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Army stands down in N.Ireland but scars run deep

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By Jonathan Saul

CROSSMAGLEN (Reuters) - The army watchtowers have gone and British soldiers no longer search homes looking for wanted men but for many in Northern Ireland's border towns the trauma of conflict still burns.

The British army ends on Tuesday its 38-year role supporting police in Northern Ireland, its longest ever military operation.

In Crossmaglen, a heartland for Irish nationalists in the British-ruled province who want a united Ireland, residents are still dealing with the legacy of fierce clashes between Republican gunmen and British forces.

"The British army ran a war through this area and the people were at the rough end of it," said Terry Hearty, a local councilor with Sinn Fein, political ally of the outlawed Irish Republican Army (IRA) guerrilla group.

British troops were sent to Northern Ireland in 1969 to help quell unrest over civil rights which erupted between the majority Protestant population -- who want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom -- and local Catholics.

More than 3,600 people, including around 2,000 civilians and 1,000 members of the security forces, were killed over the following three decades. Paramilitary groups were responsible for over 3,000 deaths while security forces killed around 300.

Violence largely ended with an IRA ceasefire in 1997 and in May of this year politicians from both sides of the sectarian divide entered into a new

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power-sharing government. But for many in the region, scars have yet to heal.

YEARS OF HARASSMENT

"It was difficult for us to live with years of harassment from the British army and the constant searches. I am glad they have gone," said Naoise Short, 55, a hardware store owner.

Traveling overland in South Armagh during the 1970s became so dangerous the British army began using helicopters to transport troops and supply its bases. It became known as "Bandit Country" because of the levels of lawlessness.

Many homes in the area close to the Republic of Ireland fly the Irish tricolor flag and monuments honor the IRA's South Armagh Brigade, one of the province's deadliest guerrilla units.

The end of military operations means the British army will now have only a "peacetime garrison" where, as in other parts of Britain, troops will now be trained for deployment to world trouble spots such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Troops in Northern Ireland will number no more than 5,000, compared with 27,000 at the height of the conflict in 1972.

As a sign of the changes here, police who once patrolled in armored vehicles with army escorts are now seen in standard squad cars or on bikes.

But a mistrust of the Protestant-dominated police force remains in places such as Crossmaglen. Military escorts for police officers in the area only ended last month.

Police area commander Chief Inspector Sam Corder said progress was being made.

"It is all about engagement and building on relationships, and one thing will feed the other," he told Reuters at his office in a heavily fortified police station in nearby Newry.

"We do have small pockets of dissident activity which, if not properly controlled, could cause us damage," he said. "I think we are well equipped to deal with that."

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