

LTTE preparing for full-scale war

By Minoli de Soysa

JAFFNA, Nov. 1 — Sri Lankan Tamil rebels are preparing for a full-scale war with a major recruitment drive as their leaders say the government has closed the doors for peace.

"The situation is gloomy here. We are mobilising the entire Tamil nation for war. There is no room now for peace or negotiations", Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) spokesman Anton Balasingham told Reuters in Jaffna.

"When the Tiger is cornered, he will fight back fiercely in self-defence", he said in a recent interview.

Posters in the town, urged people to join the LTTE and warned them to prepare for a major war. Newspapers carried similar advertisements.

Analysts said it is not the first time the rebels have declared war in the decade-old conflict.

There has been no government reaction to the latest declaration.

Outwardly, there were no signs of such preparation. The streets were filled with people shopping in buildings partly destroyed by the war, or riding bicycles to work.

Balasingham said the Tigers, had just completed a recruitment drive and were now training the new men.

He did not say how many had been recruited. The

rebels are estimated to have between 10,000 to 20,000 armed members.

"The bellicose attitude of the government is the main stumbling block. They have not put forward any proposals to form the basis for negotiations", said Balasingham. Talks between the two sides in the past have failed.

President Dingiri Banda Wijetunga told a meeting of government officials last week there was only a "terrorist" problem and no ethnic conflict.

"What is happening in the north and the east is terrorism. Terrorism is a danger, it is a plague and a disease", he said.

"As I have repeatedly said, I won't give into the terrorists and part with a portion of this country".

Wijetunga's statement, reflecting a hardline stand unlike his predecessor Ranasinghe Premadasa who followed a more moderate path and was allegedly killed by the rebels, has worried many Tamils.

"The President is taking a hardline view. If he says there is no ethnic problem, then the issue will have to be settled in the battlefield", said Balasingham.

Last month, more than 500 rebels, soldiers and civilians died in a major offensive when the army advanced into rebel territory from a base in the Jaffna peninsula. — **Reuter**