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THE WORLD

Columbus' Purported Remains Are Still Bones of Contention

Dominican Republic has rebuffed the request of Spanish scientists to ID tomb's contents.

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SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic — It's been nearly two years since Spanish scientists asked to examine the contents of this Caribbean nation's most celebrated tomb to determine whether the centuries-old bones are actually those of Christopher Columbus.

They've been told yes, no and maybe.

The protracted deliberation through two Dominican administrations has deepened suspicions that authorities here don't really want a definitive answer for fear that the mammoth lighthouse mausoleum they've built into a tourist draw isn't the bona fide resting place of the explorer.

Even those who favor letting modern science settle the matter are loath to concede that they might have invested millions in a case of mistaken identity.

"The researchers should have access. We firmly believe that part of the remains of Columbus are here. That should be proven once and for all to put an end to these polemic debates," Foreign Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso said of the conflicting claims by Spain and the Dominican Republic to be in possession of the bones.

In June 2003, the Spanish team headed by forensic expert Jose Antonio Lorente gained unprecedented access to the crypt in the Spanish city of Seville long believed to contain the remains of Columbus. After extracting genetic material from finger bone fragments no larger than peas, the scientists sought to match the DNA samples with those taken from the bones of Columbus' brother, Diego, and other remains suspected to be from his son Hernando, both also

buried in Seville.

Cross-checking the genetic material proved inconclusive. The researchers, who had first sought access to the Dominican bones at the same time they opened the Spanish crypt, renewed their petition to the government in Santo Domingo, the Dominican capital, in October in hopes of finding more intact samples in the chest-like tomb that Dominicans believe holds Columbus. Their request was rejected.

Confusion over which country — if either — has the remains has persisted more than a century.

Columbus died May 20, 1506, in Valladolid, Spain, and was buried there despite having written in his last will and testament that he wanted to be interred in his beloved Hispaniola, the name he gave to the island now shared by the Dominican Republic and Haiti, when he first saw it in 1492. At the time of his death, no site was deemed worthy of hosting the "admiral of the world's oceans."

In 1537, Maria de Toledo, the widow of Columbus' eldest son, also named Diego, sailed here with the remains of her husband and Columbus. Both were entombed at the newly completed cathedral here, where they remained until Spain ceded Hispaniola to France in 1795.

Thus his purported journey back to Spain began. A royal Spanish delegation came to evacuate national treasures and moved what it thought were the Columbus crypts to Havana, then the center of Spain's colonial dominion. When Cuba won independence in 1898, the remains were relocated to the cathedral of Seville.

Meanwhile, during 1877 renovations at the cathedral here, workers discovered an unmarked metal trunk hidden behind a wall. Inside were the bones of a tall person and an inscription, "The Illustrious and Distinguished Baron, Don Cristobal Colon," the Spanish name of the lanky explorer.

Keepers of the Columbus legacy argue that the Spaniards took the wrong tomb in their haste to get away ahead of the French takeover. To protect against pirates and invaders who plundered Caribbean ports in the colonial era, they say, priests at the cathedral here scrubbed off identifying marks from the coffins of the colony's founders.

"There is ample evidence established in studies done by archeologists that there was confusion about what was transported from Santo Domingo," said Sulamita Puig, the Culture Ministry official charged with granting access to international investigators. "The real tomb was left here. We are not mistaken."

She said she had decided to put forensic expert Lorente's petition on hold until more promising research techniques were developed to ensure that any handling of the bones would produce definitive identification.

"We don't believe it is proper to risk contamination or deterioration when there are no grounds to

expect a conclusive outcome," she said.

Before a change in the Dominican government last year, the Spanish researchers were told they could examine the remains here once the Seville tests were concluded. A Feb. 15 date was set by a now defunct commission. In late January, Puig's office announced that more discussions would be necessary before the crypt could be opened.

"There were a lot of misunderstandings about what could be done," Puig said of the flip-flop. She said only a visual investigation had been authorized, whereas the Spaniards were expecting to be able to collect DNA samples.

Spain's ambassador here, Maria Jesus Figa Lopez, declined to intervene with a formal government request for access. The absence of official backing means that Dominican authorities have no guarantees the work will be conducted as agreed, Dominican government spokesman Roberto Rodriguez Marchena said.

Although the Faro a Colon lighthouse mausoleum is an important stop on the tourist road through colonial Latin American history, Rodriguez Marchena said it had also been an albatross around the neck of every Dominican government for nearly two decades.

"No government has been able to exercise any control over the Faro. It's a power unto itself," he said. "There are still a lot of discussions about it because the government of President Leonel Fernandez believes we should have other priorities, like the fight against poverty.... Amid the power outages we are experiencing, it's a bad political move to be lighting up this monument for the entertainment of tourists."

The 157 high-powered beacons that project a giant cross onto the night sky are lighted for holidays and special occasions, such as the passing of a cruise ship, Faro administrator Andy Mieses said.

Mieses says he is convinced that his country has the real remains of Columbus and that further testing would be unnecessary and intrusive.

"There are religious considerations, as the tomb is in the custody of the cathedral. The sole key is in the hands of the cardinal," Mieses said, referring to Cardinal Nicolas de Jesus Lopez.

Most visitors to the lighthouse mausoleum are schoolchildren and foreign tourists. Many Dominicans consider it bad luck to discuss the departed explorer — and the possibility that he may still be denied his final repose.

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