

U.N. closes shop in Guatemala, says work remains

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By Frank Jack Daniel

GUATEMALA CITY, Nov 15 (Reuters) - The United Nations closed its peacekeeping mission in Guatemala on Monday, eight years after the end of a long civil war, saying there was little risk fighting would resume despite ingrained poverty and racism.

"The peace process is sufficiently mature that there is no return to the armed conflict," Seda Pumpyanskaya, spokeswoman for the Guatemala mission, told Reuters.

However, she warned that poverty, inequality and discrimination continued to plague the country.

The U.N. mission, known as Minugua, was due to leave Guatemala in 1997, a year after peace agreements were signed by the government and leftist guerrillas, but was repeatedly asked to stay because of instability fostered by power struggles among the army, the private sector and organized crime.

Its mandate was again extended last year amid fears that hotly contested elections that included former dictator Efraim Rios Montt as a presidential candidate could descend into violence.

Rios Montt was defeated by businessman Oscar Berger, who this year reduced the power of the army and invited prominent human rights activists into his government.

Minugua came to Guatemala in 1994 and at its peak in 2000 employed more than 500 people including 155 police and military officials.

Their job was to pressure the government to implement the peace agreements and to monitor human rights abuses.

A 1999 U.N.-backed truth report said around 200,000 people were killed during 36 years of war, most of them Mayan Indian civilians murdered in the army's scorched earth campaign to stamp out insurgency.

In its final report published in August, the Guatemala mission praised the end to hostilities and state-sponsored human rights crimes but said the country still needed to tackle the root causes of the war.

"The (peace) agreements on indigenous and economic matters are the least fulfilled and need serious state policies," Pumpyanskaya said.

Continued poverty is one reason crime has spiraled even as state violence has dwindled in Guatemala, leading to one of the world's highest homicide rates.

Minugua has closed all its regional offices in Guatemala and has sent some of its equipment to a new mission in Haiti. Guatemala has sent 70 troops to Haiti to aid the mission.

A few staff members will stay in Guatemala until year-end.

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