

Depleted uranium responsible for cancer among Europe's Balkan troops

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9 January 2001

Italy is the latest European country calling on NATO to investigate a possible link between its use of depleted uranium weapons in the Balkans and the emergence of leukaemia-like illnesses amongst some soldiers who served there.

In an interview with Italian state radio on Wednesday, European Union Commission President Romano Prodi said that the truth of the effect of such weapons must be established. He proposed "immediate contacts be made with the governments of Bosnia and Serbia, to discuss with them the pollution and the problems linked to the depleted uranium."

Depleted uranium (DU) is a by-product of the enrichment of uranium for the production of nuclear weapons and reactor fuel. As it is 1.7 times heavier than lead, DU is added to munitions to enable them to punch straight through solid objects. On impact, it erupts in a vapour cloud of radioactive uranium oxide that can then be inhaled; it is carried by winds spreading contamination across the soil and into the food chain.

DU-enhanced munitions were the weapon of choice for US forces during the 1991 war against Iraq, in Bosnia in 1995 and in Yugoslavia in 1999. Approximately 944,000 rounds of DU-enhanced ammunition were used in Iraq and Kuwait in 1991. Many Gulf War veterans have argued that it is DU that has caused them serious illness. Now a so-called "Balkan War syndrome" has been identified amongst soldiers active in the former Yugoslavia.

In Italy six soldiers have died from leukaemia, as have five Belgian soldiers and one Portuguese. France, where four soldiers are being treated for leukaemia, has also supported earlier demands by Portugal and Belgium for an inquiry by European Union defence ministers into DU use. Alain Richard, France's Defence Minister, called on the US to be "more open about the

matter", but added that he saw no reason why the munitions should be withdrawn at this point.

Greece, Finland and Spain have already begun looking into the issue and the Czech Republic has said it is investigating the death of a helicopter pilot last week from a blood disorder. In April last year, Yugoslav authorities accused NATO of using about 50,000 rounds of DU ammunition along the Kosovo border with Albania and against seven targets in Serbia and one in Montenegro.

Italian sources claim that US troops were fully briefed on the dangers of DU and how to protect themselves from it, but Italian soldiers were not. The Italian defence ministry has called on NATO to stop using the material in its munitions and has set up a commission of scientific inquiry into its soldier's deaths.

NATO spokesman Mark Laity has said that NATO would not conduct an investigation itself, but would provide any information requested. "NATO's position is that we are going to help the Italians in every way we can," Laity told the BBC. "They have asked for information and we are now trying to find it."

This week, a former British Army engineer who served in Bosnia between December 1995 and April 1996, was revealed as the UK's first known victims of the Balkan War syndrome. On Thursday, Kevin Rudland (41) revealed that within months of returning to the UK from Bosnia his hair had fallen out, his teeth had rotted and he began suffering from chronic fatigue, osteoarthritis and severe bowel problems. Rudland was convinced his illness was caused by contact with DU dust. "I may be the first in this country at the moment, but I believe there are more that have not come forward or do not know yet," he warned.

Both the US and UK have rejected links between DU

and the emergence of Gulf or Balkan War syndromes. Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said the US military had carried out extensive studies into the use of the munitions during the Gulf War, and had found no evidence of a cancer or other health risk. But a report by the US Army Environmental Policy Institute released three years ago said that, "If DU enters the body, it has the potential to generate significant medical consequences. The risks associated with DU in the body are both chemical and radiological. Personnel inside or near vehicles struck by DU penetrators could receive significant internal exposures."

The Blair government has refused to join other European countries in testing shells used in the Balkans and has said it will not screen all soldiers who served in Bosnia and Kosovo for cancer. A Ministry of Defence spokesman said that there was no proof that DU munitions were responsible for causing illness or death and that "It is a legitimate weapon to use... and it is a very important weapon."

The BBC point out that whilst almost all published studies suggest there is no link between DU and cancer...."there are hardly any published studies, none has ever been conducted (in the public domain anyway: Some exist but they're classified) on returning veterans and none has ever been done on civilians. Only one British Gulf War veteran has ever been tested by the Ministry of Defence over the past decade."

Long-standing sanctions against Iraq means that the equipment needed to investigate the growth of cancer cases in the wake of the Gulf War cannot be imported, whilst NATO has refused to release details on its use of DU in the Balkans that would enable a thoroughgoing investigation.

Scientists, environmentalists, doctors and veterans associations have long protested the use of DU-enhanced weapons and warned of their incalculable consequences for future generations. British experimental biologist Roger Coghill warned a 1999 London conference to discuss the use of DU by American and British forces during the Gulf War that its deployment against Serbia was likely to result in 10,000 fatal cancer cases. The first cancers were likely to be leukaemia and would begin to show up within a year and a half amongst "local people, K-FOR personnel, aid workers, everyone", Coghill said at the time.



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