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(1995, November 02) *The Ottawa citizen.*

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## **SRI LANKA**

# **500,000 flee Tamil stronghold as government advances troops**

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) — Government troops advanced to within six kilometres of the Tamil rebels' stronghold Wednesday, pushing an offensive that has sent 500,000 civilians fleeing.

Jaffna, a city of 125,000 where the Tamils have based their 12-year fight for an independent homeland, has almost emptied since the military launched a campaign two weeks ago to capture it, said a relief worker who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Authorities said they did not know how many rebel defenders are left in the city.

Most of the Jaffna Peninsula's 675,000 other residents have fled their homes as government troops, supported by warplanes and artillery, march toward Jaffna, said K. Ponnampalam, the government's chief administrator in the region.

He warned of a refugee crisis and appealed for international help, including food, tents and chlorine to purify drinking water. Diarrhea and eye diseases already are spreading, he said.

Ponnampalam said government bombing near Jaffna has killed 42 civilians. The military said it was unaware of those casualties.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga promised a quick end to the war, but she warned rebels may soon target the capital.

"As we pressure the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in the north, they are likely to strike in Colombo," Kumaratunga said over state radio and television.

Fearing retaliatory rebel attacks, the government has shut the nation's schools until the end of the year — more than a month ahead of a scheduled December vacation.

The Defence Ministry said residents harboring Tamil rebels would be imprisoned. Hundreds of extra troops were deployed in and around the parliament building and the presidential palace.

Tamil rebels, who accuse Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority of discrimination, have established a rival government in Jaffna, including a police force, courts and tax collection agencies.