Columbus holiday revives debate

Historic figure's legacy fraught in Americas

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REUTERS

MEXICO CITY – An Argentine claim that European contact brought civilization to the Americas has provoked rebukes from across Latin America, where heated debates often flare up over the era's contested historical legacy.

Commemorating Christopher Columbus' landing in the Americas on Oct. 12, 1492, the office of Argentina's libertarian President Javier Milei posted on social media on Saturday that the Italian explorer's arrival introduced enlightenment to the region.

Milei

"It marked the beginning of civilization in the American continent," the post boasted, accompanied by a video set to triumphant music.

The post argues that Columbus "opened a new era of progress," while many who agreed online pointed to human sacrifice as practiced by some native cultures as a clear example of cruelty European colonizers fought against.

Columbus' arrival in the present-day Bahamas led to centuries of Spanish and Portuguese domination of a region stretching from much of today's United States to near Antarctica.

The conquests and subsequent colonial experience have long generated impassioned debate. Many Latin American leaders now embrace a more critical view, acknowledging the abuses committed, including massacres, forced labor and widespread looting.

Columbus, traditionally thought to have been from Genoa, Italy, was a Sephardic Jew from somewhere in Western Europe, Spanish scientists said on Saturday after a 22-year investigation using DNA analysis.

The debates about his legacy often fall along ideological lines, with leftists especially sensitive to suggestions that the region's Indigenous cultures are inferior.

Mexico's new leftist leader, President Claudia Sheinbaum, ended a speech on Saturday outside the nation's capital with a repudiation of the view represented by Milei.

"For many years, they told us that they came from over there to civilize us. No! There were already great cultures here," said Sheinbaum, who took