

## Chavez asking Cubans to 'bomb clouds' amid drought

Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez says he will join a team of Cuban scientists on flights to "bomb clouds" to create rain amid a severe drought that has aroused public anger due to water and electricity rationing.

Chavez, who has asked Venezuelans to take three-minute showers to save water, said the Cubans had arrived in Venezuela and were preparing to fly specially equipped aircraft above the Orinoco river. "I'm going in a plane; any cloud that crosses me, I'll zap it so that it rains," Chavez said at a ceremony late on Saturday with family members of five Cubans convicted of spying in the United States. Many countries have programs aimed at altering weather patterns, commonly known as cloud seeding, although the effectiveness of such techniques is disputed. Firing silver iodine at clouds is one common method. China uses rockets loaded with the chemical to spur rainfall in arid regions. Chavez did not say what technology the Cubans will use. Venezuela has suffered water and electricity shortages this month after a drought caused by the El Nino weather phenomenon led to critically low water levels at several reservoirs in the oil-exporting nation. The government has been criticized for poor planning after it was forced to impose strict water rationing in the capital Caracas and power rationing in other parts of the country. Venezuela produces much of its electricity from hydroelectric projects, including the giant El Guri dam close to the Orinoco. Chavez provides Cuba with subsidized oil and is a close friend of the communist island's former leader Fidel Castro. Chavez said Castro was in excellent health and invited the Cuban to participate in a trade conference he is hosting next month in Havana. Castro has not been seen in public since undergoing intestinal surgery in 2006.