

Ongoing consequences of the Gulf War

Casualties increase from use of depleted uranium

Phil Gardner
8 September 1999

The terrible environmental impact of the depleted uranium used by the United States on the tips of anti-tank ammunition during the 1990-91 Gulf War is showing up in southern Iraq, where congenital birth defects are reported to be three times the level of before the war.

The US fired an estimated 944,000 rounds of Depleted Uranium (DU) ammunition in Iraq and Kuwait. DU is not only radioactive. It is a toxic heavy metal which, when penetrating armour plates of tanks, becomes an aerosol that disperses with the wind. By some estimates, more than 300 tons blanket the area surrounding Basra in southern Iraq.

According to the British *Guardian* newspaper, the Basra maternity and pediatric hospital reported an increase in cancer cases from 80 in 1990 to 380 in 1997. More than half the Iraqi childhood leukaemia cases occur in the region, which has less than 20 percent of the country's population.

Overall cancer rates are 4.6 times higher in the southern region, and wives of Iraqi Gulf War veterans are three times more likely to suffer miscarriages than the average across Iraq.

A lack of resources resulting from the UN-US trade embargo on Iraq has prevented the completion of proper scientific studies to establish the causal link between DU, birth defects and cancer, but the circumstantial evidence is overwhelming.

One intern at the Basra teaching hospital, Dr Zenad Mohammed, who works in the maternity department, noted the number of defects over a three-month period beginning in August 1998. Out of approximately 2,000 births, she recorded 10 babies born with no heads, eight with abnormally large heads and six with deformed

limbs.

Dr Basma Al Asam, a gynecologist of 22 years experience who works at the Al Manoor hospital in Baghdad, corroborates this evidence. "I've been watching this for seven years now," she says, "and it's increasing. We're not just seeing babies born with congenital abnormalities, but very late spontaneous abortions because of congenital defects. In the past we used to see, maybe, one a month. Now it is two or three cases per day."

The US and British governments dismiss evidence such as this as nothing more than Iraqi propaganda designed to get trade restrictions lifted. Yet the British Ministry of Defence is to spend 800,000 pounds to conduct a reproduction survey of every British veteran of the Gulf War.

In the United States, the Pentagon goes into "damage control" whenever a study suggests a connection between DU and Gulf War Syndrome, the generic name given to the illnesses of thousands of returned service men and women.

At stake is potentially billions of dollars in lawsuits and compensation to veterans and their families, not to mention the loss of markets for the most effective anti-tank ammunition yet devised.

In a recent report, the Rand Corporation—a Santa Monica-based think tank—concluded that no signs existed among veterans of radiation illness or "manifestations of kidney disease attributable to the toxicity of depleted uranium".

This runs contrary to the experience of Dr. Asaf Durakovic, who in 1991 was chief of the Nuclear Medicine Clinic at the Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital in Wilmington, Delaware. He was sacked in 1997 for

demanding proper testing of 24 veterans put in his charge in 1991.

As part of an appeal by the Uranium Medical Project for Gulf War Veterans for an independent inquiry, he explained:

"I referred some of the patients to the Boston VA for whole body counting—there was solid evidence of uranium exposure. However when funding was procured to improve testing equipment, the clinic was suddenly closed down and the results never reported.

"I carried out specialised nuclear medicine assessments which found severe pathology of the renal and geneto-urinary system. Some of the patients underwent several surgical procedures on their kidneys and urethras with no resulting improvement." [1]

After two patients died, he recommended that samples be taken of the skeletal system—a major uranium depository in the body—but this was not done. Medical and test results then disappeared and the uranium Registry Office was dismantled.

Dr Durakovic is presently professor of radiology and nuclear medicine at Georgetown University and is an associate member of the American College of Physicians.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that the after-effects of DU ammunition on the US and British veterans are tragic. Yet the children and the unborn in Iraq are paying an even bigger price. And soon the toll will begin to appear in the Balkans, where NATO's use of DU weapons is likely to result in more than 10,000 fatal cancer cases, according to British experimental biologist Roger Coghill.

Footnote:

1. <http://prop1.org/2000/du/99du/990215dw.gwvm.htm>



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact