

Indians-Americas

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Body

--- Indians-Americas --- QUITO (AFP) _ Some 300 Indians solemnly smoked a peace pipe, lit a sacred fire and chewed a sacred coca leaf Wednesday as they gathered in Ecuador to assess their situation in anticipation of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of European explorers in the Americas. The Continental Meeting of the Indigenous People is expected to end Saturday with the approval of a common strategy for defending native rights, obtaining compensation for lost lands and commemorating some "500 years of resistance" against European domination. The meeting drew Indian delegates _ some dressed in traditional, colorful garb _ from 22 North and South American countries to a tourist area in the town of La Merced, 25 kilometres southeast of the capital Quito. In their opening ceremony, the Indian leaders declared when Hunan _ an Indian word for an eagle from the north _ joins with Urin _ or a condor from the south, a new spirit will emerge and unite the two hemispheres. Cristobal Tapuy, the president of the National Confederation of Ecuadoran Indians, denounced police persecution of Indians and the arrest of a Colombian Indian leader for carrying coca leaves. Coca leaves have been chewed for centuries by Indians in Latin America as part of their religious ceremonies and to dull the ache of hunger. Reflecting on the almost 500 years since Spain commissioned Italian explorer Cristopher Colombus to sail westward from Europe in 1492, the Indians expressed dissatisfaction with their situation following the European invasion. Some also criticized U.S. imperialist policies and said there is a need to forge their own independence and self-determination. Also on the agenda for discussion were education, religion, communication, as well as the role of women in the Indian social structures.

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