

The coming battle

Civilians will continue to suffer after the fighting ends in Sri Lanka.



AFP

Sri Lanka's government declared officially on Monday April 27th that "combat operations have reached their conclusion" in the last sliver of territory held by the Tamil Tigers. It instructed the army "to end the use of heavy-calibre guns, combat aircraft and aerial weapons which could cause civilian casualties." On Sunday the Tiger rebels had declared a unilateral ceasefire, saying it was the only way to end a humanitarian crisis involving thousands of civilians trapped in the narrow tract of northern coastline still held by the militants. Sri Lanka's president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, promptly rejected the truce as a ploy and insisted that the Tigers must surrender after laying down their weapons.

Some saw the Tigers's offer as a last ditch attempt to circumvent a final bloody defeat or a calculated move aimed at intensifying international political pressure on the government to suspend its offensive, even momentarily. The government's announcement may well have been designed to placate international opinion generally and John Holmes, the United Nations humanitarian co-ordinator, in the country for a brief visit. In any case, Sri Lanka's army says it stopped using heavy weapons and air strikes some time ago though rebel fighters claim that air strikes are continuing despite the ceasefire.

Over the past week a powerful group of Western nations, including America and Britain, have called for a ceasefire. They fear that civilians covering inside what has shrunk into a six-kilometre stretch of coastline in the Mullaitivu District—originally designated by the army as a no-fire zone—would perish in the final battle. The UN says some 50,000 civilians remain trapped, but the army puts the number at 15,000.

In the two years since Mr Rajapaksa's government started its military offensive, the Tamil Tigers have been beaten back steadily from vast swathes of territory they had dominated for years. Brigadier Shavendra Silva, who commands the battalions that are advancing into this terrain, told journalists during a guided tour of the battlefield last week that the Tigers were fighting out of uniform. This had forced him to slow down his offensive for fear of causing casualties among non-combatants.

Journalists have teemed into Sri Lanka during the past few weeks but must report the conflict through conducted tours that stick to a rigid timetable. Independent access, even to camps for the internally displaced, is prohibited. So estimating how many civilians are still inside the "safe zone" is tricky. The government repeatedly accused the UN and aid agencies of exaggerating their figures but it has kept quiet on the subject since some 114,000 people left the "safe zone" after April 20th (this means that 186,000 have left since January). The UN's

estimates that there were originally around 250,000 civilians in Tiger-controlled areas appear not far off the mark.

Even if this cessation of hostilities does mark an end to the fighting, civilians caught up in the battle still face an dicey future. The northern township of Vavuniya is already heaving with displaced civilians that escaped the "safe zone". Campaigns have been launched around the country to collect essential items and the UN has issued an urgent appeal for funds. Neil Buhne, the organisation's humanitarian co-ordinator in Sri Lanka, said after a visit to camps for displaced civilians that he had seen infants with dysentery, malnourished children and women with untended wounds. People are dressed in ragged clothing they had been wearing for months.

As it advances into the Tiger's last domain, the army must be careful to distinguish civilians from rebel fighters. Fears abound that the process may not be handled with much circumspection. Ominously, government forces will be allowed to use small arms to "rescue" civilians. Britain, France and Sweden are sending their foreign ministers to Colombo this week to put pressure on Sri Lanka's government to ensure that the remaining non-combatants are not treated with the cruel disregard they were shown while trapped in the war zone.

But international pressure is unlikely to sway a regime which on Saturday swept to a crucial victory in local election in the Western province, an area that includes the capital, Colombo. A government spokesman said the landslide victory is an endorsement of the president's fight against terrorism. Mr Rajapaksa's military campaign is hugely popular among the Sinhalese Buddhist who make up the majority population. But it has left most Tamils, 18% of the island's population, quaking about the future.

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