

Zapatistas leave jungle for tour of Mexico

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LA GARRUCHA, Mexico (AP) - Zapatista rebels in rickety trucks and buses streamed out of this village Sunday, leaving their jungle strongholds for the first time in four years for a six-month tour of Mexico aimed at reshaping the nation's politics.

Thousands of supporters cheered as Subcommandante Marcos, the Indian rights movement's ski-masked leader, roared through La Garrucha on a black motorcycle with a Mexican flag tied to the back and the initials of the Zapatista military army, EZLN, painted in red on the front.

The caravan's trip through all 31 states and Mexico City is meant to influence Mexico's July presidential election. Marcos has said Zapatista leaders will reach out to leftist groups across the country, creating a national movement that will "turn Mexico on its head."

The rebels have pledged to move away from armed struggle and toward politics, but have not clearly defined their new political role 12 years after seizing several towns in southern Chiapas state in short-lived revolt for Indian rights and socialism.

Marcos, who has never revealed his true identity but has been identified by the government as a former university instructor in Mexico City, has abandoned his military title in favor of the civilian moniker "Delegate Zero."

La Garrucha, accessible only by dirt road, is a rebel-sympathetic village 75 miles from San Cristóbal de las Casas, a large mountain city in southernmost Chiapas state.

Marcos' travels marked the first time the Zapatistas have left their strongholds in the jungles of Chiapas since a triumphant tour to Mexico City in the name of Indian rights that made international headlines in 2001. They largely disappeared from public view following that trip.

Former Mexico City Mayor Manuel Lopez Obrador, of the leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party, is the favorite to win the July elections, but Marcos has criticized the candidate. President Vicente Fox, whose 2000 victory ended 71 years of single-party rule, is barred from running again.

Marcos, known for the pipe and guns he often carries in public, has said the Zapatistas will not run for office or join Mexico's political mainstream.

In speeches from a wooden stage in La Garrucha's main square before the tour, regional rebel leaders offered kind words to non-Zapatista leftist groups, some of which they have fought in the past.

"To the brothers who aren't Zapatistas, we respect all of you, whatever your organization, party or religion," said a masked man, introduced as the leader of La Garrucha, a rebel-controlled village. "We aren't looking for a fight with anybody."

The first leg of the tour is San Cristóbal de las Casas, where the Zapatistas started their rebellion on New Year's Day 1994. Thousands of gun-toting Indians took over the mayor's office and declared war on the Mexican government.

A cease-fire with government forces quickly ended the uprising, but there has been sporadic violence between rebel supporters and other Indian groups in southern Mexico.

Alejandro Cruz, a rebel supporter and 33-year-old high school teacher from Mexico City, said the Zapatistas could be looking to become an organization like the Brazilian landless peasant movement Sin Tierra, which has no candidates of its own but has a strong influence on elections.

"The tour is clearly part of a Zapatista strategy to get legal recognition," Cruz said. "Without that, they have a very uncertain future."

Ricardo Mendez, 28, a Zapatista farmer and native speaker of the Mayan tongue Tzeltal, said the rebels want to expand their influence.

"We will never die. Look how many of us there are," Mendez said, pointing to thousands of masked men and women and children in the village square.

Among the rebel's sympathizers gathered in La Garrucha was a group organized by Higher Grounds, a company from Lake Leelanau, Mich., that buys coffee from Zapatista communities at prices about 50% above the market rate.

Higher Grounds' 31-year-old owner, Chris Treter, said the Zapatista ideas could resonate north of the Rio Grande.

"There are a lot of people in Mexico and in the United States who are disenfranchised and are looking for a voice they can't find in the political parties," Treter said.