

Another US war crime: the use of depleted uranium munitions in Iraq

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One of the war crimes for which the Bush administration should be prosecuted is the US military's extensive use of weapons tipped with depleted uranium (DU) during the war against Iraq.

The Pentagon has repeatedly dismissed warnings from a variety of scientific and other bodies about the potential dangers of such weaponry. In the aftermath of the war, Washington has refused to clean up the residue left behind or allow UN experts into the country to assess the potential long-term environmental and health hazards caused by depleted uranium.

In its use of DU weapons, the Bush administration has acted with complete indifference to international law and convention. In January 2001, the European Parliament voted in favor of a resolution that took the modest step of imposing a ban on the use of DU munitions while investigations were carried out into the links between DU and cancer.

In August 2002, the UN published a report which cited a series of international laws and conventions breached by the use of DU weapons, including: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the UN Charter; the UN Genocide Convention; the Convention Against Torture; the four Geneva Conventions of 1949; the Conventional Weapons Convention of 1980; and the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 which all forbid the deployment of "poison or poisoned weapons" and "arms, projectiles or materials calculated to cause unnecessary suffering".

According to a recent CNN report, Pentagon and UN experts have estimated that US-led military forces used between 1,100 and 2,200 tonnes of depleted uranium during the invasion of Iraq. The amount far exceeds the 300 tonnes of depleted uranium used in the 1991 Gulf War and the 10 tonnes used by NATO forces during the bombing of Serbia in 1999.

Depleted uranium is a radioactive heavy metal, which is also chemically toxic. It is the waste product left over after the isotope uranium-235—used in nuclear power plants and nuclear weapons—has been extracted from naturally occurring uranium. What remains—depleted uranium—is composed almost entirely—99.7 percent—of the isotope uranium-238. While less radioactive than enriched or even naturally occurring uranium, DU is still toxic and its long-term effects on health are

unknown.

The Pentagon has insisted on using DU munitions because they confer a significant military advantage. DU is 2.5 times denser than steel and 1.7 times the density of lead, enabling shells and bullets tipped with the substance to easily pierce most armour and concrete structures. It is also relatively cheap to manufacture—essentially being a waste product from the US nuclear industry and weapons program. DU bullets and shells emit almost no radiation prior to firing, but burn in mid air and vaporise after impact, spreading a layer of fine dust across a large area. Each DU tank shell is said to contain about five kilograms of depleted uranium.

Just days before the invasion of Iraq, Colonel James Naughton crudely summed up the reasons for using DU munitions and accused those warning of its dangers of falling for Iraqi propaganda. "The Iraqis tell us terrible things happened to our people because you used it last time. Why do they want it to go away? They want it to go away because we kicked the crap out of them—okay? I mean, there's no doubt that DU gave us a huge advantage over their tanks. They lost a lot of tanks."

Equally cynical was the response of Lieutenant Colonel Michael Sigmon, the deputy surgeon for the US Army's V Corps. Asked about the health risks of DU, he declared: "There is not really any danger, at least that we know about, for the people of Iraq." He claimed that children playing with expended DU tank shells would have to eat and practically suffocate on the depleted uranium residue before incurring any health problems.

These comments fly in the face of considerable anecdotal evidence from battlefields where DU munitions have been used—including in Iraq during the first Gulf War, in the Balkans and at the US bombing range on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. In each case, significant increases in cancer rates, birth deformities and long-term health problems have been recorded.

A leading Iraqi specialist, Dr Salma Haddad, told reporters that several years after the 1991 Gulf War she began to encounter more and more children at Baghdad's Al Mansur Hospital with an aggressive form of cancer.

Haddad said she was particularly alarmed since the disease—acute myeloblastic leukemia—is closely associated with radiation exposure and her suspicions pointed to DU munitions. She went on to explain that the number of cancer cases admitted to her hospital was five times higher than in 1991.

But Pentagon officials continue to play down the dangers. Last month, spokesman Colonel David Lapan claimed that recent studies had demonstrated that DU was safe. Since 1990, he told the BBC “there’ve been a number of studies by the UK’s Royal Society and the World Health Organisation, for example—into the health risks of DU, or lack of them. It’s fair to say the 1990 study has been overtaken by them. One thing we have found in these various studies is that there are no long-term effects from DU.”

In fact, the Royal Society report entitled “The health hazards of depleted uranium munitions” says nothing of the sort. The body has been one of the most vociferous in calling for a cleanup of depleted uranium and for more comprehensive tests into its health and environmental effects. It recently called on the British government to carry out health tests on troops returning from Iraq.

The study does state that the known risks of cancer are low and may only be twice as probable for people exposed to DU in the worst-case battlefield scenarios. But it also points to the need for further research. Far from being harmless, the Royal Society report explains: “DU is radioactive and poisonous. Exposure to sufficiently high levels might be expected to increase the incidence of some cancers, notably lung cancer, possibly leukemia and may damage the kidneys.

“The key question is whether exposures to DU on the battlefield are such that the increased incidence of cancer, or the likelihood of kidney damage, are insignificant or are high enough to cause concern. This is a very difficult question to answer given the lack of good quality data on some of the parameters that determine the extent of the exposure or the subsequent risk of disease.”

Royal Society spokesperson Professor Brian Spratt commented last month: “The coalition needs to make clear where and how much depleted uranium was used in the recent conflict in Iraq. Although there are more pressing problems in Iraq ... the coalition needs to acknowledge that depleted uranium is a potential hazard and make inroads into tackling it by being open about where and how much depleted uranium has been deployed.”

But neither Washington nor London has shown the slightest willingness to provide the necessary information, let alone acknowledge the dangers. When the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) asked to be allowed to send a team to Iraq to make an assessment of the environmental and health threats posed to the Iraqi population, the Bush administration refused.

Previous UNEP studies on depleted uranium have indicated that the substance can attack the kidneys if ingested most likely

through contaminated water or cause lung cancer if the dust is inhaled.

Further evidence of the dangers of DU munitions has been provided by Major Doug Rokke, a Vietnam and Gulf War combat veteran. Rokke has specialised in hazardous materials and emergency medicine for over 20 years and has campaigned in recent years against the use of DU. He was assigned to clean up depleted uranium after the 1991 Gulf War in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

In a speech in January published by the magazine *In These Times*, Rokke denounced the use of DU munitions declaring: “We have willfully spread it all over the place. We’ve refused to clean up the mess; we’ve refused to provide medical care; not only to the American ‘friendly fire’ casualties who survived, but also to the DU cleanup teams; and we’ve refused to supply medical care to all the thousands and thousands of other people, including women and children—which makes it an indiscriminate weapon.”

Rokke explained that indiscriminate weapons are banned by international law and that UN has issued several calls for a ban on the use of DU—which the US has rejected. Speaking from his experience in the first Gulf War, he warned: “When you leave all the contamination there, people are going to continue to get sick from just the uranium munitions alone... The army knows it’s a problem, and they just don’t care. They’re going to use DU... When you go to war, you use the best weapon you have, and you will not ever give it up.”

Washington also has other interests at stake. If DU is proven to have a long-term health impact, the US faces charges of criminal negligence and claims for compensation, not only from civilians in the Middle East and the Balkans, but from thousands of US veterans who have suffered debilitating illnesses.

Moreover, any cleanup of DU residue in Iraq and elsewhere would involve huge costs. According to an article in the US publication *Newsday* last month, the estimated cost of clearing a closed 500-acre military facility—the Jefferson Proving Ground in Indiana—was between \$4 billion and \$5 billion. The firing range was thought to contain about one fifth the amount of depleted uranium used during the 1991 Gulf War and many times less than the tonnage used this year on Iraq.



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