

Troops move into Sri Lanka town after threat. (1999, November 12). *The Focus.*

11/12 0718 FOCUS-Troops move into Sri Lanka town after threat

(Updates with defence ministry statement saying troops engaged rebel targets, three rebels killed in paras 6-9)

VAVUNIYA, Sri Lanka, Nov 12 (Reuters) - Thousands of troops poured into Sri Lanka's northern town of Vavuniya on Friday after Tamil Tiger rebels warned of fresh attacks.

"There were eight buses carrying soldiers heading to Vavuniya and in town troops are moving around briskly in armoured personnel carriers and other vehicles," Reuters photographer Anuruddha Lokuhapurachchi said.

The frontier town, some 220 km (136 miles) northeast of

Colombo, has come under threat after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) began their latest offensive, codenamed "Unceasing Wave 3," on November 2.

The LTTE, in a clandestine radio broadcast, announced plans to attack Vavuniya and asked residents to move since it "may cause hardship to the people."

In their latest offensive, the Tigers retook large areas in the northern Wanni region which they had lost in the past two years, dealing the government one of the biggest military setbacks and clouding President Chandrika Kumaratunga's bid for re-election next month.

The defence ministry said on Friday troops killed three rebels and engaged identified guerrilla targets with artillery near the villages of Periyamadu and Pallamadu in northern Wanni region.

The rebels were killed when troops confronted a group of 10 guerrillas at Nochchikulam, a town north of Vavuniya, on Thursday, the ministry said in a statement.

It said troops were also in the process of constructing new defence lines in the Wanni.

An earlier statement said forces were stepping up security in the area and were mounting operations against the rebels to regain the areas lost during fierce battles.

CIVILIANS FLEE VAVUNIYA

But while soldiers rushed into Vavuniya, thousands of civilians have fled.

"There is a lot of uneasiness. A few people have come back on bicycles to take away their belongings and there are a lot of troop movements," Lokuhapurachchi said.

Medecins Sans Frontieres on Thursday urged the government to allow all civilians to leave Vavuniya, following reports that the army was holding back some civilians who did not have permission.

"Those denied permission to leave include 300 families (about 1,700 people) in a displaced persons centre, whose travel documents are officially only valid for Vavuniya," the relief agency said in a statement.

But most people who had lined up carrying household goods in trucks, cars and three-wheeler taxis at a military checkpoint were no longer there on Friday.

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