

Sharp rise in birth defects in Iraqi city destroyed by US military

By David Walsh
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The assault by the US military on the Iraqi city of Fallujah in November-December 2004 was a major war crime. Thousands of civilians died as the US Marines and accompanying forces attempted to crush Iraqi popular resistance to the American occupation in the city of 300,000.

Now, as a likely result of the weaponry unleashed on the city by US imperialism, doctors are discovering a horrifying increase in birth defects and deformities. The *Guardian* reported November 13 that the medical authorities in the city are reporting “up to 15 times as many chronic deformities in infants and a spike in early life cancers that may be linked to toxic materials left over from the fighting.”

Medical specialists interviewed by the *Guardian* indicated that “the rise in birth defects—which include a baby born with two heads, babies with multiple tumours, and others with nervous system problems” is both “unprecedented and at present unexplainable.”

While no single factor, or even combination of factors, has yet been determined to account for the situation, there is considerable suspicion that the use of Depleted Uranium (DU), White Phosphorus and other toxic materials by US forces has played a central role.

An open letter calling for an independent commission of inquiry addressed to the United Nations General Assembly, issued October 12 by several Iraqi and British officials and doctors, pointed to disturbing facts.

The communication, signed by Dr. Nawal Majeed Al-Sammarai (Iraqi minister of women’s affairs, 2006-2009); Dr. David Halpin, fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons; Dr. Chris Burns-Cox MD, fellow of the Royal College of Physicians; Dr. Haithem Alshaibani (environmental sciences) and others, stated in part:

“Young women in Fallujah in Iraq are terrified of having children because of the increasing number of babies born grotesquely deformed, with no heads, two

heads, a single eye in their foreheads, scaly bodies or missing limbs. In addition, young children in Fallujah are now experiencing hideous cancers and leukaemias. ...

“In September 2009, Fallujah General Hospital had 170 newborn babies, 24 percent of whom were dead within the first seven days, a staggering 75 percent of the dead babies were classified as deformed...”

“Doctors in Fallujah have specifically pointed out that not only are they witnessing unprecedented numbers of birth defects, but premature births have also considerably increased after 2003. But what is more alarming is that doctors in Fallujah have said, ‘a significant number of babies that do survive begin to develop severe disabilities at a later stage.’”

In its November 13 article, the *Guardian* cited the comments of Fallujah general hospital’s director and senior specialist, Dr Ayman Qais: “We are seeing a very significant increase in central nervous system anomalies. ... Before 2003 [the start of the war] I was seeing sporadic numbers of deformities in babies. Now the frequency of deformities has increased dramatically.”

The British newspaper continued: “The rise in frequency is stark—from two admissions a fortnight a year ago to two a day now. ‘Most are in the head and spinal cord, but there are also many deficiencies in lower limbs,’ he [Dr. Qais] said. ‘There is also a very marked increase in the number of cases of less than two years [old] with brain tumours. This is now a focus area of multiple tumours.’”

A pediatrician, asked by the *Guardian* to keep precise records over a three-week period, observed the birth of “37 babies with anomalies, many of them neural tube defects,” during those 21 days.

Dr. Abdul Wahid Salah, a neurosurgeon, told the newspaper: “With neuro-tube defects, their heads are often larger than normal, they can have deficiencies in hearts and eyes and their lower limbs are often listless.

There has been no orderly registration here in the period after the war and we have suffered from that. But [in relation to the rise in tumours] I can say with certainty that we have noticed a sharp rise in malignancy of the blood and this is not a congenital anomaly—it is an acquired disease.”

The savage and cowardly attack on Fallujah pitted the best-equipped military in the world, capable of dealing death in a myriad of ways, against a ragtag group of insurgents. The background to the assault included the killing of several Blackwater Security mercenaries in Fallujah in March 2004, and a first siege of the city that resulted in a humiliating retreat by the Marines the following month. Later that year, following George W. Bush’s reelection, the Pentagon decided to take no chances, mobilizing 10,000-15,000 US and 2,000 Iraqi puppet forces, backed by massive airpower and artillery.

In the immediate aftermath of the event, Mary Trotochaud and Rick McDowell, the American Friends Service Committee’s representatives in Iraq, described the attack on Fallujah: “The population was subjected to daily aerial bombardments. The use of cluster bombs in urban areas was recorded. Doctors reported seeing patients whose skin was melted from exposure to phosphorous bombs. Water and electricity were cut off and people quickly ran out of food as they were trapped in their homes by sniper fire. Families trying to flee the devastated city were executed, including a family of five, shot down trying to cross the river to safety; their murder was witnessed by an AP photographer. ...

“Preliminary estimates are as high as 6,000 Iraqis killed, a third of the city destroyed, and over 200,000 civilians living as refugees.”

Later estimates put the number of buildings entirely destroyed as 7,000-10,000 out of a pre-assault total of 50,000, with half to two-thirds of the remaining buildings sustaining significant damage. The military operation created some 200,000 internally displaced people who were forced to move elsewhere in Iraq.

Journalists, including Italian state television reporters, subsequently accused the US of using white phosphorus in the attack, causing civilians and resistance fighters to die or be injured by chemical burns. The Pentagon denied that the weapon had been used against fighters, but was forced to retract its denial after the appearance of an item in a US Army magazine in March 2005 bragging about the success of its use in Fallujah.

The piece in *Field Artillery Magazine* stated, “WP [white phosphorus] proved to be an effective and versatile

munition. We used it for screening missions at two breeches and, later in the fight, as a potent psychological weapon against the insurgents in trench lines and spider holes when we could not get effects on them with HE. We fired ‘shake and bake’ missions at the insurgents, using WP to flush them out and HE to take them out.”

As one commentator notes, “Phosphorus burns on the skin are deep and painful. ... The burns usually are multiple, deep, and variable in size. The solid in the eye produces severe injury. The particles continue to burn unless deprived of atmospheric oxygen. Contact with these particles can cause local burns. These weapons are particularly nasty because white phosphorus continues to burn until it disappears. If service members are hit by pieces of white phosphorus, it could burn right down to the bone.” (Globalsecurity.org)

The use of white phosphorus as an offensive weapon is generally considered to be banned by international law, although this is not binding on the US because it is not a signatory to the 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

The US military has also used some 1,200 tons of Depleted Uranium in Iraq so far in the war, including in Fallujah. Used in armor-piercing projectiles, DU is widely blamed for serious health consequences, including to US veterans of the Gulf War in 1991.

Dr. Souad N. Al-Azzawi, former professor of environmental engineering at Baghdad University, notes that several years after exposure to DU contamination, “multifold increase of malignancies, congenital malformations, miscarriages, children leukemia, and sterility cases have been registered in suburb areas of Basrah and other surrounding areas. Similar problems appeared in Falluja, where illegal weapons were also used intensively in the 2004 attack of occupation forces on the city. More than two million of the Iraqi population died since 1991 because of the synergic multiple impact of using (DU) weapons, economical sanctions, and the destruction of the health care systems.” (Global Research, November 8, 2009).

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