

Chavez lashes back at Spanish king

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SANTIAGO, Chile --

President Hugo Chavez lashed back at Spain's king Sunday for telling him to "shut up" during a summit, suggesting the monarch knew in advance of a 2002 coup that briefly ousted the Venezuelan leader from power.

Chavez claimed that Spain's ambassador had backed interim president Pedro Carmona and appeared at Venezuela's presidential palace during the two-day coup in 2002. He demanded to know how deeply King Juan Carlos had been involved.

"Mr. King, did you know about the coup d'etat against Venezuela, against the democratic, legitimate government of Venezuela in 2002?" Chavez said before reporters in Santiago. "It's very hard to imagine the Spanish ambassador would have been at the presidential palace supporting the coup plotters without authorization from his majesty."

Chavez touched off the spat Sunday at the closing session of a summit of Latin American nations, Spain and Portugal. Chavez accused former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar of backing the 2002 coup and repeatedly calling him a "fascist" in an address to leaders gathered in the Chilean capital.

Spain's current prime minister, socialist Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, asked Chavez to be more diplomatic and show respect for other leaders despite political differences.

Chavez continued to interrupt as Zapatero spoke, although his microphone was off.

King Juan Carlos, seated next to Zapatero, then leaned toward Chavez and loudly asked, "Por que no te callas?" - or "Why don't you shut up?"

The leftist Venezuelan leader has often grabbed attention with flamboyant speeches at international gatherings, including calling President Bush the "devil" on the floor of the United Nations last year.

Chavez regularly accuses Washington of helping orchestrate the 2002 coup against him - a charge U.S. officials deny. U.S. and Spanish ambassadors did meet with Carmona and his newly appointed foreign minister on April 13, 2002, hours before Chavez was restored to power following massive demonstrations.

Officials at the Spanish Embassy in Venezuela and the royal palace in Madrid could not be reached for comment Sunday.

In comments published by the Spanish newspaper El Mundo, Chavez recalled his spat with the monarch. "He acted like an angry bull" as he stormed out, Chavez said. "I'm no bullfighter - but ole!"

Chavez, who faces violent protests at home against proposed constitutional reforms that would greatly boost his power, said the incident had been exaggerated by the media.

"I hope this will not damage relations," Chavez said as he left his Santiago hotel room Sunday morning. "But I think it's imprudent for a king to shout at a president to shut up."

"Mr. King, we are not going to shut up," he said.