

New revelations of US military use of white phosphorus in Iraq

Tom Carter

21 November 2005

A week after RAI, the Italian state television network, aired footage of the American military deploying white phosphorus munitions against the population of Fallujah and their grisly effects on innocent residents, more evidence has come to light confirming that the US is using chemical weapons against the Iraqi people. The report on Italian television sparked angry protests outside the US embassy in Rome.

Despite denials by top Pentagon and state department officials that white phosphorus, a napalm-like substance, is being used as a chemical weapon in Iraq, facts are continuing to emerge that confirm the opposite.

The first new piece of evidence comes from an embedded reporter, Darrin Mortenson of the *North County Times* in California, who gave this account of a mortar crew in action during the assault on Fallujah last November:

“The boom kicked the dust around the pit as they ran through the drill again and again, sending a mixture of burning white phosphorus and high explosives they call ‘shake ’n bake’ into a cluster of buildings where insurgents have been spotted all week.”

In army jargon, white phosphorus rounds are known as “Whiskey Pete” or “Willie Pete”—the army radio pronunciation of the letters “WP.”

Also, in the March/April edition of the US Military’s *Field Artillery*, three Fallujah veterans wrote the following:

“WP proved to be an effective and versatile munition. We used it for screening missions at two breeches and, later in the fight, as a potent psychological weapon against the insurgents in trench lines and spider holes when we could not get effects on them with HE [high explosives].

“We fired ‘shake and bake’ missions at the insurgents, using WP to flush them out and HE to take them out.”

White phosphorus releases heat on contact with moisture, and continues to burn as long as it has a supply of oxygen. It burns rapidly, right down to the bone, and there is no putting it out, except with the rapid application of wet mud. For men, women, children and animals caught in a cloud of it, however, the situation is hopeless. The weapon was used in

Vietnam alongside napalm.

A white phosphorus bomb fired from a helicopter or mortar distributes the substance in a wide area, much like a cluster bomb. According to one US soldier, it has an effective kill radius of 150 meters, and will even annihilate individuals hiding in trenches, inside buildings and underground. The wide kill zone is confirmed in the Italian documentary, which contains the deeply chilling night footage of dozens of city blocks in Fallujah being immersed in an eerie white cloud as an American helicopter deploys burst after burst of WP in the otherwise pitch dark.

These images, combined with those of men, women and children whose bodies are charred but wear clothes that are completely intact, which aired on Italian television, are evidence of massive war crimes committed by the US military. (See: “Film documents American use of chemical weapons in Iraq”)

US government spokesmen are on the defensive and their initial indignant denials have been exposed as lies. In a letter to the British *Independent*, Robert Tuttle, the US ambassador to Britain, first rejected the claim that phosphorus was used for anything other than providing illumination at night and for the creation of smokescreens, as did the US ambassador in Rome. “US forces do not use napalm or white phosphorus as weapons,” Tuttle said.

The day after Tuttle sent his letter, US Colonel Barry Venable gave an interview to the BBC in which he directly contradicted the ambassador. “We use them [white phosphorus munitions] primarily as obscurants, for smokescreens or target marking in some cases. However, it is an incendiary weapon, and may be used against enemy combatants.”

Venable said earlier denials had been based on “poor information.”

Asked whether WP was used as an offensive weapon during the bloody siege of Fallujah, Venable answered: “Yes, it was used as an incendiary weapon against enemy combatants. When you have enemy forces that are in covered positions that your high explosive artillery rounds

are not having an impact on, and you wish to get them out of those positions, one technique is to fire a white phosphorus round into the position: the combined effects of the fire and smoke—and in some case the terror brought about by the explosion on the ground—will drive them out of the holes so you can kill them with high explosives.”

Was it possible that civilians had been killed by white phosphorus? Venable replied: “It would not be out of the realm of the possible.”

When the WSWS spoke with a mortar specialist in the Indiana National Guard, he indicated that he had been trained in the deployment of white phosphorus munitions. Asked what the primary purpose of these particular mortar rounds were, he responded “antipersonnel.”

The BBC’s defense correspondent Paul Wood called the retraction of Tuttle’s denial a public relations disaster for Washington.

War critic George Monbiot bluntly headlined his article in the *Guardian*, “The US used chemical weapons in Iraq—and then lied about it.”

The use of white phosphorus as a weapon against human beings is forbidden under international law, which the US has made a policy of disregarding in the prosecution of its criminal war in Iraq. The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), to which the US is a party, proscribes the use of white phosphorus for anything other than the creation of smokescreens and for battlefield illumination.

The US military’s attempt to label white phosphorus an “incendiary” and not “chemical” weapon amounts to nothing more than linguistic gymnastics—akin to the invention of the term “enemy combatant.”

Peter Kaiser, spokesman for the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, based in the Hague, commented that the use of white phosphorus was “not forbidden by the CWC if it is used within the context of a military application which does not require or does not intend to use the toxic properties of white phosphorus. White phosphorus is normally used to produce smoke, to camouflage movement....

“If on the other hand the toxic properties of white phosphorus, the caustic properties, are specifically intended to be used as a weapon, that of course is prohibited, because the way the Convention is structured or the way it is in fact applied, any chemicals used against humans or animals that cause harm or death through the toxic properties of the chemical are considered chemical weapons.” The evidence from Fallujah clearly indicates that the American military was using WP for its “toxic properties” against enemy troops and perhaps civilians.

The use of white phosphorus as a weapon is also forbidden under Protocol III of the Convention on Certain

Conventional Weapons, which the US deliberately opted out of signing.

A US Army handbook published in 1999 states that the use of WP against enemy personnel is “against the law of land warfare.”

Professor Paul Rogers, of the University of Bradford’s department of peace studies, added his voice to the debate, asserting that white phosphorus could be considered a chemical weapon if deliberately aimed at people. He told the BBC: “It is not counted under the chemical weapons convention in its normal use but, although it is a matter of legal niceties, it probably does fall into the category of chemical weapons if it is used for this kind of purpose directly against people.”

Britain’s Defence Secretary John Reid said UK forces had also used white phosphorus in Iraq, but claimed that the material was not used as “anything other than a smokescreen to protect our troops when in action.” The UK Ministry of Defence said its use was permitted in battle in cases where there were no civilians near the target area.

In any case, a spokesman for Prime Minister Tony Blair argued, with sophistry worthy of the oldest imperialist power, “It is important to remember, first and foremost, the efforts that were made to settle the Fallujah issue by the Iraqi government in a peaceful way. The offer was made to talk, but the insurgents refused that offer.”

Much like the use of napalm in Vietnam, which the US military also vehemently denied at the time but which was later well documented, there is little doubt that white phosphorus is being used as a weapon against a population hostile to the occupation.

The hypocrisy of the American government and media knows no bounds. How many of the crimes for which Washington supposedly organized the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime—torture, the development and use of chemical weapons, rigged elections, arrest, imprisonment and execution without trial—have its own forces committed or overseen?

Fallujah: the hidden massacre, produced by Sigfrido Ranucci and Maurizio Torrealta, is available in English translation, and can be downloaded at: <http://www.rainews24.rai.it/ran24/inchiesta/video.asp>



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact