

## **Deadly blast hits Sri Lanka bus**

At least 23 people have been killed and dozens hurt in a bomb attack on a bus in Sri Lanka, the military says.

The attack took place in the town of Buttala, some 240km (150 miles) south-east of the capital, Colombo.

Several soldiers were injured in a second blast not far from the first explosion. The army blamed the Tamil Tiger rebels for the attacks.

The attacks came as the ceasefire between Sri Lanka's government and the Tamil Tigers formally came to an end.

Fighting had been going on in the north and east of the island for about two years despite the truce.

More than 60 people were wounded in Wednesday morning's attack on the bus, officials said.

A roadside bomb was detonated as the vehicle was driving past, packed with civilians including schoolchildren, according to the defence ministry.

Army spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara said the attackers fired shots into the wreckage after the explosion.

The second blast took place a short distance away - the target was an armoured vehicle and several soldiers were wounded.

### **'Shocked'**

The government gave notice two weeks ago it was pulling out of the ceasefire agreement which was brokered by Norway in 2002.

Tamil Tiger rebels said on Thursday they were "shocked and disappointed" that the ceasefire was ending and vowed to defend themselves.

As the ceasefire came to an end fighting continued along the frontlines that surround territory held by the Tamil Tigers in northern Sri Lanka.

The government says the rebels, who want an independent state in the north and east, used the peace pact to rearm and regroup. It now says it aims to crush them by the end of this year.

The head of the Tigers' political wing B Nadesan told the BBC they were ready to fight.

"Definitely if they try to launch a major offensive against our forces, the Sri Lankan forces will face severe casualties," he said.

### **Doubts**

The government now says it will produce within weeks a long delayed package of devolution proposals.

It is seeking to sideline the separatist Tigers and resolve with other groups the complaints of the Tamil minority that they have been marginalised for decades by Sinhalese-dominated governments.

The BBC's Roland Buerk in Colombo says there are serious doubts over whether the scheme can work.

As the last hours of the ceasefire ticked away the Japanese peace envoy, Yasushi Akashi, held meetings with government officials in Colombo.

Japan is a major donor to Sri Lanka and has hinted it might reconsider its aid package, warning of the dire humanitarian consequences of an intensified war.