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Stop press

Sri Lankan Army in Kilinochchi

AFTER a week of heavy fighting, the Sri Lankan Defence Ministry announced that troops had captured the northern town of Kilinochchi on Sunday 29 September, describing it as the last bastion of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The Tigers have refused to confirm the fall saying Sri Lankan forces were still east of the town but BBC reports say the LTTE withdrew from Kilinochchi on Friday after blowing up the telecommunications tower as troops threatened to encircle the town from the south.

Defence sources say over 450 Tiger guerrillas died in a savage counter attack on Thursday as Tiger radio appealed for reinforcements for a last-ditch battle to save the town. A week of fighting has left 750 guerrillas and 255 soldiers dead, the Defence Ministry says. The Tigers claim bodies handed over to the ICRC by the military are civilians killed in Sri Lankan airstrikes.

Government restrictions on correspondents in the war zone and press censorship means there is no independent confirmation of the reports.

The loss is a psychological blow to the LTTE and attention will now focus on the strategic crossroads town of Mankulam 45 kms south, where many of the 200,000 refugees from the fighting have sought shelter.

The military's objective may be to take the 70 kms of shattered road between Kilinochchi and frontline Vavuniya, symbolically reuniting the island and securing a vital supply line to Jaffna, where Sri Lankan troops are increasingly bogged down by guerrilla attacks and a civilian population cowed by food shortages and reprisals from both sides.

Mankulam, with one of three cottage hospitals in hundreds of miles of jungle and isolated farms is flooded with refugees with no proper food, shelter or sanitation. Vital drugs, antibiotics and chlorine are in short supply. Thousands of people are fleeing Akkarayankulam, another refugee concentration, a few miles south-west of Kilinochchi.

The Tigers' real strongholds east of the main road in the Vanni jungle remain a palpable threat and the LTTE may seek a quick strategic reply to Kilinochchi with an attack on the capital by its suicide commandos or on the eastern seaboard town of Batticaloa, increasingly embattled as Tiger control swells west of the lagoon.

Rather than let over 200,000 frightened civilians be pushed south into government-held territory in Vavuniya where extensive refugee preparations have been underway for weeks, the Tigers may seek to engineer a new refugee exodus to south India, a few miles across the Palk Strait. Over 2,500 Tamils have arrived in south India in the last three weeks.