

Violence darkens Guatemala election

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By Mica Rosenberg

GUATEMALA CITY (Reuters) - In Guatemala's worst political violence since the end of its civil war, almost 50 people have been killed in campaigning for this weekend's election, giving an ex-general who promises to crack down on crime a lift in the race for president.

Much of the bloodshed has come from powerful drug barons trying to force their candidates into office and political rivals shooting each other.

Guatemala, still recovering from a 1960-1996 civil war, chooses a new president and Congress on Sunday. The country is awash with guns and police are widely viewed as inept.

In one of the most brazen attacks, the 28-year-old son of human rights activist Amilcar Mendez was killed by gunmen as he left work in mid-August after he helped his father alert rights groups in Washington to death threats against candidates.

"Our complaint was the political detonator in my son's murder," said Mendez, an advisor to the running mate of center-left presidential candidate Alvaro Colom.

Besides political murders, almost 6,000 people were killed in common crime last year, many the victims of drug feuds or attacks by tattooed street gang members.

That gives Guatemala, with a population of 13 million, one of the highest murder rates in the world, and has propelled tough-talking former general Otto Perez Molina to the top of opinion polls along with Colom, who for months was the clear front-runner.

GENERAL RISING

Colom, a bespectacled former deputy economy minister, has promised to clean up the police and overhaul the justice system. But Perez Molina's promise of a "strong fist" and to use the military to combat crime is gaining support.

"The police do nothing, but the gangs are afraid of the army," said Ricardo Rodriguez, a 62-year old carpenter from the rural El Quiche region who had to shut down his business when armed robbers stole \$1,500. "What people want is security."

The two main candidates were tied on about 32 percent of support each in a poll in the Prensa Libre newspaper on Wednesday.

Neither of them is expected to win more than 50 percent of the vote on Sunday, so a run off in November is likely and Perez Molina is tipped to pick up more votes by then.

Guatemalans' support for the long-mistrusted army underscores just how desperate the situation has become.

A U.N.-backed report blamed the army for 85 percent of Guatemala's civil war-era killings and disappearances of almost 250,000 mostly Mayan people.

Perez Molina commanded troops in El Quiche in the 1980s when some of the worst massacres of civilians happened but he has not been prosecuted for any atrocities.

Some 98 percent of Guatemala's murders went unsolved in 2006, as an inefficient and corrupt justice system made few arrests and even fewer convictions.

Colom and Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu, a human rights leader who is lagging in the polls, say turning to Perez Molina would be a mistake because only jobs, a strong economy and honest police can help Guatemala.

"Guatemala lived for 40 years under a strong fist, and it left the country poor and violent," Menchu said during a televised debate.

Two activists from Menchu's party were shot dead this week while distributing leaflets, but most of the victims have been from Colom's National Unity for Hope party.

"We used to be victims of the war," said Mendez as his wife cried inconsolably over their son's murder. "Now we are victims of the peace."