

Rebel leader kick-starts Mexico tour on motorbike

By Greg Brosnan

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LA GARRUCHA, Mexico (Reuters) - Mexican rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos rode a motorbike out of his jungle hide-out on Sunday to start a nationwide tour that seeks more support for Indians and the poor before July's presidential election.

Wearing black ski masks, hundreds of Zapatistas from Mayan villages gathered in the jungle valley of La Garrucha, the starting point for the tour and exactly 12 years after the guerrillas seized towns in a brief but bloody uprising.

The rebels formed a guard of honor for Marcos who sped into the village stronghold, wearing a helmet over his own ski mask and waving to supporters.

The pipe-smoking Marcos then led hundreds of rebels on the start of the tour, which plans to visit every Mexican state to urge leftist groups to join a broad anti-capitalist front that wants to influence politics but will not seek office.

"It was an incredible way to come into town," said Zapatista supporter Julio Jimenez, 23, standing on the side of the dirt road as Marcos passed by.

The rebel leader often rides on horseback to draw media attention but the motorbike ride was a first.

The Zapatistas burst out of the jungle on New Year's Day in 1994, taking over towns and attacking police and army positions in Chiapas, Mexico's poorest state, in clashes that claimed about 150 lives.

There has been little fighting since a ceasefire shortly after the 1994 attack, but Marcos' colorful Internet communiqués have made him a hero of the anti-globalization movement.

The rebels are focused on building a rotating system of self-government in strongholds like La Garrucha, with transportation, education and health services supported partly by funds from foreign nongovernmental organizations.

'HONOR TO FIGHT BY YOUR SIDE'

Later on Sunday, about 5,000 Zapatista supporters, including 1,000 masked Indian rebels, crowded into the main square of the colonial Chiapas city of San Cristóbal de las Casas to hear Marcos speak.

Marcos said the tour would avoid mass political rallies, aiming instead to forge links with "those who work machines and the land, take goods and services everywhere but end up with nothing."

"If anything bad happens to me, know that it has been an honor to fight by your side," he said.

Before the tour, the Zapatistas danced the night away in La Garrucha with bands playing tropical music on two makeshift stages in a clearing among wooden huts.

As it struck midnight bringing in the new year, the music went dead and rebels rolled ski masks over their faces and stood at attention to observe a minute's silence for companions killed in the initial uprising.

In 2001, the Zapatistas crisscrossed Mexico in a two-week tour to promote an Indian rights bill, but the subsequent legislation was watered down.

The decision to go back on the road came after agreeing they could only sustain their system of government and promote wider rights for Indians and the poor by joining with workers, peasants and students across Mexico's cities and countryside.

When the Zapatistas emerged, Latin America was recovering from decades of violence that was a Cold War legacy.

Disenchantment among the region's poor with a subsequent embrace of free-market policies has put leftists in power in many Latin American countries.

Leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador is the front-runner in the campaign for Mexico's July 2 election.

While many on the left want the Zapatistas to throw their moral weight behind Lopez Obrador, the rebels have branded him a fraud, saying his party would do little to help the poor.

Lopez Obrador has also criticized Marcos, who has refused to enter mainstream politics.