

Battle casualties mount in Sri Lanka's civil war

More than 140 Tamil separatists, 27 soldiers reported killed

Associated Press and Reuters

COLOMBO — More than 140 Tamil separatists and 27 troops were killed in two battles yesterday in what appeared to be the deadliest day of Sri Lanka's civil war, military officials said.

In Jaffna Peninsula in northern Sri Lanka early yesterday, troops beat back a Tamil guerrilla counterattack on soldiers who had advanced into rebel-held territory this week.

The military recovered 144 rebel bodies, but as many as 200 guerrillas may have been killed and 250 injured, said spokesman Major Tilak Dunuwille. The insurgents often remove bodies of rebels from the scene of battles. Nine soldiers were killed and 19 others wounded, Major Dunuwille said.

The reports could not be independently confirmed.

Near the town of Mullaittivu in

the northeast, rebels attacked naval ships carrying troops and killed 15 soldiers and three sailors, the military said in a statement. It added that 54 soldiers and sailors were wounded aboard the Rana Gaja, which was badly damaged by gunfire.

Navy gunboats shot and sank eight rebel boats, killing at least 30 guerrillas, the statement said.

The death toll in the two battles was the highest in a single day in the 12-year civil war. On July 28, 182 rebels and two soldiers died in a counteroffensive on four military camps in the northeast.

The rebels want a homeland for the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. They accuse the majority Sinhalese, who control the government and the military, of discrimination in education and jobs. More than 36,000 people have been killed in the war.

In yesterday's land battle, rebels in two groups attacked troops near the towns of Ponnalaikadduwan, Navakerri and Puthur, about 320 kilometres north of Colombo, the military said. Fighting raged for four hours before the attack was repulsed by troops backed by heavy artillery fire from Palali, the main military base on Jaffna Peninsula, according to Major Dunuwille.

Rebel radio reported 50,000 residents had been left homeless by the intense fighting.

Diplomats said the latest upsurge in the conflict could be the start of a widely expected all-out government offensive on the northern stronghold of the separatists. But they added that a continuous drizzle, apparently presaging the onset of October monsoons, may put this in doubt because troops moving with tanks and artillery run the risk of losing air cover in bad weather.