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Latin American bicentennial puts Spain in quandary (Feature)
By Sinikka Tarvainen
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Madrid - As Latin American countries are marking the bicentennial of their independence from Spain, the former colonial power finds itself in an awkward position.

Spain wants to play a special role in the festivities to stress and reinforce its ties with Spanish-speaking America, but has to deal with the fact that its former colonies are actually celebrating the end of what many perceive as Spain's bloody and exploitative rule.

The celebrations also coincide with the rise of general 'anti-imperialist' sentiment in countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua or Ecuador.

Spain finds itself in a 'complicated situation,' historian Carlos Malamud told the German Press Agency dpa.

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's government is trying to carry out a delicate balancing act, with a strategy of 'accompanying' the former colonies without playing too visible a role in the bicentennial.

Spain's American colonies won their independence at different dates. Bolivia and Ecuador have already begun staging commemorative events, while Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia and Chile are to join them in 2010.

Celebrations will continue around the continent until 2025. The events include solemn official acts, opening museums or monuments, cultural and academic activities.

Spain has formed its own commission - mirroring nine Latin American national ones - to handle its participation in the bicentennial, appointing 1982-96 prime minister Felipe Gonzalez a special ambassador for the purpose.

Spain, which shares with its former colonies a language spoken by 400 million people, needed to play a more prominent role in the bicentennial than other European countries, Malamud explains.

The Latin America specialist is a researcher with the Elcano Institute which is represented in the Spanish bicentennial commission.

Spain also wants to seize the opportunity to reinforce ties between the European Union and Latin America during its EU presidency in the first half of 2010.

There has been little direct criticism of Spain's presence in the celebrations, Malamud observes.

However, opposing 'capitalist imperialism' forms part of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez' 'Bolivarian revolution,' and is on the rise in other countries with like-minded regimes.

Venezuela rejected the idea of Spain as Latin America's gate to Europe, Chavez said Friday in Madrid, stressing he made his visit in 'conditions of equality' removed from 'colonialist cliches.'

'In Bolivia, for instance, there is talk about 500 years of colonial exploitation,' which is seen as following a direct line from the Spanish conquest to US or Spanish presence today, Malamud said.

Spanish companies have been 'reconquering' Latin America economically since the early 1990s, with Spain now the region's second-biggest investor after the United States.

Spain needed to come to terms with the populist and indigenous movements that were reshaping Latin America, recognizing 'the horrors of (its) conquest,' journalist and author Miguel Angel Bastenier wrote.

Those wrongs do not amount to 'the genocide trumpeted by Chavez, because there was no extermination plan' of America's indigenous peoples, he continued.

But there was the 'extremely cruel' evangelization and 'looting of riches in blood and fire,' Bastenier wrote, also adding slave trade to the list of horrors.

The Spanish conquest is believed to have claimed tens of millions of lives in Latin America and the Caribbean from the
15th to the 17th centuries after Christopher Columbus first arrived in the Americas in 1492.

The Spanish government would rather keep quiet about that side of colonial history, and is trying to focus on the 1812 liberal Cadiz Constitution.

It was created during Spain's rebellion against the French invasion under Napoleon, and acted as a model for many of the new Latin American republics.

'The question is, whether (that historic focus) has sufficient political weight against the (anti-imperialist) discourse' in south America, Malamud said.

While Latin America's populist and indigenous movements are questioning earlier interpretations of history and identity, Spain also has homework to do in relation to the continent which once turned it into a world power, analysts said.

Spain retains a narrow 'national-Catholic' concept of its identity, Bastenier complained, while Felipe Gonzalez urged Spaniards to study Latin America in order to better understand themselves.

'It is only when I travelled in South America that I understood what it meant to be Spanish,' a Madrid lawyer said. 'Those countries have preserved many Spanish traditions that have been lost in Spain itself.'

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