

Recent report confirms: US depleted uranium weapons targeted civilian areas in Iraq war

By Barry Mason
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“Laid to Waste”, a report by the Dutch Catholic NGO Pax Christi International, confirms that US forces in Iraq used depleted uranium (DU) weapons in civilian areas during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. More than a decade later, DU is still harming people’s health. The impact of the use of DU in 2003 added to that resulting from the Gulf War of 1991.

Pax made field trips to Iraq in November 2013 and January 2014 to collect data for the report, visiting sites containing scrap metal remnants resulting from DU attacks. They interviewed people living or working nearby.

DU weapons are formed into dart-like projectiles from the remains of natural uranium, left when it is enriched to make nuclear weapons or for use in a nuclear reactor. It is mildly radioactive, but is extremely dense—1.7 times that of lead.

As well as being radioactive, it is chemically toxic. It was developed as a weapon to use against armour-plated objects like tanks and can be fired from planes, tanks or armoured vehicles. When fired the DU core of the projectile (the penetrator) penetrates the armour plating and burns fiercely, producing a radioactive and toxic dust.

A YouTube video explains how DU weapons are used.

A United States Air Force’s international law division memo of 1975 concluded that while legal, DU weapons should be restricted to use against hard targets such as tanks. It also noted, “They may cause fires... causing potential risks of disproportionate injury to civilians... Precautions to avoid or minimise such risks shall be taken in the use of this weapon or alternate available weapons should be used.”

Concern that some Dutch troops conducting support operations in Iraq in 2013 may have become

contaminated by DU led to a request to the US army command centre (Centcom), by the Dutch Ministry of Defence. Centcom released a limited number of GPS coordinates, targets and numbers of DU rounds relating to the presence of the Dutch soldiers. Previously, the US government had refused to divulge information relating to use of DU weapons, including requests from Iraqi government and the United Nations Environment Programme.

The Pax group used a freedom of information request to the Dutch government to access the information. It gave 10,000 coordinates of DU rounds fired by US jets and tanks. The data showed the use of DU rounds in heavily-populated areas of Iraq including As Samawah, Nasiriyah and Basra and included 1,500 DU rounds fired at troops.

Informed estimates suggest over 300,000 DU rounds were fired in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, mostly by US troops but some by UK troops. More than three-quarters of a million DU rounds were fired in the 1991 Gulf War. In total, more than 440,000 Kg of DU was used, with around 300 known DU contaminated sites. Pax estimates that it would cost between \$30-45 million to make them safe.

There was no commitment by the coalition forces to clean up DU contamination and apart from areas immediately adjacent to coalition bases no such clean-up was done. Scrap metal associated with DU strikes has been dumped in collection sites which are not monitored or secured. Local people are exposed when they strip out valuable materials, while children often use such sites as playgrounds. There is also the danger of contaminated scrap being exported to neighbouring countries.

DU contaminates, air, water and soil.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

guidelines state waste DU material should be classed as Intermediate Level Radioactive Waste, while contaminated soil, etc., should be classed as Low Level Radioactive Waste and dealt with appropriately using safe storage, monitoring and disposal methods. The international coalition forces took no responsibility for this and the material is still in situ.

A long-term strategy to clear up these contaminated areas is urgently needed. Together with the UN Environment Programme and the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Iraqi government recently drew up a five year plan to clear up DU contaminated sites but with civil war raging this will not happen.

Without such a strategy thousands of Iraqis will be left exposed to the health hazards associated with the use of DU. The report notes that “the knowledge that there might be toxic and radioactive substances present in the soil you live on, the air you breathe and the water you drink, affects the wellbeing of communities. Hospital reports indicate that environmental pollution due to the wars continues to impact the health and wellbeing of civilians in Iraq, yet little work is being done to address this.”

John Pilger writing in the *Guardian* in May 2013, spoke to Dr. Ginan Ghalib Hassen, a paediatrician at Sadr Teaching Hospital in Basra. She showed Pilger an album of children with neuroblastoma, a cancer affecting specialised nerve cells. She told him, “Before the war, we saw only one case of this unusual tumour in two years. Now we have many cases... I have studied what happened in Hiroshima. The sudden increase of such congenital malformations is the same.”

Pilger continues, “Among the doctors I interviewed, there was little doubt that depleted uranium shells used by Americans and British in the Gulf war were the cause.”

In the summer of 2012, the WHO and the Iraqi Ministry of Health began a study for the prevalence of congenital birth defects in some areas of Iraq, with the results scheduled to be released in November, 2012. Its findings were continually delayed.

Pilger had recently received a letter from Hans von Sponeck, who had been a senior humanitarian official in Iraq. He told him, “The US government sought to prevent WHO from surveying areas in Southern Iraq where depleted uranium had been used and caused serious health and environmental dangers.” According

to Pilger the report showed that “birth defects have risen to a ‘crisis’ right across Iraqi society where depleted uranium and other toxic heavy metals were used by the US and Britain.”

The WHO finally published a summary report in September, 2013 and concluded, “The study provides no clear evidence to suggest an unusually high rate of congenital birth defects in Iraq”

The validity of its findings was immediately questioned by experts. The findings flew in the face of a previous WHO press release which stated that “existing MOH (Iraqi Ministry of Health) statistics showing high number of CBD (congenital birth defects) cases” in the areas chosen for study.

In a *Guardian* article of October 2013, Nafeez Ahmed spoke to Dr Keith Bavistock who had been employed as an expert on radiation and health by the WHO. He opposed the decision from “the very outset to preclude the possibility of looking at the extent to which the increase of birth defects is linked to the use of depleted uranium.”

He attacked the findings’ scientific credibility:

“This document is not of scientific quality. It wouldn’t pass peer review in one of the worst journals...The way this document has been produced is extremely suspicious. There are question marks about the role of the US and the UK, who have a conflict of interest in this sort of study due to compensation issues that might arise from findings determining a link between higher birth defects and DU.”

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