

Correspondence on the impact of depleted uranium on Vieques

10 March 2001

I have a question about the article: "US Navy to be sued for depleted uranium use on Caribbean island" found at: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/feb2001/vieq-f21.shtml> This paragraph: "Over a third of the island's population of 9,000 are now suffering from a range of cancers and other serious illnesses. By official figures, the cases of cancer of the breast, cervix and uterus have risen by 300 percent over the last 20 years. Many doctors have linked the alarming rise in cancers to the decades-long use of the island as a bombing range by the US Navy and to a lesser extent by Britain's Royal Navy."

What are these official figures? Where is an official report that 33 percent plus of the nation's population is suffering from cancer and serious illnesses?

I would really like to see these figures.

Thanks,

CR

Dear Mr R,

In response to your enquiry on the article "US Navy to be sued for depleted uranium use on Caribbean island", the following are some of the sources from which I both quoted and consulted for information.

A February 5 article on the 'Vieques Libre Homepage', by Carmelo Ruiz-Marrero entitled "Vieques Residents Alarmed by Depleted Uranium Reports", states:

"According to a study carried out by the Puerto Rico Health Department, the cancer rate in Vieques is 26.9 percent above Puerto Rico's average. The study, which covered the years 1990-94, says nothing about the possible causes of this unusually high cancer rate. But the navy's opponents are certain that military activities on the island, including target practice with DU munitions, are to blame.

"Doctor Rafael Rivera-Castaño, who lives in Vieques, believes that the PR Health Department cancer study's data are already somewhat dated, and that the current cancer rate in Vieques is even higher. 'I estimate that the cancer rate here is now 52 percent over the Puerto Rico average,' he said in an interview."

A January 23 article on the same site, "Depleted Uranium (Uranium-238) and Vieques", by Mary Anne Grady Flores, states:

"The Viequenses live with the highest cancer rate in all of Puerto Rico, with 26 percent higher than the main island. Ironically, there is no hospital on the "isla nena," the little girl island, and Viequenses have to take a ferry, a one and a half hour ride, to the town of Fajardo, on the main island of Puerto Rico for treatment. Babies are born on the main island, so records of birth defects are not connected with Vieques. Oddly enough the Navy has been collecting medical data from the people in Vieques for years. A 58 year old Viequenses woman named Mimita told me that for years the Navy would draw her blood and others but never gave the people the results."

And from a link 'The legacy of the US Navy':

"The people of Vieques suffer from high levels of cancer and other serious health problems. Studies carried out by the Puerto Rico Department of Health have shown that from 1985 to 1989 the rate of

cancer in Vieques rose to 26 percent above the rest of PR. Rafael Rivera-Castaño, a retired professor from the University of Puerto Rico's Medical Sciences Campus, has documented an increase in extremely rare diseases, like, for example, Scleroderma, lupus, thyroid deficiencies, and not-so-rare ones, like asthma, which is significantly affecting Vieques' children. 'How can the children of Vieques get asthma if this is such a small island? The winds that blow in from the ocean are rich in iodine, which prevents asthma. The only possible cause is air pollution. We don't have factories here, the only source of air pollution here is the Navy,' he has stated."

The cancer increase on Vieques was also the subject of a BBC News article on February 4, "Cancer surge on bomb range island". The piece states:

"More than a third of the 9,000 inhabitants of Vieques have been found to be suffering from a range of serious illnesses and cancers, which doctors have linked to decades of bombing by the US and the military of other countries including the British Royal Navy.

I hope the above has been helpful to you.

Harvey Thompson

In your article "US Navy to be sued for depleted uranium use on Caribbean island", you say that a Puerto Rican man's tests confirmed that he was "contaminated by a long list of toxic materials including titanium". I think you've got your elements mixed up, or have discovered a new use for the metal that people have implanted in them for prosthetic devices: surely a bigger scandal would be that they are receiving doses of this cancer-causing element! And those that use titanium for wedding rings and Palm Tops? Are you trying to scare the unscientific? Perhaps the sharp lawyer representing the Vieques man is doing just that. One of his clients was "maintaining military buildings", but had never heard of uranium before? Either he was a poor jibaro cleaning latrines on the base, or he was one of the most ignorant of people to "maintain a base". Please, you will lose your credibility if you allow such poor writing to infect otherwise sane journalism. The situation is bad, but you are only making it worse by making journalism for the left look hysterical.

Dear D,

Firstly, an apology. A radio report on Garcia's (the said cancer sufferer) case had listed the number of toxic elements found in his test data. It had also mentioned the presence of titanium in the results. In my article I inadvertently listed titanium with the other elements but as you rightly point out, this metal is not toxic. It is neither my intention, nor that of the *World Socialist Web Site* to print misleading information, and all such corrections are gratefully received.

Having corrected this, I should point out that it does not detract from the fact that Garcia was found to have a number of highly toxic elements present in his body. More broadly, I do not agree with the conclusions that you subsequently draw in your letter nor its tone.

You say the fact that Garcia did not know about uranium proves he was either "a poor jibaro [peasant] cleaning latrines on the base, or he was one of the most ignorant of people to maintain a base". Garcia has lived all his

life on the island. He worked at the base in 1998. I wasn't able to find out Garcia's exact job description at the base but in all probability it will have been menial.

Given that the local population—as well as UN Navy employee's—were kept in relative ignorance of the military's operations, (the US Navy only admitted to having used DU in 1999, and then only under force of a court injunction) it is not surprising to find such widespread bewilderment. Many of those who now find themselves in the cancer cluster were previously critical of what was going on at the Eastern side of the island, but how many of them could have suspected that the long term effects would be poisonous?

Of course, in regard to the seriousness of the cancer outbreak, it isn't necessary to take Mr Eaves, the representative of a Mississippi-based law firm, at his word. I think its necessary to keep in mind the historical context, however. We are after all discussing a region that has fallen under direct US military dominance for the past six decades—and under US influence for over a century. US involvement in Puerto Rico has been intimately bound up with the Americas' role in the great events of the 20th century. The effective seizure of Vieques island by the US and the forced relocation of its inhabitants were carried out on the pretext of preparation for World War Two. In the decades that followed the war, with the emergence of the Cold War, the US always argued its continued military presence was due to reasons of "national security".

And so for 60 years the US carried on its military practices in the region with relative impunity. In that time a great amount of effort and resources had been expended by Washington to keep the operations of its navy around Puerto Rico (the 'jewel' in the crown of the Atlantic Fleet) a closely guarded secret. So successful was this that news from the area of operations was often at the level of leaks. In 1976 the New York newspaper *Newsday* reported that Michael Greenwood, a former US military scientist, told a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing that the navy accidentally 'lost' a nuclear bomb in waters off the coast of Vieques in 1966. During the late 70s the navy used trained dolphins to try and locate the nuclear device, but it was never found. Due to the corrosive effect of the water, plutonium will be released creating what has been described as a "time bomb for the Caribbean Sea".

The discovery that the US Navy has been using DU munitions in its training exercises on Vieques could of course be viewed as just another instance of its arrogant behaviour, but nothing more significant than that. 'The situation is bad', you say, but in the same breath imply that it really isn't 'that bad'. In my view such complacency is highly dangerous, especially in today's volatile political climate. The explosion of US military adventures overseas in recent years has raised concern amongst many peoples around the world. In at least two recent cases that concern has reached levels of angry denunciation of America's increasingly blatant disregard for local populations. (See US sub joyride kills nine Japanese: The USS *Greeneville* and the arrogance of power [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/feb2001/sub-f21.shtml>] and Letters on the acquittal of US marine pilot) [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/mar1999/corr-m10.shtml>]

Those who possess the most detailed knowledge of the US military machine do not share your somewhat jaundiced approach. Dr. Doug Rokke, former head of the Depleted Uranium Project of the Pentagon, US Army Major, and former professor of environmental science at Jacksonville University, Alabama, is considered one of the world's leading authorities on DU. Based on Rokke's studies, he concluded that anyone who comes in contact with DU munitions must get medical attention, not only those who have been fired at with them, but also those who have fired them, as well as anyone who has come near structures impacted by these bullets.

Rokke suffers from radiation poisoning since he visited the Persian Gulf area to study the effects of DU ordnance used by US forces in the 1991

war against Iraq. His urine contains 2,000 times the amount of uranium considered normal. In his view, DU is largely responsible for the unusual health problems that US veterans of the Gulf War have been suffering, known collectively as the 'Gulf War Syndrome'. The military denies that there is any such causal relationship.

As in all potentially damaging admissions, the US Navy substitutes a half-lie for a lie—until that too collapses. So when it was forced to admit to the use of DU ammunition in 1999, a communiqué was also signed stating that it had fired DU rounds in Vieques once, in February 1999. However, in Vieques the communiqué claimed that only 263 aeroplane-fired, low-calibre rounds had been fired, and then only as a mistake. Rokke however finds the last two claims unbelievable. "If they fired 263 DU rounds in Vieques, then it's going to snow in San Juan tomorrow," he said. As he explained, 263 rounds is, "not even a burst of automatic gunfire. The A-10 Warthog attack plane, which fires DU ammunition, can fire three to four thousand rounds per minute." He added that it couldn't possibly have been a mistake, since the Pentagon keeps very strict inventory of all its ammunition.

When a DU round is fired, 60 percent of its mass ends up as microscopic aerosol particles in the air, which can be carried miles downwind, according to the Military Toxic Project. The group claims that a single DU particle a thousandth of a millimetre in size lodged inside a human lung emits 800 times the amount of radiation considered safe by federal standards.

Dr. Andreas Toupadakis, Phd, a former chemist at the Los Alamos Laboratory, in speaking about the effects of DU in the Balkans said, "I have some experience with uranium oxide. The very tiny particles are able to fly away so easily, just like the water particles in clouds or the solid particles in smoke. A strong wind is not necessary to transport them, not only just to Greece or Italy, but also around the whole earth within a year." Toupadakis left his position last year, for reasons of conscience.

A soon to be published book, *'Depleted Uranium: The Invisible War'*, uncovers evidence that the Pentagon knew in 1995 that its armour-piercing shells and bombs contained substances more environmentally menacing than the "natural" DU that Washington, London and NATO headquarters have repeatedly defended. The book's French, Belgian and American authors produce evidence that the US government knew six years ago that its stocks of 'safe' DU had been contaminated by spent nuclear fuels.

The US has not only poisoned the inhabitants of Vieques, robbed them of the most fertile land on the island and created a near 50 percent unemployment rate; it has also produced a series of ecological disasters throughout the whole area. I would personally hope that the worst case scenarios on DU do not come to pass. But the mounting evidence from the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caribbean, and more recently from Scotland do not give much cause for optimism.

Finally, because the *World Socialist Web Site* takes a Marxist viewpoint, it has a healthy scepticism for what the US—and the other major powers—have to say for themselves. Whilst we do not automatically accept the validity of criticism's levelled at them by their detractors, we certainly give it sympathetic, but critical consideration.

Sincerely,
Harvey Thompson



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