

Zapatista rebel leader gives interview

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MEXICO CITY - Zapatista rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos Tuesday criticized a police crackdown against protesters in a town near the capital, predicting that political fallout from the clashes would affect the upcoming presidential election.

In a rare live broadcast interview with Mexico's Televisa network, the masked rebel leader said that a clash between police and protesters that left a teenager dead and scores injured in a town outside Mexico City last week shows the country's brewing tensions.

He added, however, that the Zapatistas will not boycott the July 2 elections for the presidency, state governorships and congressional seats. He emphasized that his rebel group is now committed to peace.

Marcos denied Institutional Revolutionary Party presidential candidate Roberto Madrazo's allegations that the Zapatistas instigated the clash last week in San Salvador Atenco, about 15 miles northeast of Mexico City.

But he said he supports the dozens of protesters who were arrested, and he will remain in Mexico City until they are released.

Members of a radical group of townspeople kidnapped and beat six policemen after they tried to prevent vendors from setting up stands in a nearby city. Police responded with rage the next day: television images showed officers repeatedly clubbing helpless detainees. Several of the women who were arrested alleged they were raped by officers.

Marcos said the attack against the police stemmed from "people's fury" and said the attacks were not organized.

"They were not beating the person, but rather what he represents," he said.

The rebel leader came out of his jungle hideout in January and is touring Mexico trying to forge a national leftist movement.

Marcos said he did not expect any settlement with the government that would lead him to take off his rebel's mask.

Marcos enjoyed almost rock star-like popularity among many Mexicans following the Zapatistas' brief armed uprising in January 1994 in the southern state of Chiapas.

Since then, his fight has been carried out through poetic communiqués posted on the Internet, earning him support around the globe.