

Toll in Sri Lanka clashes rises to 33

Sri Lankan troops launched a series of pre-emptive strikes ahead of their forward defence lines in the northern part of the country, killing at least 32 Tamil rebels and losing a soldier, a military spokesman said Tuesday.

The operations were launched in the Wannu and Jaffna areas, 260 km and 370 km north of the capital respectively, Monday in the wake of a string of rebel attacks on the security forces manning isolated guard positions.

The rebels had also attempted to infiltrate the forward defence lines in the north during the past few weeks.

Government troops launched their first operation in Mullikulam, in Wannu district, killing at least 20 rebels. Seven bodies, including those of five women, were recovered from the scene while 15 rebels were injured, the spokesman said.

Around the same area a government soldier was killed and seven more were wounded when rebels engaged troops using artillery and heavy mortar fire. Government troops were unable to retaliate because the rebel gun positions were located around an old Roman Catholic church in the area, he said.

In another confrontation, soldiers attacked a rebel hideout in Vilathikulam in Wannu district Monday evening, killing eight rebels.

Military authorities said government troops killed four rebels and seized their weapons in Muhamali, 370 km north of the capital Monday.

Meanwhile, troops were deployed to carry out a search operation for suspected Tamil rebels who attacked an army detachment in southeast Sri Lanka Monday evening.

Military spokesman Udaya Nanyakkara said that reinforcements were sent in from a nearby camp to the detachment located at Thalgasamkanda, 380 km south east of the capital, on the border of a wildlife park.

He said no damage had been caused to the security forces, but Tamil rebels claimed they overran the detachments and killed six soldiers.

The area where the detachment was located borders the eastern province where Tamil rebels have been carrying out small attacks after their main bases were overrun in successive military operations.

Fighting in the north and eastern provinces during the past 23 months has escalated, claiming the lives of more than 5,300 people, including rebels, soldiers and civilians.

Both sides have ignored a Norwegian-backed ceasefire signed in Feb 2002 between rebels of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government.

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