military wings and offers something in its place to the alienated Tamil minority, says Rohan Gunaratna, head of the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore and the author of several books on the LTTE.

"It's not only a fight for territory, it's a fight for the hearts and minds of the people.

Neutralizing the LTTE and its leadership ... isn't sufficient," he says.

### No calls for cease-fire

Unlike in Gaza, virtually no foreign government has called for a cease-fire in Sri Lanka. The difference is partly explained by the lack of visibility for the conflict. The LTTE also lacks legitimacy in the eyes of foreign powers, including India, whose former prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, was killed by a LTTE suicide bomber in 1991.

Some Western donors who supported a cease-fire in 2002 between Sri Lanka and the LTTE soured on the intransigence of the group's leadership. Peace talks later fell apart.

Since taking office in 2005, President Mahinda Rakapaksa has hiked military spending and rallied support for the troops. He has gained in popularity from the recent victories and is expected to call early elections this year.

Human rights groups and opposition politicians, however, accuse the administration of silencing dissenting voices. Several journalists have been killed in the past two years, including a pro-opposition newspaper editor who was gunned down earlier this month and a stabbing attack on another editor and his wife last Friday.

The government's emphasis on unity among the majority Sinhalese population may allow it more space to pursue a long-term political solution to the conflict, says Mr. Gunaratna. That must include equal treatment of minority Tamils who are concentrated in the north and east of the country, he continues.

### Little progress in state-held east

Since the government wrestled back control of the east in July 2007 following the defection of an LTTE commander, there has been little progress on this front, says Mr. Keenan.

Nor has the military managed to put a lid on violence, including bombings by rebel holdouts in the area. This may set a pattern for liberated areas in the north, with a battlefield victory followed by a dirty counterinsurgency war.

"What the east shows is you don't need that many people [to resist], if you can move through the civilian population without getting denounced and handed over to the government. They [LTTE] can do a lot of damage," says Keenan.

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