August. In the labour sphere, the most important was the implementation of the new rules for the recognition of legal personality and the approval of statutes and registration of trade unions, which fulfilled Guatemala's obligations with regard to ILO Convention No. 87.

Progress was also reported in the strengthening of institutions for the protection of human rights. Under the leadership of the new Attorney-General, a more rational administration of the human, material and technical resources in the Public Prosecutor's Office took place. The Public Defender's Office broadened its activities and extended its coverage. An information and an anti-riot unit were created within the National Police. The Office of the Counsel for Human Rights had begun to set up the department for investigating individual human rights violations, and COPREDEH, under its new chairmanship, had significantly improved its capacity to deal with complaints of rights violations and ensure prompt response from the authorities.

The demobilization and disarming of the CVDCs concluded in December. While MINUGUA had no mandate to verify the process, its field presence allowed it to conclude that that was a most significant development. The purification of the National Police continued. Between July and October, 134 police officers faced legal actions for various criminal acts. The recruitment and training of new police officers improved and the Criminal Investigation Department underwent some reorganization. On 21 August, Congress approved a decree prohibiting the bearing of firearms by persons under 25 years of age. The suspension of compulsory military conscription continued, while consultations were held on a new law governing military service.

NGOs and entities working for the protection of human rights had begun to play a more visible role, while COPREDEH was following up on cases of threats reported by human rights organizations. In the course of the year, several legislative initiatives were designed to provide comprehensive assistance to victims of violations and their relatives, and a compensation bill was before the Congressional Human Rights Commission. Other significant legislative developments included the adoption of the Code on Children and Youth and the Act on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Domestic Violence.

In 1996, over 4,000 refugees returned to Guatemala. Total voluntary repatriation to date involved more than 34,000 people, with another 32,500 refugees remaining in Mexico. Progress was made in reincorporating into national life the so-called communities of populations in resistance, assisting them in resettlement and access of land and with support for socio-economic development programmes.

The Government set in motion an extensive campaign, with assistance from MINUGUA, to publicize the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The judiciary showed greater interest in and provided financial support for the training of court translators. Representatives of the Maya, Xinca and Garifuna organizations laid the foundation for their role in implementing the Agreement by establishing working committees to prepare for the reforms envisaged.

Nevertheless, the Mission observed, the enjoyment of human rights by the population as a whole was still precarious, and government efforts against crime and impunity had achieved only partial results, as the persistence of widespread criminal violence continued to cause a serious lack of public safety and distrust in the institutions responsible for the rule of law. Further progress was being hampered by the continuing weaknesses in the institutions responsible for preventing, investigating, trying and punishing serious crimes and rights violations, a large proportion of which had been impossible to clarify. In addition, there was an alarming proliferation of firearms in the hands of private individuals, as well as recourse to violence, failure to abide by the law in resolving private conflicts and discrimination against indigenous groups.

Overcoming those problems required a major effort to comply with all the agreements signed and the State should be fully committed to that, with the backing of civil society and the support of the international community, MINUGUA believed. The Mission wished to contribute by focusing on those aspects of the peace agreements with which it was most familiar. Now that the peace agreements had been signed, judges and magistrates would have to apply the National Reconciliation Act in accordance with its meaning and its aim of achieving reconciliation without impunity. Impeccable professional conduct on the part of those involved in running the justice system would be essential; MINUGUA offered its technical cooperation in that connection. Effective coordination between the National Police, the Public Prosecutor's Office and the judiciary was essential for improving the State's performance in guaranteeing public safety and fighting crime.

The Mission put forward a number of recommendations to bring about the necessary changes in the administration of justice; transform the National Police into an effective public service institution; limit and control the use of weapons;