

Indians to put Columbus on trial

By Thelma Mejia

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras (IPS)—Indigenous groups in Honduras opened a historic trial against Christopher Columbus on July 20, the anniversary of the death of Chief Lempira, an Indian leader who was betrayed and killed by the Spanish while negotiating peace and the withdrawal of the conquistadors.

The trial against Columbus will end Oct. 12, the Day of the Race and the 506th anniversary of Spain's "discovery" of the Americas. The indigenous activists are accusing Columbus of such crimes as genocide, ethnocide, trafficking in slaves, rape and plundering.

Gregoria Flores, with the Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Organizations of Intibuca, said the trial aims to "tell the other side of the story of the so-called conquest of the Americas.

"We indigenous peoples want the truth to be known, 500 years later, of what was done to our brothers and sisters, who were mistreated and used as animals.

"With this symbolic act, we want to place on the record what really happened and show that indigenous resistance did not die with the colonial period. On the contrary, we have gained strength to demand justice and respect for our rights," she said.

COPIN, one of the most combative indigenous organizations in Honduras, is mainly made up of members of the Lenca ethnic group, the largest of the country's seven indigenous communities, and is active in impoverished western sections of Intibuca and Lempira.

Representatives of all seven ethnic groups commemorated the anniversary of Lempira's death in the streets of the town of Intibuca with a parade and religious masks, songs and rites, while a symbolic jury was set up in the public square of La Esperanza to hear the case against Columbus.

"Five hundred years after the conquest of the Americas, Lempira is alive!" "Indigenous resistance is still alive, the Lenca people are present!" read several of the placards carried by the indigenous marchers in La Esperanza.

In Bolivia, Guatemala and the state of Texas, "our indigenous brothers and sisters are holding similar trials of Columbus, who for us is guilty of genocide rather than a standard-bearer of culture as they make him out to be," said COPIN leader Salvador Zuniga.

On Oct. 12, 1997, Zuniga and more than 150 other members of the Lenca

community destroyed a statue of Christopher Columbus in Tegucigalpa, an act that drew criticism from all sides and led to a decline in activism in favor of the rights of Honduran indigenous groups.

In an attempt to boost the indigenous movement's diminished credibility, COPIN leaders decided to hold a "historic trial" against Columbus and proposed the raising of a monument to Chief Lempira in downtown Tegucigalpa, a move accepted by the government.

Indigenous groups, which account for 10 percent of the 5.8 million inhabitants of Honduras, began waging a peaceful struggle four years ago seeking respect for their rights and social and economic redress. Some of these

demands have been partially addressed by the government.

The activists have revealed the poverty and neglect in which local indigenous groups are steeped, especially the Lencas and Tawankas. Three years ago, the government created the "Fiscalia de las Etnias," an office in charge of addressing indigenous demands and training leaders in negotiation and conflict resolution techniques, human rights and the preservation of identity.

The trial of Christopher Columbus has drawn positive attention from academic and cultural circles in Honduras. They support the group's attempt to draw attention to the plight of indigenous groups, restore legitimacy and rescue the country's indigenous roots.

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constitutional rights after building this country for 400 years, to defend ourselves and carry arms and loaded weapons to defend the Black community against this murderous and hypocritical outfit known as the Ku Klux Klan," Shabazz shouted to police officers standing between the two groups. The Klan has denied any involvement in Byrd's slaying.

But now the community wants to know more about this, such as where did they come from, and are they for real?

Shabazz informed the *Defender* that the group has been evolving for the past year, but matured as a group following the "brutal killing" of Byrd.

Now, he says, it is actively recruiting all across Texas and will begin to open branches in other cities before year's end.

The original group, The Black Panther Party for Self Defense, was founded by the late Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in October, 1966. The Party grew to at least 5,000 members nationwide, with chapters across the country and an international branch

in Algeria. It headed a national effort to create an armed political force to police and protect America's 22 million Black people.

Whether this New Black Panther Party's objectives are the same as those of the original is still unknown, as members indicated no specific platform or strategic purpose that extended beyond their counter-demonstration. When repeatedly questioned about the group's objectives, Shabazz did not respond.

Some question whether this New Black Panther Party will ever have the same positive impact in the community, receive the notoriety of its predecessor, or become a significant pop-culture movement among young Blacks.

"The times are simply different and the conditions less predictable," said Andrew Bonner, a former Black Panther member and current professor of literature at Ball State University in Indiana.

"We were full of purpose and commitment. Our lives were secondary to our goals of helping and protecting African-Americans," Bonner said.

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