

## Thousands flee after Sri Lanka rebel threat. (1999, November 11). *The Focus.*

11/11 0713 FOCUS-Thousands flee after Sri Lanka rebel threat

(Updates with Vavuniya mostly empty, comments from ICRC and fleeing civilians.)

VAVUNIYA, Sri Lanka, Nov 11 (Reuters) - Thousands of civilians fled Sri Lanka's northern government-held frontier town of Vavuniya after Tamil Tiger rebels warned of fresh attacks, witnesses said on Thursday.

They said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in a clandestine radio broadcast, had announced plans to attack the northern towns of Vavuniya and Jaffna and northwestern Mannar.

A Reuters photographer who reached Vavuniya on Thursday said people carrying household goods in trucks, cars and three-wheeler taxis were awaiting military clearance to leave the town.

"The town is almost deserted with only soldiers and policemen patrolling. In the few shops that are open, people were packing their goods into vehicles to move out," photographer Anuruddha Lokuhapuarachchi said by telephone.

"It is difficult to give exact figures, but the town appears to be empty," said Harsha Gunawardena, spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The ICRC was keeping its Vavuniya office open, but Gunawardena said the relief agency was closely monitoring the situation. Vavuniya lies 220 km (136 miles) northeast of Colombo.

The Tigers, fighting for a homeland for minority Tamils, recently launched a major offensive against government troops in the north. Scores have been killed in intense fighting.

Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte on Wednesday discounted the rebel threat to Vavuniya and said troops were taking pre-emptive steps and could handle any confrontation.

Residents said the military had increased its presence in the area with tanks and soldiers patrolling the streets.

Jaffna, a former rebel stronghold that was captured by the military in 1995, is further north. Mannar, on the northwest coast, has been under government control almost throughout the 16-year-old ethnic war.

### THOUSANDS OF CIVILIANS BOARD TRAIN

Following the threat thousands of people had boarded trains that left Vavuniya late on Wednesday, said residents contacted by phone.

"Whoever can are leaving Vavuniya town to areas they feel are safe from possible artillery shells fired by the LTTE," said a resident who did not wish to be identified.

T. Sinnammah, a Tamil grandmother who got off a crowded train that reached the capital from Vavuniya on Thursday, said she had to wait a day to find a place on a train.

"I was scared and decided to leave with my daughter and her baby," Sinnammah told Reuters on reaching Colombo.

Vavuniya has come under threat after the LTTE began their latest offensive, codenamed "Unceasing Wave 3," on November 2,

wresting large areas in the northern Wanni region they had lost in the past two years.

Sri Lankan troops, backed by artillery, have in the past few days carried out operations along a highway north of Vavuniya in an effort to minimise the rebel threat, military officials said.

The troops were advancing from south of Puliyankulam town where the soldiers withdrew after last week's battles in which the government said 101 soldiers and 150 guerrillas were killed.

In the northeast, troops and the rebels continued to exchange artillery and mortar fire that has forced thousands of villagers to flee their homes in the Welioya region, officials said.

The latest losses are one of the biggest military setbacks yet for the government and are clouding President Chandrika Kumaratunga's bid for re-election next month.

Kumaratunga, in a statement late on Monday, conceded losing territory in the north.

The rebels have said 119 of its cadres were killed in the fighting, but no independent confirmation was possible. The government does not allow journalists access to the front line except on conducted tours.

The rebels have been fighting since 1983 for an independent homeland in the north and east of the country. More than 55,000 people have been killed in the