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AMERICAN INDIANS, MAYANS TALK DURING LAKE WORTH FORUM

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BODY:

A red candle to the east signifies where the sun rises and where Mayan strength lies. A black candle to the west is where the sun sets, where Mayan ancestors traveled to the great valley beyond.

With these candles, Mayan **Maria Domingo** prayed in her native Mam language for the indigenous people across the Americas who fell victim to European explorers more than 500 years ago.

At a conference in Lake Worth on Saturday morning, Mayan and American Indian advocates discussed the effects on indigenous people of Italian explorer Christopher Columbus' journey. And at the conference -- titled "The Lost Souls of the Indigenous People" -- they continued questioning America's celebration of Columbus Day, which is observed Monday.

"We're still here after 500 years trying to control our culture and destiny," said Javier Del Sol, a Cora Indian who's executive director of Florida's chapter of the American Indian Movement in Lake Worth.

Founded in the early 1970s, the American Indian Movement has called on the U.S. government to eliminate the holiday. The group asked Congress to follow the lead of such states as Louisiana and South Dakota, who instead declare Oct. 12 as a day to honor American Indians.

The U.S. Census counts 2,400 American Indians or Alaska natives in Palm Beach County. There are about 25,000 Mayans, indigenous people of Guatemala, in the county, said Miguel Angel Chiquin Yat, executive director of the Organization of Maya People in Exile.

Scholars and activists long have debated Columbus' legacy and role in history. Though Columbus is recognized for ushering in European settlement North America, advocates on Saturday described him as symbolic of the conquest that raged throughout the Americas.

"It is very sad when we see Mayans parading on Columbus Day," Chiquin Yat said in Spanish. "We respect other cultures who want to celebrate this day, but it is not a

celebration for the indigenous because the conquest really brought death and destruction to our people."

Bernie Petreccia, Italian-born president of the Italian American Civic League of Fort Lauderdale, said Columbus Day is meant to honor a visionary who immigrated to a land that became a country of freedom. Members of the Italian American Civic League will re-dedicate a statue of Columbus at Port Everglades in Fort Lauderdale today.

Branden Wilson, who is visiting Lake Worth, said it's offensive to celebrate Columbus Day. Wilson came to the conference because he's interested in the plight of indigenous people in Guatemala and Mexico.

"There's a lot of denial about our history," Wilson said. "And we need to be aware that whenever something is gained something is lost."

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