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Subcomandante Marcos was absent from the delegation

An unarmed delegation from the Zapatista rebels has appeared before Mexico's congress to present its case for indigenous rights legislation.

But the movement's controversial military leader, Subcomandante Marcos, was noticeably absent from the chamber.

Instead rebel leader Comandante Esther proclaimed the end of the rebels' military mission and the beginning of a political struggle.

She said the movement would initiate contacts with the government to re-start peace talks which were suspended in 1996.

The Zapatistas wanted a country where it could be possible to think or act differently without being imprisoned or killed, she added.

'Political leadership'

The BBC's Peter Greste says the meeting has been the central aim of the guerrilla movement's long march from their base in the southern state of Chiapas to Mexico City. But it has also been highly controversial.

Twenty-three rebels in ski masks strode onto the floor of congress and made three hours of speeches on an Indian rights bill.

“
Our warriors have done their job. Now it's a time for respect
”

Comandante Esther

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Comandante Esther told legislators: "Our warriors have done their job. Now it is time for respect. The person speaking to you is not the military leader of a rebel army, but the political leadership of a legitimate movement."



Zapatistas have thousands of supporters in Mexico

But correspondents say that to some congressmen the whole notion is abhorrent.

The ruling National Action Party (PAN) boycotted the Zapatistas' appearance, saying it represented a serious breach of protocol.

They said it would be wrong for masked leaders of a guerrilla movement to appear before congress.

Key demand

The Zapatistas want to introduce a bill giving indigenous communities the right to administer a traditional form of justice and local administration.

The bill's critics argue that the measures could lead to human rights abuses, that they are fundamentally undemocratic and that they could ultimately lead to the break up of the state.

But the Zapatistas have also warned that the passage of the law is a key demand before they start formal peace negotiations.

The government has already met their other conditions - the withdrawal of troops from seven key military bases and the release of rebel prisoners.



President Fox backs the Indian rights bill

There is no guarantee that the bill will pass despite having the support of President Vicente Fox.

And the Zapatistas have all but given up one key negotiating point - in a weekend interview Subcomandante Marcos admitted that they were unlikely to ever return to arms.

Even so, correspondents say, they still have a powerful weapon on their side - a groundswell of public support both here and abroad.

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