

Sri Lanka military: Weekend battles kill 81 rebels, 11 soldiers in north

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COLOMBO, Sri Lanka: Fierce weekend fighting in Sri Lanka's northern region killed 81 Tamil separatists and 11 government soldiers, the military said Monday.

On Sunday, army troops killed five Tamil Tiger rebels in separate clashes along the front lines separating government-controlled territory with the rebels' de facto state in the north, a Defense Ministry official said on condition of anonymity, citing government regulations. He said the fighting also killed one soldier and wounded two others.

In a main assault Saturday, troops backed by artillery and mortar fire pushed into rebel-held territory in Mannar district, military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said.

At least 66 guerrillas and nine soldiers were killed in the fierce daylong battle, Nanayakkara said. Fifty-one guerrillas and 34 soldiers were wounded, he said.

However, in a statement late Saturday, rebel spokesman Rasiah Ilanthirayan said 30 soldiers died and 75 were wounded, and that only three rebels had been killed in the battle.

Both sides commonly exaggerate their enemy's casualties while underplaying their own, and it was not possible to verify either side's claim because the fighting took place deep in the northern jungles where access is restricted.

Separate battles elsewhere in the north on Saturday killed 10 more rebels and one soldier, the military said.

There was no comment from the rebels on that fighting.

Reports of fighting have increased in recent months following the government's promise to capture the rebels' de facto state and crush them by the end of the year. But diplomats and other observers say the army is facing more resistance than it expected.

Meanwhile, a New York-based rights group blamed the Sri Lankan government, Tamil rebels and paramilitary groups for violence against children.

"This has turned into a war against civilians and it is the children who suffer most," Julia Freedson, director of the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, said in a statement issued Monday.

The group blamed Tamil rebels and the Karuna group, a former rebel force now allied with the government, for using child soldiers. It accused the government of obstructing humanitarian access to thousands of children in war-torn areas.

International rights groups have long criticized the Tamil Tigers and other armed groups in Sri Lanka for forcibly recruiting children.

The government and the rebels didn't immediately comment on the statement.

The Tamil Tigers have been fighting since 1983 for an independent homeland for minority ethnic Tamils, who were marginalized for decades by governments dominated by the Sinhalese majority. More than 70,000 people have been killed in the fighting.