

UN says nearly 6,500 civilians killed in Sri Lanka
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Hundreds who fled intense fighting in Sri Lanka's war zone were awaiting evacuation from this tiny coastal village Friday as the U.N. reported that nearly 6,500 ethnic Tamil civilians were killed in the last three months.

Speaking to journalists on a rare visit to the edge of the war zone, civilians told of Tamil Tiger rebels using them as human shields. Conditions "were terrible as we did not have anything to eat. We thought it's better to flee," said Rajeshwarai, 40, who gave only her first name. She and other civilians moved with the retreating rebels for months as the advancing army chipped away at the insurgents' territory, trying to end the nation's quarter-century of civil strife.

The rebels promised the civilians protection, Rajeshwarai said. "But they did not keep the promise." The U.N. estimates that 50,000 people were still trapped in the war zone after more than 100,000 fled earlier this week, spokeswoman Elisabeth Byrs said Friday. Nearly 1,000 awaited evacuation Friday.

Dr. Thangamuttu Sathyamurthi, a top government health official in the war zone, said there was a severe shortage of food and medicine in the area and people were dying of starvation. The ongoing violence was so intense that many people were abandoning their dying relatives to flee the fighting, he said. Doctors Without Borders, a medical relief group, said the civilians pouring out of the conflict zone included large numbers of people with blast, mine and gunshot wounds. The rebels have denied accusations they used civilians as human shields. At least 6,432 civilians have been killed in the intense fighting over the past three months and 13,946 wounded, according to a private U.N. document circulated among diplomatic missions in Sri Lanka in recent days. A foreign diplomat gave a copy to The Associated Press on Friday. The U.N. has declined to publicly release its casualty figures and had no immediate comment on the document.

Civilian deaths have increased dramatically, according to the U.N. An average of 33 civilians were killed each day at the end of January, and that jumped to 116 by April, the document said. More than 5,500 of those killed were inside a government-declared "no-fire" zone.

Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona said the government took special care to avoid civilian casualties, and that many of those killed were combatants dressed in civilian clothing. The Sri Lankan military on Friday gave journalists rare access to Puttumattalan, which until earlier this week was inside the section of rebel territory designated as a "no-fire" zone. ()

On Thursday, India called for an immediate cease-fire to allow the civilians to escape. But Media Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena said the government had no plans for a cease-fire. "The military operations will continue to free the remaining civilians," he said. Brig. Shavendra Silva, a top commander in the conflict zone, said his troops were on the verge of crushing the remaining rebels and ending the 25-year civil war. More than 70,000 have died in

the fighting to create an independent homeland for ethnic minority Tamils, who have faced decades of marginalization by governments controlled by the ethnic Sinhalese majority.

Silva also said intelligence reports indicated reclusive rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and other top Tamil Tiger officials remain holed up there. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he would send humanitarian experts to Sri Lanka to monitor the situation. ()

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