

Spanish King Under Fire for Hunting Elephants in Botswana

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Spain's King Juan Carlos I came under intense media fire on Sunday for hunting elephants in Botswana when his country was being sucked back into the euro zone's financial crisis and one young Spaniard out of two was unemployed

Spanish media pointed to the cost of his trip and criticized the lack of transparency of the Royal Household, three months after it promised to disclose its income following a corruption probe linked to the king's son-in-law.

The royal holiday last week would have remained secret if the king had not tripped on a step, fractured his hip and had to be flown back urgently to Madrid to undergo hip replacement surgery on Saturday morning.

Juan Carlos called on Spanish leaders in his annual Christmas message to set a good example and, more recently, he said there were times when he could not sleep because of concern about Spain's youth unemployment problem.

Last week he cancelled his regular weekly meeting with Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy because he had already left for Botswana, several newspapers said.

"It was an irresponsible trip, taken at the worst possible moment," the daily El Mundo said in an editorial. "The image

of a monarch hunting elephants in Africa at a time when the economic crisis in our country creates so many problems for the Spanish people is a very poor example.”

Most Spanish dailies and TV channels on Sunday showed a picture of the king in front of a dead elephant, taken on a similar trip to Botswana in 2006.

The picture drew many internet and Twitter comments, some linking it to a Russian hunting trip in 2006 when the king was reported to have killed a bear which had been made drunk.

News of the king’s latest trip came at a time when Spain’s political leaders face growing social anger. Support for Rajoy fell sharply in April after his government announced deep spending cuts and health and education reforms to fight the sovereign debt crisis, an opinion poll showed on Sunday.

ABC newspaper said it was Juan Carlos’s “bitterest year” since he came to the throne and became head of state shortly after the death in 1975 of dictator Francisco Franco.

The king, who oversaw the country’s tense transition to democracy, won respect from many Spaniards in 1981 when he publicly condemned an attempted coup.

He has remained very popular, though a poll in October showed that the Spanish people’s trust in the royal family was declining.

The monarchy was also criticized in December when Inaki Urdangarin, the husband of the king’s youngest daughter Cristina, was charged in a fraud and embezzlement case.

A separate accident also drew media attention to the royal family on Monday, when Felipe Juan Froilan, the 13-year-old son of the king’s eldest daughter Infanta Elena, accidentally shot himself in the foot with a shotgun during target practice outside a family home north of Madrid.

The incident reminded older Spaniards of a more serious royal shooting accident in 1956 when King Juan Carlos's 14-year-old brother, Alfonso, died at the royal family's home.

The palace said at the time that Alfonso was killed by a bullet in the head when a revolver he was cleaning went off accidentally, but historians have questioned the official version of events.