

Depleted uranium weapons used in Balkan War expected to cause thousands of fatal cancers

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Depleted uranium (DU) weapons dropped by American A-10 "tank-busting" planes on Kosovo during the war with Serbia are likely to result in 10,000 fatal cancer cases, according to British experimental biologist Roger Coghill. Coghill runs a research laboratory in Gwent, Wales and spoke at a recent conference in London which discussed the use of DU by American and British forces in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Depleted uranium is a byproduct of the enrichment of uranium for the production of nuclear weapons and reactor fuel. As it is 1.7 times heavier than lead, it has been the weapon of choice of the US to be directed against armored tanks and concrete structures. The US fired approximately 944,000 rounds of DU ammunition in Iraq and Kuwait in the 1991 war. Members of Iraq's Committee of Pollution Impact by Aggressive Bombing say that birth defects in parts of Iraq have been linked to the DU bombing. "When we studied the nearest to the depleted uranium sources, the more abnormalities we got," said Professor Mona Kammass. Some scientists believe chemical weapons may have also contributed to the rise in birth deformities.

Describing the effect of these weapons, Coghill said, "In an impact DU catches fire, and much of the round is turned into burning dust. The particles are extremely small, they can travel up to 300 kilometers. They are also beta-emitters, which are dangerous if inhaled." These particles attack the immune system, lodging in the lungs and often affecting the kidneys.

Coghill expects to see the first cancers from the DU bombing—most likely leukemia—to begin showing up in the Balkans within a year and a half. "Throughout the region, I calculate there will be an extra 10,150 deaths

from cancer because of the use of DU. That will include local people, K-FOR personnel, aid workers, everyone." DU weapons were also dropped on Bosnia in 1995 and birth defects similar to those in Iraq have been seen there.

Increased levels of radiation have been reported in other areas of the Balkans during and after the Kosovo conflict. Researchers have reported radiation levels in Bulgaria eight times above normal. Radiation levels 25 percent above normal, carried on the wind from Kosovo, were reported in June in Kozani in northern Greece. Levels of radiation up to 30 times the normal level have been reported in Yugoslavia itself.

Although the US and European governments have sought to deny the connection between the use of the DU weapons and cancers, radiation physicists at the University of Maryland submitted evidence to the US Department of Energy in April, recommending that DU never be used in warfare, because of the health hazards.



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