

Congressman sparks outrage in Colombia

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BOGOTA, Colombia --

A congressman from California attempted to put out a diplomatic fire Thursday, expressing contrition for his lack of decorum during an appearance before Colombia's congress.

Rep. David Dreier, a Republican from Los Angeles, sparked amusement and some outrage among his Colombian counterparts on Tuesday when he sat casually atop a lectern while addressing lawmakers in the lower house of congress.

In a news conference, Dreier blamed the gesture on confusion about where he was supposed to sit.

"I come from California and meant absolutely no offense," he said. "I have the highest regard for the congress of Colombia and I simply wanted to demonstrate my warm feeling and affection."

Sen. Luis Elmer Arenas, an ally of Colombia's pro-Washington president, Alvaro Uribe, said the faux pas was worse than spitting on the Colombian flag.

"It would be as if we went to meet with (President) George Bush and sat down on his desk," Arenas told The Associated Press. "It worries me that the Colombian congress just accepts what this American congressman did."

The incident made newspapers and television reports across the Andean nation, overshadowing a bipartisan, seven-member congressional delegation's visit to discuss ways to strengthen democracy here.

For some legislators in Bogota, it was small solace that Dreier and his colleagues vowed to push for the rapid approval of a trade agreement between the two countries.

"I don't know what would happen if a Colombian congressman did something similar in the U.S. Congress," said opposition lawmaker Franklin Legro.