

Testing of New York guardsmen: first confirmed cases of Iraq war depleted uranium exposure

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A group of American soldiers suffering from unexplained illnesses due to service in the Iraqi war have been diagnosed with radiation contamination likely caused by dust from depleted uranium shells fired by US troops.

An investigation funded by the *New York Daily News* found that several members of the 442nd Military Police Company, based in Orangeburg, New York, “almost certainly” inhaled radioactive dust from exploded American shells manufactured with depleted uranium (DU).

A nuclear medicine expert and former Army doctor, Dr. Asaf Durakovic, tested nine men who had been battling serious physical problems that began last summer in the Iraqi town of Samawah. Laboratory tests revealed traces of two manmade forms of uranium in urine samples from four of the soldiers. The men—Sgt. Hector Vega, Sgt. Ray Ramos, Sgt. Agustin Matos and Cpl. Anthony Yonnone—are the first confirmed cases of inhaled depleted uranium exposure from the war, according to the *Daily News* report. The soldiers contacted the newspaper after six of them were denied testing for DU by Army doctors and the three who were tested waited months for results. Two in the latter group suspiciously tested negative.

Dispatched to Iraq a year ago, the unit, made up for the most part of New York policemen, firefighters and correction officers, has been providing security for convoys, operating jails and training Iraqi police.

“These are amazing results, especially since these soldiers were military police not exposed to the heat of battle. Other American soldiers who were in combat must have more depleted uranium exposure,” Durakovic, a colonel in the Army Reserves who served in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, told the *Daily News*. Dr. Durakovic is affiliated to the Uranium Medical Research Centre, an international association of scientists and physicians—the first study organization to detect DU in the urine of Canadian, British and US troops who served in the first Gulf War.

The Army and Pentagon, under pressure from veterans’

groups who blame DU contamination as a factor in Gulf War Syndrome, have conducted studies which essentially concluded that DU exposure does not present a major health risk. Gulf War Syndrome is a term for a myriad of ailments that afflicts thousands of veterans of that war. A Pentagon study published in 2000 concluded that DU, as a heavy metal, “could pose a chemical hazard” but that Gulf War veterans “did not experience intakes high enough to affect their health.” Pentagon spokesman Michael Kilpatrick said “the overwhelming conclusion” from the studies of those who work with uranium is that “it has not produced any increase in cancer.”

Kilpatrick also said that the Pentagon has tested some 1,000 soldiers back from the current war in Iraq and only three have come up positive for DU—resulting exclusively from depleted uranium shell shrapnel.

The Army contends that only soldiers who suffer retained DU shrapnel wounds or who were inside tanks hit by DU shells—forcing an immediate inhalation of radioactive dust—are at risk. However, the Pentagon’s Kilpatrick claimed that follow-up studies of around 70 cases of DU-contaminated veterans from the Gulf War exhibited no serious health problems.

Of the 579,000 American veterans who participated in the Gulf War, some 251,000 (43 percent) had sought medical treatment from the Department of Veterans Affairs as of July 1999. Approximately 182,000 (31 percent) filed claims for compensation for medical disabilities or damage related to illness or injury. The illnesses included leukemia, lung cancer, chronic kidney and liver disorders, respiratory ailments, chronic fatigue, skin spotting and joint pain, according to the Japanese newspaper *Chugoku Shimibun*. A large number of the veterans’ offspring suffer from congenital defects.

In an April 18 article by John Pilger headlined, “This is a war of liberation and we are the enemy,” the author states that Dr. Doug Rokke, director of the US Army DU project

following the 1991 Gulf invasion, estimates that more than 10,000 American veterans have since died as a result of the war, many from contamination illnesses.

After an unusual number of leukemia deaths among Italian soldiers who served in Kosovo, the European Parliament called for a moratorium on the use of depleted uranium weapons in January 2003.

Depleted uranium is what is left over when most of the highly radioactive isotopes of the element are extracted for use as nuclear fuel or nuclear weapons. In military applications, depleted uranium is primarily used in armor-piercing munitions and enhanced armor protection.

Pilger's article also revealed that during last year's invasion of Iraq, "both American and British forces used uranium-tipped shells, leaving whole areas so 'hot' with radiation that only military teams in full protective clothing can approach them. No warning or medical help is given to Iraqi civilians; thousands of children play in these zones. The 'coalition' has refused to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to send experts to assess what Rokke describes as 'a catastrophe.'"

Sgt. Agustin Matos, one of those who tested positive for DU from the New York company, told the *Daily News* that since his return from Iraq he has had constant headaches, fatigue, shortness of breath, nausea, dizziness, joint pain and excessive urination. A small lesion on his liver has also been discovered. "Before I left for Iraq, they tested my eyes and I was fine. Now my eyesight's gotten bad on top of everything else," Matos said.

According to members of the 442nd, the company was so short of manpower that a commanding officer would order an evacuation only when a soldier could no longer physically function.

A press release issued by the National Gulf War Resource Center, an international coalition of advocates and organizations, stated: "The [NGWRC] is very concerned that veterans returning from combat in Iraq are being denied testing for exposure to depleted uranium and potentially other hazards.... The family members of the 442nd are right to be concerned about proper DU screening. Both the DoD [Department of Defense] and the VA [Veterans Administration] have done a poor job testing and evaluating veterans in the past, and it is hard to ignore the withholding of information and manipulation of study findings from the DoD DU Surveillance Program."

Isaac Zimmerman of the Uranium Medical Research Centre is a research assistant for Dr. Durakovic and a co-author of many of the organization's studies. He told the WSWs: "The 442nd was a military police unit and I don't believe they saw active combat. All of the nine soldiers that we tested were sick. Four tested positive for DU and six or

seven came back with Uranium 236, which does not exist in nature, and is only produced in a nuclear reaction process.

"The military is continuing to drop DU. I don't think anybody really knows, not even the military, how many tons have been dropped. One researcher in England estimates some 1,700 tons, which is a lot more than what the military claims. We have also tested a number of civilians in Iraq and found that a significant number are contaminated.

"I've heard second hand that the military is now going to test everyone. But we know from past tests that labs with substandard methodology were used and therefore the test results were negative for DU. It is without doubt that the US military would never ask our organization to conduct DU testing on the soldiers. The testing of the New York guardsmen was entirely funded by the *Daily News*."

A statement by Dr. Durakovic, posted on the International Action Organization web site, argued that "[d]ue to the current proliferation of DU weaponry, the battlefields of the future will be unlike any battlefields in history. Since the effects of contamination by uranium cannot be directed or contained, uranium's chemical and radiological toxicity will create environments that are hostile not only to the health of enemy forces but of one's own forces as well.

"Due to the delayed health effects from internal contamination of uranium, injury and death will not always be immediate to the battle, but will remain lingering threats to 'survivors' of the battle for years and decades into the future. The battlefield will remain a killing zone long after the cessation of hostilities. Environmental contamination will linger for centuries posing an ongoing health threat to the civilians who reclaim the land and subsequent generations."

The testing organized by the *Daily News* on a handful of members of one company yielded results that point to the fact that thousands of US troops and a vast percentage of the Iraqi population are likely to have suffered exposure to depleted uranium, absorbing it either by inhaling contaminated dust or ingesting it from contaminated water, food and soil.



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