

Tamils suspected of causing explosions

Sri Lankan government, trying to end 12-year-old civil war, surprised from behind by Tigers

BY JOHN STACKHOUSE
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NEW DELHI — With a fresh battle under way in northern Sri Lanka and two oil depot fires raging in the capital Colombo, the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam proved again yesterday that they cannot be confined to a battlefield or defined by military tradition.

Hoping to bring the country's 12-year-old civil war to a swift end with a new offensive, launched this week, the government was hit in the back early yesterday when suspected Tamil Tigers blew up two of Colombo's three oil depots.

The stinging rebuke to the new military offensive destroyed an estimated more than \$30-million of petroleum products and equipment, crippled the nation's oil supply and left more than 23 security forces and three rebels dead.

Also dead, again, was the government's hope of restricting the civil war to a remote jungle.

A Colombo-wide curfew was imposed to prevent looting in neighbourhoods affected by the big blaze, and all gas stations were closed to conserve supplies. Fearing further blasts, thousands of residents fled their homes, taking refuge in other houses, temples and on the street.

The Tigers' latest apparent attack has made a mockery of the government's defences. While security at the installations had been tightened for fear of sabotage, the government forces on guard were quickly overpowered by a much smaller group.

Police said 20 suspected Tamil Tigers arrived at the main depot after midnight in a truck, attacked the main gate and then stormed the compound, firing rocket-propelled grenades at the oil installations. One of the attackers blew himself up with explosives, police said.

Following the explosions at Colombo's main Kolonnawa depot and smaller nearby Oruduwatta depot, about three kilometres from the city centre, heavy fighting broke out between security forces and attackers trapped in the compound. At least 25 people were wounded in the shooting, but most of the rebels escaped.



Sri Lankans came out yesterday to watch the fires at an oil storage depot in a Colombo suburb. (DEXTER CRUEZ/Associated Press)

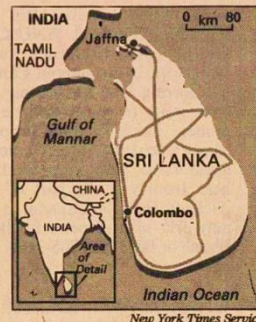
Hours later, fireballs were still seen shooting into the tropical air while plumes of black smoke billowed over parts of the city.

Only 72 hours earlier, Sri Lanka's military had launched a major assault on the northern Jaffna peninsula, from which the Tamil Tigers have waged a war of independence since 1983. And the army appeared to be

winning some of its biggest gains in recent years.

Government officials said the offensive would continue apace despite the fuel depot attack. "Very soon we will capture Jaffna," deputy defence minister Anuruddha Ratwatta told Parliament yesterday.

After watching the Tamil Tigers abandon peace talks last



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winter, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her defence advisers had hoped they could devastate the rebels on the battlefield, and thus force them to return more humbly to the negotiating table. But yesterday's debacle may force Ms. Kumaratunga, who had predicted peace by the new year, to rethink some of her strategy.

Even if the Sri Lankan army seizes the Tigers' stronghold of Jaffna, which many military analysts think doubtful, the oil-depot attack shows the government will only find itself forced to begin war anew on a different, more elusive front against the world's most sophisticated force of suicide saboteurs.

The government says more than 50,000 people have been killed in the 12-year struggle with the Tamil Tigers, who want an independent homeland. The government last summer proposed a new constitution that would give the Tamils a semi-autonomous region in the north and east, but the Tigers so far have rejected such an offer.

With as many as 30,000 troops (one-third of the entire armed forces) and a battery of tanks, heavy weapons and ground attack aircraft, the military launched Operation Sunshine before dawn last Tuesday on the Jaffna peninsula, about 300 kilometres north of Colombo. The rebels responded the same day with a suicide attack on a cargo ship that had been deployed by the military to transport food to troops in the north.

In the first three days of the fighting, the military said 62 soldiers were killed and 250

wounded, while 220 Tamil Tigers were killed and 450 injured.

The Tigers have accused the government forces of killing 40 civilians as well, although there has been no independent account. The government has censored all domestic news reports of the fighting, including foreign television transmissions into the country.

For the first time since the Indian government backed Sri Lanka in the 1980s, military officials believe they have the rebels on the run. In the past four months of fighting, the Tigers have lost nearly 1,000 fighters from its force, estimated to number between 10,000 and 15,000. There also have been credible reports of dissension within the rebel movement, with Tiger leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran recently dismissing his intelligence chief, Pottu Amman.

For the military, the early victories this week create a buffer around its base at Palali, which had become an easy target for rebel mortar attacks. But if the government forces hope to push further toward Jaffna town, where the Tamil Tigers are headquartered, many analysts doubt they would be able to hold their ground in the jungle against the rebels.

"Any offensive into Jaffna now would be an unmitigated disaster," said Harry Goonetilleke, a former air force chief. "The timing is all wrong."

He said the military is already racing against the heavy autumn monsoon, which is expected to hit the peninsula in the next few weeks. The torrential rains play havoc with traditional supply lines and can make sea and air access to the peninsula precarious. He estimated the military would need almost 100,000 troops to hold Jaffna, equivalent to the entire armed forces.

In other developments a suspected fund raiser and leader of the Tamil Tigers has been arrested on terrorism-related charges, officials said yesterday.

Manickavasagam Suresh, 40, was arrested on a National Security Certificate, used to hold suspected terrorists operating in Canada.