

Venezuela turns to cloud-seeding to battle drought

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Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, left, and Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez attend a signing of agreements at Miraflores presidential palace in Caracas, Friday, Nov. 27, 2009. Behind is a painting of Venezuela's independence hero Simon Bolivar. (AP Photo/Ariana Cubillos)

(AP) -- Hugo Chavez says he is starting to "bombard" clouds now that Cuba has provided Venezuela with cloud-seeding help in an effort to produce rain and alleviate the effects of a severe drought.

The Venezuelan president said Saturday night that specialized equipment, sent by Fidel Castro and Cuban President Raul Castro, is starting to be used to [seed clouds](#) from planes.

"We're bombarding clouds," Chavez said during a televised speech. "We have some planes there, and some equipment that Fidel and Raul sent

us."

Chavez is trying to squeeze more rain from the clouds as his country heads into its dry season amid a drought that has put reservoirs at their lowest levels in decades. The lack of [water](#) behind [hydroelectric dams](#) that supply most of Venezuela's electricity is threatening to worsen blackouts that have already become an emerging political liability.

Chavez suggested he wants to witness the cloud-seeding effort, saying: "Any cloud that comes in my way, I'll hurl a lightning bolt at it. Tonight I'm going out to bombard."

Cloud-seeding has been tried in various countries - including China, Australia and parts of the United States - in attempts to draw more moisture from storms, usually by releasing silver iodide particles into clouds. Chavez did not say what method Venezuela is using.

Such efforts to modify the [weather](#) are controversial, and critics question the effectiveness under many circumstances. But cloud-seeding is viewed as an option in some areas.

Dry weather in Venezuela and other parts of South America this year has been blamed on the [El Nino](#) weather phenomenon over the Pacific Ocean. Parts of Bolivia, Ecuador, Guyana and Argentina have also been coping with drought.

"That's occurring not only in Venezuela," Chavez said. "Problems, [climate change](#) - it now stops raining for long periods and all of a sudden a downpour comes and there are floods."

Chavez first announced the cloud-seeding plan two weeks ago, saying Cuban specialists had arrived along with equipment that was being mounted on C-130 Hercules transport planes. Chavez said then that the

seeding would begin over the Orinoco and Caroni river basins, near the Guri hydroelectric dam, the country's largest.

Water has increasingly become a political issue in Venezuela, with Chavez opponents blaming the government for not planning ahead or building sufficient infrastructure. Widespread water rationing began in Caracas earlier this month.

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