

Mounting evidence points to poisonous legacy of NATO's depleted uranium munitions

Harvey Thompson**26 January 2001**

Last week, British and US government departments finally admitted that there were traces of highly radioactive particles in the depleted uranium (DU) shells fired during NATO military operations in Yugoslavia and Iraq. The DU-enhanced munitions used in Kosovo in 1999 and Bosnia in 1994-5, as well as during the Gulf War, also contained plutonium, a highly toxic substance that remains radioactive in the environment for over 24,000 years.

The admission by the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the US Department of Energy intensifies the strain on NATO, whose spokesman have repeatedly claimed over the last weeks that there was no evidence to link DU shells with the incidence of cancer amongst soldiers that had served in the Balkans or the Gulf.

NATO's public relations snow-job had gone into overdrive since December, when the Italian government called for an investigation into the effects of DU. At least 30 Italian soldiers have fallen ill after serving in Balkan operations and eight have died from leukaemia.

On January 9, Germany called for the banning of DU munitions. Social Democratic Party Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder declared, "I have a healthy scepticism about munitions that can damage our own troops when they are fired".

On the same day, in Portugal—where two soldiers have died from leukaemia and a further five are reported ill—an immediate screening programme of 10,000 Portuguese troops who had served in the Balkans began. Three ministers from the Portuguese government have left for Kosovo in order to investigate the effects of DU. The Portuguese Prime Minister explained, "We want our own information based on our own tests...it's the best guarantee of getting to the truth".

In Spain, the official death toll among Balkan veterans is three, but the veterans' pressure group "Soldiers Defence Bureau" puts the figure at four, with another four

ill, and some 12 more who require further investigation. The Spanish Red Cross has said it is to submit its 58 members who served in the Balkans to health checks. Last week, a special hot-line was set up by the Spanish Defence Ministry, with three medical specialists for soldiers to speak to who think they may be affected. Such was the volume of calls that another nine lines had to be installed.

Russia, which has 3,000 "peace-keeping" troops in Kosovo and a further 1,000 in Bosnia, wants any investigation to involve the World Health Organisation and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as well as the United Nations.

Protests have also been raised from France and Belgium and Norway, which is due to take over command of the international Kosovo Force (KFOR) in June, has postponed the sending of 400 soldiers to the area. In Greece—a lukewarm supporter of NATO's war in Kosovo, due to huge domestic opposition—the former Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Emmanuel Drettakis, demanded that the Alliance be made to clear all traces of DU from Yugoslavia and that it, "compensate all the present and future victims of that lethal weapon". NATO has already replied that it is the UN that should foot the bill for any clear-up operations.

During the Kosovo conflict in 1999, US jets fired 31,000 DU shells. Another 10,000 rounds were fired four years earlier as part of NATO operations in Bosnia. DU missiles were also used in Iraq ten years ago, during the Gulf War, when around 944,000 rounds were fired.

Depleted uranium is an extremely dense substance derived from enriched uranium. The US military uses DU as part of its "tank-buster" missiles as the substance grows so incredibly hot on impact that it literally melts the tank shell, spraying the inside of the tank with shrapnel, the explosion also releases a cloud of radioactive uranium oxide dust. The toxic material can be

carried for miles by the wind and when inhaled or ingested has the potential to cause cancer-related illnesses.

The latest findings on NATO's DU munitions—based on recently released information by UN scientists working in eight of the 112 bombing sites in Kosovo—suggests an even more alarming picture.

There are two basic types of DU, misleadingly called "clean" and "dirty". The "clean" variety is obtained as a by-product of the extraction of uranium-235 from ore in the production of nuclear fuel or nuclear weapons. "Dirty" DU is what is left over when the fuel has been through a nuclear reactor. This means it may be contaminated with far more dangerous radioactive isotopes such as plutonium.

It had been widely assumed until now that the type used by the US in its weapons was the "clean" variety. But research by UN scientists found evidence of "dirty" DU in the field.

Speaking on the findings, IAEA spokesman David Kyd said, "This is the first time that the spent fuel origins of DU munitions have emerged".

It has been suggested that the US military have relied on "dirty" DU because much of the "clean" DU is owned by the private corporations running the country's nuclear facilities.

But "dirty" DU is also cheaper and easier to access as the US has vast stockpiles left over from the Cold War, when thousands of tonnes of spent nuclear fuel was reprocessed to extract plutonium (for each tonne of plutonium, 100 tonnes of DU would have to be stored). From the late 1970s onwards the US, the Soviet Union, Britain and France, began converting otherwise useless stockpiles of DU into armour-piercing weapons. It is not until now, however, that anyone outside of the military and political elite has been informed that at least some of the DU used was the even more hazardous "dirty" variety.

With one European government after another agreeing to conduct tests for DU poisoning on soldiers that had served into the Balkans, the British were forced to make a U-turn whilst continuing to echo US denials over a DU-cancer link.

Last week the Blair government reluctantly agreed to offer medical tests to British military personnel who had spent time in the Balkans. Such was the tension in Whitehall leading up to the reversal in policy that the decision to offer medical tests was made while the Defence Secretary, Geoffrey Hoon, was in Stockholm at a meeting of the European Union political and security

committee. Hoon, who had said he wanted to announce the decision himself, was instead "kept informed," while the decision was hammered out between Downing Street and the Department of Health.

Spokesmen claimed that the government had wanted to wait for the results of a report on DU being prepared by the Royal Society, and expected in March, before taking a decision on testing. It was later revealed that the team who prepared the report had not even visited the Balkans, let alone Iraq.

Labour's cynicism was further displayed by the fact that Defence officials were unable to specify which government Department would conduct the tests and when they would take place.

Moreover, a recently leaked British Army report, dated March 1997, made clear that soldiers exposed to dust from DU weapons risked developing lung, lymph and brain cancer. This information was covered up.

Gulf War veterans—currently excluded from the medical testing—are now stepping up their campaign for compensation for illnesses they insist were contracted as a result of military service in Iraq and Kuwait.

Growing evidence of the adverse health impact of DU munitions has consequences far beyond NATO's armies. There are now numerous cases of Iraqi children being born with horrific deformities, and cases of childhood leukaemia have risen four-fold since the war in the Persian Gulf. Hospital wards in Baghdad and Basra are filled with Iraqi civilians, particularly children, facing certain death as a consequence of these diseases. As evidence begins to emerge in the Balkans for a similar rise in cancer illnesses, it is becoming plain that not only did NATO bombing destroy much of the essential means of life in those countries, but it has also deliberately poisoned their inhabitants.



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