

1000 Tamil guerrillas pull back as Sri Lanka troops declare victory.
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COLOMBO (DPA) — Sri Lanka's government claimed victory yesterday in its seven-day military offensive against Tamil guerrillas.

Nearly 1,000 of the guerrillas moved out of the Vadamarachchi area in the northeast as about 3,000 troops gained control.

But the rebels were reported to have strengthened their positions in the densely populated main area of Jaffna in the Northern Peninsula.

Tilak Ratnakara, chairman of the State Media Centre, said the armed forces began yesterday to flush out remaining guerrillas and clear booby traps and land mines in a bid to gain control of the last portion of the Vadamarachchi area.

Other sources said the guerrillas had moved into Jaffna and the western side of the peninsula, where they were regrouping.

More than 200 people have died in the offensive — including 37 civilians, 32 soldiers and 150 rebels.

India, meanwhile, said it plans to send 20 shiploads of food as "humanitarian aid" to the Tamils.

A Sri Lankan government spokesman called the move a "gross interference" in the internal affairs of the country and sources said the foreign ministry was drafting a protest.

The food convoy is to leave from the southern Indian port of Rameswaram tomorrow under the supervision of the Indian Red Cross.

Indian officials said the ships will be unarmed and open to inspection by the Sri Lankan Red Cross.

Three-quarters of Sri Lanka's 16 million people are Sinhalese and Buddhists. The Tamils, who make up less than 20 per cent, are fighting for a separate homeland.