

Soaring birth deformities and child cancer rates in Iraq

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Iraqi doctors are making renewed efforts to bring to the world's attention the growth in birth deformities and cancer rates among the country's children. The medical crisis is being directly blamed on the widespread use of depleted uranium (DU) munitions by the US and British forces in southern Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War, and the even greater use of DU during the 2003 invasion.

The rate of birth defects, after increasing ten-fold from 11 per 100,000 births in 1989 to 116 per 100,000 in 2001, is soaring further. Dr Nawar Ali, a medical researcher into birth deformities at Baghdad University, told the UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) last month: "There have been 650 cases [birth deformities] in total since August 2003 reported in government hospitals. That is a 20 percent increase from the previous regime. Private hospitals were not included in the study, so the number could be higher."

His colleague, Dr Ibrahim al-Jabouri, reported: "In my experiments we have found some cases where the mother and father were suffering from pollution from weapons used in the south and we believe that it is affecting newborn babies in the country."

The director of the Central Teaching Hospital in Baghdad, Wathiq Ibrahim, said: "We have asked for help from the government to make a more profound study on such cases as it is affecting thousands of families."

The rise in birth defects is matched by a continuing increase in the incidence of childhood cancers.

Six years ago, the College of Medicine at Basra University carried out a study into the rate of cancer among children under the age of 15 in southern Iraq from 1976 to 1999. It revealed a horrific change between 1990 and 1999. In the province of Basra, the

incidence of cancer of all types rose by 242 percent, while the rate of leukaemia among children rose 100 percent. Children living in the area were falling ill with cancer at the rate of 10.1 per 100,000. In districts where the use of DU had been the most concentrated, the rate rose to 13.2 per 100,000.

The results were cited at the time in campaigns to end the UN-imposed and US-enforced sanctions against Iraq, which were held responsible for the death of as many as 500,000 Iraqi children from malnutrition and inadequate medical treatment.

The study noted: "Most doctors and scientists agree that even mild radiation is dangerous and increases the risk of cancer. The health risk becomes much greater once the [DU] projectile has been fired. After they have been fired, the broken shells release uranium particles. The airborne particles enter the body easily. The uranium then deposits itself in bones, organs and cells. Children are especially vulnerable because their cells divide rapidly as they grow. In pregnant women, absorbed uranium can cross the placenta into the bloodstream of the fetus.

"In addition to its radioactive dangers, uranium is chemically toxic, like lead, and can damage the kidneys and lungs. Perhaps, the fatal epidemic of swollen abdomens among Iraqi children is caused by kidney failure resulting from uranium poisoning. Whatever the effect of the DU shells, it is made worse by malnutrition and poor health conditions....

"Iraq holds the United States and Britain legally and morally responsible for the grave health and environmental impact of the use of DU ..." (A version of the report is available at: http://www.iacenter.org/depleted/du_iraq.htm).

Terrible as these results were, the last six years have witnessed a further rise in the number of children under

15 falling ill with cancer in Iraq. The rate has now reached 22.4 per 100,000—more than five times the 1990 rate of 3.98 per 100,000.

Dr Janan Hassan of the Basra Maternity and Childrens Hospital told IRIN in November 2004 that as many as 56 percent of all cancer patients in Iraq were now children under 5, compared with just 13 percent 15 years earlier. “Also,” he said, “it is notable that the number of babies born with defects is rising astonishingly. In 1990, there were seven cases of babies born with multiple congenital anomalies. This has gone up to as high as 224 cases in the past three years.”

The statistics point to the long-term consequences of depleted uranium contamination. Munitions containing an estimated 300 tonnes of DU were unleashed by coalition forces in southern Iraq in 1991. A decade after the war, DU shell holes are still 1,000 times more radioactive than the normal level of background radiation. The surrounding areas are still 100 times more radioactive. Experts surmise that fine uranium dust has been spread by the wind, contaminating swathes of the surrounding region, including Basra, which is some 200 kilometres away from sites where large numbers of DU shells were fired.

A 1997 study into the cancer rate among Iraqi soldiers who fought in the Basra area during the 1991 Gulf War found a statistically significant increase in the rate at which they were stricken with lymphomas, leukaemia, and lung, brain, gastrointestinal, bone and liver cancers, as compared to personnel who had not fought in the south. One in four of the American personnel who fought in first Iraq war—more than 150,000 people—are also suffering a range of medical disorders collectively described as “Gulf War Syndrome”. While the US military denies there is any relationship, exposure to depleted uranium is one of the factors blamed by veterans and medical researchers.

Somewhere between 1,000 and 3,000 tonnes of DU was expended during the three-week war in 2003. Unlike 1991, however, where most of the fighting took place outside major population centres, the 2003 invasion witnessed the wholesale bombardment of targets inside densely-populated cities with DU shells. *Christian Science Monitor* journalist Scott Peterson registered radiation on a simple Geiger counter at levels some 1,900 times the normal background rate in parts of Baghdad in May 2003. The city has a population of

six million.

Given that it was two to four years after the 1991 war before cancer and birth defect rates began to rise dramatically, the fear among medical specialists is that Iraq will face an epidemic of cancers by the end of the decade, under conditions where the medical system, devastated by years of sanctions and war, is unable to cope with the existing crisis.

Dr Amar, the deputy head of the Al-Sadr Teaching Hospital in Basra, one of the main hospitals treating Iraqi cancer patients, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* on April 29: “We don’t have drugs to treat tumours. I have a patient with tumours who is unconscious and I don’t have drugs or a bed in which to treat him. I have two women with advanced ovarian cancer but I can give them only minimum doses of only some of the drugs they need.

“Two or three days ago we had to cancel all surgery because we had no gauze and no anaesthetics. Our wards are like stables for horses, not humans. We can’t properly isolate patients or manage their diets. We don’t have proper laboratory facilities....

“If you are sick don’t come to this hospital for treatment. It is collapsing around us. We’re going down in a heap.”



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