

Sri Lanka navy says blows up Tamil Tiger weapons ship. (2008, December 22). Reuters.

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By Ranga Sirilal

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COLOMBO (Reuters) - Sri Lankan navy boats destroyed a Tamil Tiger weapons-smuggling ship Saturday and four other small rebel boats in an attack that killed at least 20 fighters, the navy spokesman said.

The ship, approximately 40 metres long (130 feet), was spotted in international waters steaming towards the only sizeable port the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) still control on the Indian Ocean island nation, Mullaitivu on the northeastern coast.

"Navy offshore patrol craft observed a medium-sized LTTE vessel about 70 miles (112 km) northeast of Mullaitivu and navy fast attack boats attacked it," navy spokesman Mahesh Karunaratne said. "The vessel was destroyed. Four LTTE attack crafts that came in support were also destroyed."

The LTTE could not be reached for comment.

The Tigers for years had a sizeable fleet of freighters it used for smuggling weapons into Sri Lanka, but in the past two years the navy has intercepted them in international waters and destroyed close to a dozen.

Security analysts say the LTTE had based the fleet in southeast Asia and developed a lucrative sideline carrying contraband for other militant groups and criminals.

The Sri Lankan military has methodically closed down the smuggling routes available to the Tigers, especially since capturing the western coast a month ago.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa in January threw out a poorly-observed 2002 truce, accusing the Tigers of using it to re-arm and vowing to wipe them out if they refused to surrender.

Since then, the military has systematically captured rebel-held territory in the most successful combat campaign so far in the quarter-century war, and is now battling its way to the LTTE's self-proclaimed capital of Kilinochchi.

The Tigers since 1983 say they have been fighting for the rights of Sri Lanka's minority Tamils. They have ended up on U.S., E.U. and Indian terrorism lists after scores of assassinations and suicide bombings.

(Writing by Bryson Hull; Editing by Katie Nguyen)

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