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Across the Americas, Indigenous Peoples Make Themselves Heard

By Hector Tobar , Times Staff Writer

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EL ALTO, Bolivia -- Above the rocky bowl of La Paz, this vast township of brick and adobe homes stretches across a dry plain. This is where the Aymara Indians of western Bolivia come to live and work when their farms can no longer feed them.

For the past week, the hardscrabble order of El Alto gave way to a fervor of rebellion. Armed with the traditional weapons of the Aymara people — sticks, slingshots and muscle — its residents fought the army, built barricades and derailed a train, cutting off and shutting down the capital below them.

"We are not going to allow ourselves to be pushed around anymore," said Bernaldo Castillo Mollo, a 37-year-old Aymara bricklayer and jack-of-all-trades who was shot in the foot during the protests. "So that our children have a better life than us, we are willing to die."

The Indian-led movement that brought down Bolivian President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada last week was only the most recent and startling expression of a growing militancy and political assertiveness among the native peoples of the Americas.

In Ecuador and in Guatemala, indigenous leaders arguably wield more influence in local and national affairs than in any time since the Spanish conquest. And in Chile and Mexico, resistance to the changes brought by the global economy are helping to feed a renaissance of indigenous organizations.

"Everyone thought that globalization would wipe out local identities and cultures," said Alejandro Herrera, a professor at the University of the Frontier in Temuco, in south-central Chile.

"Instead, the opposite has happened. People are embracing their indigenous identities against these outside threats."

In recent years, the Mapuche villages around Temuco have been the site of a smoldering, low-tech war against corporate tree farming that has landed a handful of Mapuche Indian leaders in prison on charges of burning logging trucks.

Similarly, Bolivia's plan to export the country's natural gas reserves through a pipeline to be built by a multinational consortium helped coalesce Indian resentment against a government dominated by politicians of European descent.

Castillo Mollo, the wounded bricklayer, has only a fifth-grade education. Until he moved to El Alto in 1986, he worked the land, growing potatoes and other crops. But like many other residents of El Alto, he is well-steeped in the anti-globalization rhetoric that has swept through Latin America.

"It's not just the gas that we're angry about," Castillo Mollo said from a La Paz hospital ward he shared with a dozen other El Alto residents injured in the uprising. "Look at all the privatization [of government enterprises] and how many people they threw out of work.

"People are going hungry," he said. "In the cities you see people working on the streets in exchange for food."

What Soweto was to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, El Alto has been to the indigenous movement in modern Bolivia: an overpopulated slum of internal migrants that has been transformed into a caldron of activism.

In El Alto, ideas first expressed by left-leaning economists a decade ago — that U.S.-inspired economic policies would benefit only a small minority of Latin Americans — have found fertile ground among the poor.

Brought into the national debate by a handful of Indian and union leaders, they have percolated down to the community's neighborhood assemblies. According to activists and residents, there are more than 150 such assemblies in El Alto, a city of 750,000.

The assemblies are the urban equivalent of traditional Aymara and Quechua communes. All decisions are made by voice vote. The opinions of elders carry additional weight. And all members of the community must carry out responsibilities, such as participating in safety patrols.

"What we're seeing in Bolivia is really a clash between civilizations," between Western individualism and Indian communalism, said Jacqueline Michaux, an anthropologist who has worked in the community.

"In the countryside, all the members of the village work together in the harvest," Michaux said. Similarly, during the conflict in El Alto, "everyone worked together to build the barricades and to feed the marchers who were arriving from out of town. They had to. It was their obligation to the community."

In Mexico, too, indigenous consciousness appears to be gaining momentum, nearly a decade after the Zapatista uprising that first brought worldwide attention to the plight of Mexico's native peoples.

The movement's charismatic leader, Subcommander Marcos, is moving the Zapatistas toward Indian self-rule in the southern state of Chiapas. Zapatista leaders have sworn in five "good government boards" to oversee a scattering of rebel-controlled indigenous communities there.

They set their watches on "Zapatista time," an hour ahead of what they call "Fox time" (after Mexico's president). The Zapatista army seizes drugs, alcohol and illegally cut timber trafficked through its territories.

The years since the Chiapas uprising have been hard on the peasantry throughout Mexico. The free trade agreement with the United States has flooded the country with cheap corn, the staple crop of the indigenous people.

Now the movement for indigenous autonomy is spreading northward, to Oaxaca and other states. Many villages practice de facto autonomy, for example, by electing mayors in village assemblies rather than by secret ballot, by farming the land communally and by settling disputes by centuries-old methods rather than using Mexico's legal system.

Even on the outskirts of Mexico City, about 100,000 Nahuatl Indians, descended from the Aztecs, have set up 12 indigenous communities and are demanding that the government recognize their autonomy. City officials have barely acknowledged their demands.

In years past, Indian discontent in the Americas was often channeled into traditional political parties dominated

by Western ideas and non-Indian leaders. But in Bolivia, as in other countries of the region, new Indian leaders have emerged. And there is a growing, if still small, indigenous intelligentsia.

"We have lots of educated people now. We don't have to rely on the 'experts' to make decisions for us anymore," said German Jimenez, a teacher and Quechua from the Bolivian city of Potosi who joined a group of miners marching to La Paz last week.

In Potosi, Jimenez has witnessed a flowering of indigenous culture and thought. "There are even people now who are beginning to question Christianity, who are saying we should return to our original religions," he said.

Perhaps the most well-known and radical voice of *indigenismo* in Bolivia is Felipe Quispe, a former professor and the president of the nation's largest peasants union. In the Aymara villages around Lake Titicaca, he is known as "El Malku," the Condor.

Quispe's Pachakuti Indigenous Movement won only a small fraction of the vote in last year's presidential election, but he wields much influence as the leading proponent of Aymara nationalism.

"If the concerns of the original inhabitants of this land are not addressed, then the so-called Bolivia will cease to exist," he said recently. "The indigenous people will march into La Paz and an Indian will sit in the presidential chair."

Another Aymara, Evo Morales, finished second in last year's presidential election here. He is the leader of the Movement to Socialism, whose strongest base of support is among the nation's Quechua.

Once a coca farmer trying to eke out a living in the Chapare region, Morales is now a major figure in Bolivian politics, but also a proponent of radical tactics, including confrontations between striking peasants and the authorities.

In Ecuador, the indigenous movement is one of the best organized and most powerful in Latin America.

The country's primary indigenous group, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, was behind a brief 1999 coup that toppled the government. And the indigenous Pachakutik political movement formed a key part of the support that catapulted Lucio Gutierrez to the presidency.

Until a recent falling-out, indigenous leaders held several key position in the Gutierrez Cabinet, including South America's first indigenous foreign minister, Nina Pacari, a Quichua.

In Guatemala, indigenous political power has flourished since the signing of a peace treaty ending the country's civil war in 1996. Maya children can now be educated in their native languages, a right that was long denied them under the country's repressive military regimes. There is also a Maya member of the Cabinet.

On Saturday, less than 24 hours after Sanchez de Lozada's resignation, Bolivia's new president, Carlos Mesa, visited El Alto, where he made a speech to thousands of Aymara and other community residents. He later participated in an Indian religious ceremony.

In one of his first official statements, he said he would name indigenous leaders to his Cabinet.

Times staff writers Richard Boudreaux in Mexico City and T. Christian Miller in Bogota, Colombia, contributed to this report.