

Zapatistas invade Madrid to mark Spanish conquest anniversary

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An assembly of collectives organise Zapatista events in Madrid [Marta Vidal/Al Jazeera]

Madrid, August 13 (RHC)-- In the summer of 1521, Spanish conquistadors led by Hernan Cortes looted and destroyed the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. Today, 500 years later, Mexico's indigenous Zapatistas

are holding their own “invasion” of the Spanish capital to mark the anniversary.

A delegation of seven Zapatistas set out by boat from Mexico’s most eastern point, Isla Mujeres, weeks ago in May, following the inverse route Spanish invaders took half a century earlier. They crossed the Atlantic in 50 days and disembarked in Vigo, in northern Spain, on June 22.

Once they set foot on European soil, Zapatistas renamed the continent “Slumil K’ajxemk’op” which means “rebel land” in Tzotzil, a Mayan language. But the Zapatistas say they did not come to conquer or to dominate.

Their mission, they said in a statement, was to “listen and to learn” from local struggles for social justice. The purpose of the trip is “to talk about our mutual histories, our suffering, our rage, our successes and our failures.”

Spanish conquistadors, aided by an alliance of indigenous people, laid siege to Tenochtitlan until it surrendered on August 13, 1521.

The Aztec capital was devastated by violence and disease brought by Europeans. Mexico City was built on its ruins. “Even with the lowest estimates, around eight out of 10 people died from disease,” said Caroline Pennock, a senior lecturer who specialises in Aztec history. “There was also horrendous violence and enslavement. The disruption and devastation of [indigenous] people’s lives are unimaginable.”

In 2019, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador asked Spain to apologise for the brutal conquest of Mexico. But the Zapatistas have made it clear they are not looking for an apology, and have reframed the anniversary as a commemoration of “500 years of indigenous resistance”.

“We are going to tell the people of Spain two simple things: one, they didn’t conquer us, we are still here resisting, in rebellion. Second, they don’t have to ask that we forgive them for anything,” they said.

In Madrid, the Zapatistas are commemorating the fall of Tenochtitlan on Friday with a demonstration under the slogan “We weren’t conquered – we won’t surrender.” Zapatistas and their supporters will march from the city centre’s Puerta del Sol to Columbus Square, which features monuments to Spain’s colonial empire.

After the events in Madrid, the Zapatistas will continue their journey and visit other European countries, where they are planning meetings with groups that share the movement’s anti-capitalist and environmentalist values – from feminist collectives to migrant support initiatives and climate justice movements.

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