

Chavez calls protesters U.S. 'pawns'

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez derided students who have protested his decision to force an opposition TV station off the air as U.S. "pawns," ridiculing them for walking out of a congressional debate Thursday on freedom of expression.

University students - who have led more than a week of street protests condemning Chavez's decision not to renew the broadcast license of Radio Caracas Television, or RCTV - walked out of a National Assembly debate saying they did not want to become part of a political spectacle.

"I had information that those youths were going to put on a show in the National Assembly," Chavez said during a nationally televised speech to pro-government students. "They're nothing but pawns of the empire."

Chavez defends the move to not renew RCTV's license, which expired May 27, as a means of democratizing the airwaves by turning over the signal to a state-funded public broadcasting station. Critics argue the president is trying to muzzle his opponents.

About a dozen students opposed to the move went to congress to participate in what was supposed to be an open debate but quickly turned into a hostile confrontation.

"We didn't come here to play around," said Yon Goicochea, a student leader from the Andres Bello Catholic University, who walked out of congress with his companions.

Pro-Chavez students, joined by National Assembly President Cilia Flores, railed against those who walked out, accusing them of staging demonstrations as part of a plan by radical government opponents to oust Chavez.

Following the walkout, rows of police and National Guard troops in riot gear were forced to hold back an angry pro-Chavez mob that threw objects at police trucks driving the students away.

During a brief 2002 coup, RCTV and other private channels broadcast opposition calls for protests to overthrow Chavez while giving little coverage to his return to power amid protests by his supporters. Chavez accuses the channel of seeking his ouster and violating broadcast laws. RCTV denies wrongdoing.