

NATO admits to use of radioactive munitions in Yugoslavia

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NATO Secretary General Lord George Robertson has finally provided limited details of the Alliance's use of depleted uranium (DU) ammunition during its war against Serbia last year. Robertson disclosed the information in a letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan last month—four months after it was first requested.

DU is a waste product of the process used to enrich natural uranium ore for use in nuclear reactors and nuclear weapons. It is 1.7 times as dense as lead and is used in the tips of a bullet or a round to pierce armour plating. It can also be used in cruise missile nose cones and has been used in the armour of tanks. DU breaks into tiny particles on impact, which can be easily ingested and/or inhaled. Numerous studies have linked DU ammunition to the increase of cancer in Iraq, following the 1991 Gulf War, and to the number of army personnel in the US and the UK suffering from "Gulf War Syndrome".

Annan had requested detailed information on NATO's use of DU during its 78-day bombardment of Yugoslavia, following a UN investigation by the Balkan Task Force (BTF). The results of the BTF investigation—which included members from the World Health Organisation, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Swedish Radiation Protection Institute—were reported last October. Investigators concentrated on four environmental "hot-spots" in Kosovo—Pancevo, Kragujevac, Novi Sad and Bor—but complained that the lack of official confirmation from NATO of its use of DU "during the Kosovo conflict distorted the prerequisites for the group's work". The report concluded that whilst the Kosovo conflict did not cause an environmental catastrophe for the whole of the Balkan region, pollution at the four spots investigated was "serious and poses a threat to human health". It

urged an investigation into the impact of DU ammunition on human health.

Robertson wrote that the United States Air Force A-10 "tankbuster" aircraft had concentrated their operations "in an area west of the Pec-Dakovica-Prizren highway, in the area surrounding Klina, in the area around Prizren, and in an area to the north of a line joining Suva Reka and Urosevac". He added, "However, many missions using DU also took place outside these areas."

The UN Environmental Programme (UNep) complained that "the information provided [by Robertson] is not of sufficient detail to facilitate an accurate field assessment of the environmental and human health consequences of its use at the present time". This meant it was not possible "to comprehensively carry out an objective and scientifically based environmental and human health impact assessment in Kosovo".

Whilst claiming that Robertson's admission "should not be a cause of widespread alarm", UNep urged that its October 1999 recommendations should be followed—including preventing access to all places where contamination has been confirmed, informing the local populace of the possible risks and taking "appropriate precautionary measures".

The lack of detailed information in Robertson's letter is not surprising. NATO pursued a strategy of "carpet-bombing" towns and cities across Yugoslavia during its offensive. Some 700 planes flew almost 35,000 sorties, destroying large parts of the country's industrial and social infrastructure. During the latter stages of the air campaign, NATO moved to 24-hour bombing, targeting industrial plants, airports, electricity and telecommunications facilities, railways, bridges and fuel depots, schools, health clinics, day care centres,

government buildings, churches, museums and monasteries.

A comprehensive list of those areas targeted with DU ammunition would probably mean declaring much of Serbia and Kosovo contaminated, as well as raising serious concerns over the environmental and health dangers for surrounding countries.

It is unlikely that a detailed breakdown will be forthcoming. Following Robertson's admission, Francois LeBlevenac, a NATO spokesman, said that the alliance had "no direct control" over the use of DU ammunition during the war. Whilst NATO had overall control of the campaign against Serbia, "it had no jurisdiction over the choice of armaments used by member nations," LeBlevenac said.

Both the US and the UK were known to have used DU ammunition during the war. Whilst both have denied that the weapons posed any significant risk to human health, numerous studies have revealed significant dangers. The US Army's Environmental Policy Institute reported in 1995: "If DU enters the body, it has the potential to generate significant medical consequences. The risks associated with DU are both chemical and radiological."

UK Ministry of Defence personnel in Kosovo have been warned to stay clear of any sites targeted with DU munitions, unless they are wearing full radioactive protective clothing. The National Radiological Protection Board advises UK nationals visiting or working in Kosovo to avoid disturbing areas contaminated with DU. Last April, radiation physicists at the University of Maryland submitted evidence to the US Department of Energy, recommending that DU never be used in warfare because of the health hazards. Last week German KFOR troops designated an area of approximately 5,000 square metres in Kosovo-Metohija as radioactive, leading the Defence Ministry to promise it would conduct health checks on all its personnel in the vicinity.

The consequences of DU munitions have been most clearly revealed in Iraq. The US fired almost 944,000 rounds of DU ammunition in Iraq and Kuwait during the 1991 war. Congenital birth defects in Iraq are reported to have increased to three times their post-war levels and there has been a dramatic increase in cancers and childhood leukaemia. Last year, British experimental biologist Roger Cohill warned that the use

of DU weapons against Yugoslavia was likely to result in an additional 10,000 fatal cancer cases in the region.

As in Iraq, NATO sanctions against Serbia are undermining the medical profession's ability to detect and treat the disease. At a public meeting convened in London on March 24 to commemorate the first anniversary of the NATO bombing, Labour MP's Alice Mahon and Bob Marshall-Andrews reported on their recent visit to Yugoslavia as part of a campaign to lift western sanctions.

The two reported that they had spoken with refugees from Kosovo, Bosnia and Croatia and met patients at the Bazanijska Kosa hospital in Belgrade. Cancer experts at the hospital had informed them that sanctions were seriously undermining cancer prevention and the quality of care. Radiotherapy equipment often does not have all the required parts and chemotherapy drugs are unavailable. Already this has meant that the number of early-detected cancer cases has dropped from 35 percent in 1990 to 13 percent. Doctors told them that, in comparison to the rest of Europe, Serbia is now bottom of the league table for five-year survival rates for lung, breast, colon, rectum, prostate, testicular, ovarian, stomach and cervical cancers.

The BTF report is available on the Internet at:
<http://www.grid.unep.ch/btf>



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