

Mexican 'subcomandante' to withdraw

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MEXICO CITY --

Mexico's famed masked rebel, Subcomandante Marcos, says he is withdrawing again to the shadows, ending nearly two years of public appearances meant to bolster a grass-roots leftist movement.

Marcos became the eloquent voice of the Zapatista National Liberation Army as it burst out of the jungles of southern Mexico on Jan. 1, 1994, to seize several cities in the name of socialism and Indian rights.

He has vanished before from public view for years, returning to barnstorm around Mexico to promote the Zapatista views.

"This is the last time, at least for a good while, that we will come out for activities of this type," Marcos said at a seminar Sunday in the southern state of Chiapas honoring French-born historian and anthropologist Andres Aubry.

In the comments, released Monday on the rebel group's Web site, Marcos said he was referring "to colloquiums, encounters, roundtables, conferences and, of course, interviews." It was unclear whether Marcos would continue recent appearances at meetings of leftist activists.

A cease-fire ended fighting between Zapatista rebels and government forces after a few days the initial uprising, and the two sides have since maintained an uneasy truce.

The Zapatistas have since formed autonomous governments in at least 38 villages in the highlands of Chiapas, as well as "good government committees" that promote their development.

Marcos, identified by the government as former university instructor Rafael Sebastian Guillen, has continued to champion a social revolution from the jungles of Chiapas, issuing missives harshly critical of Mexico's politicians and government policies.

At Sunday's seminar, Marcos said various Zapatista communities have been harassed by local government officials, although he did not elaborate.

He said "for the first time" since the Zapatistas' uprising in 1994, the once widespread national and international social support the Zapatistas have customarily received this time has been "insignificant or null."

During his comments Sunday, the subcomandante referred to himself as the Zapatistas' military leader and not their spokesman.

Last year, Marcos toured the country to promote "The Other Campaign," aimed at promoting a new leftist movement during the 2006 presidential campaign. His criticism

of political parties, including left-leaning parties, created a division among leftist intellectuals and organizations that used to support him.