

Are American soldiers in Iraq dying due to depleted uranium?

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The office of the US Army Surgeon General informed the media July 31 that teams of medical specialists have been dispatched to both Iraq and the Landstuhl military hospital in Germany to investigate why a pneumonia-like condition is striking down American military personnel who took part in the invasion of Iraq. At least 100 soldiers have been hospitalized with severe respiratory problems since March 1. Fifteen have been so ill they have required ventilator support to stay alive. Two have died, while three reportedly remain under close supervision at Landstuhl.

Three of the critical cases occurred in March, three in April, two in May, three in June and four in July. Fourteen were Army personnel and one was from the Marines. A localized epidemic has been ruled out. The troops who have fallen ill belong to diverse units and were operating in different areas of Iraq and in at least one case in Kuwait. An Army official told reporters: "It is pneumonia. The question is, what is the cause?" According to the Army, there is no evidence that any of the cases have been caused by exposure to chemical or biological weapons, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) or environmental toxins.

It is not the number of cases that is concerning the military hierarchy. According to the spokesperson of the US Army Surgeon General, there are normally nine cases of pneumonia per 10,000 US soldiers per year that are serious enough to require hospitalization. Based on that statistic, 100 cases of pneumonia in five months among the several hundred thousand army and marine personnel who were involved in the war on Iraq are only slightly higher than average.

The dispatch of the experts therefore raises disturbing questions. There is clearly something about either the nature, or the severity, of the cases the Army Surgeon

General feels warrants investigation.

On July 16, the *News-Leader* site operating out of Springfield, Missouri published a detailed report describing the symptoms of one of the soldiers who has died from the alleged pneumonia. Josh Neusche, a 20-year-old, fit and healthy Missouri National Guardsman, collapsed in Baghdad on July 2. He was evacuated to Landstuhl, Germany. His family was informed he was suffering from pneumonia caused by fluid in his lungs. According to his mother, his liver, kidneys and muscles then began to break down. He was placed on dialysis, but fell into a coma and died on July 12.

For anyone familiar with the research into the medical effects of exposure to depleted uranium, the details of Josh Neusche's death would have to ring alarm bells. The 2001 World Health Organization report into the issue notes: "Brief accidental exposure to high concentrations of uranium hexafluoride has caused acute respiratory illness, which may be fatal." [Full report available at http://www.who.int/ionizing_radiation/pub_meet/ir_public/en/]

Scenarios that could cause a "brief, accidental exposure to high concentrations of uranium hexafluoride" definitely would include being in the vicinity of a vehicle or building struck by depleted uranium munitions; traveling in or being in the vicinity of a vehicle that is armored with depleted uranium and sustains damage; or being involved in the cleanup of such a vehicle. The organs most affected by exposure are the lungs and kidneys.

In a July 30 article on US casualties in Iraq, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported the unconfirmed allegation in the July 17 Saudi newspaper *Al-Watan* that three US servicemen had been evacuated from Iraq

suffering symptoms of depleted uranium exposure.

The WSWS noted that if this proved true, it would not be surprising. Thousands of US troops in Iraq are likely to have been exposed to DU to some degree, absorbing it either by inhaling contaminated dust or ingesting it from contaminated water, food and soil. Initial estimates are that between 100 and 200 tons of DU munitions were used in Iraq and that at least 17 incidents took place during the combat phase that would most likely have resulted in US and British personnel being exposed to high concentrations of DU particles.

[See

<http://www.antenna.nl/~wise/uranium/pdf/duiq03.pdf>]

On July 28, as part of the research for the July 30 article, “America’s maimed come home from Iraq,” this WSWS correspondent submitted a list of questions to the US Department of Defense, addressed to media@defenselink.mil. One of the specific questions we asked of the Department of Defense was: “Have any US military personnel been medically evacuated from Iraq due to the possible side-effects of exposure to depleted uranium?” To date, the WSWS has received no reply.



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