

Britain acquires thermobaric weapons for Afghanistan

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For weeks, British media and sections of the political elite have been urging the government and the military to focus their attention on military operations in Afghanistan. In contrast to Iraq, the US-led occupation of Afghanistan is being portrayed as a “winnable.” But a report by Channel 4 News has disclosed just how it is intended to secure victory—through the use of thermobaric weapons.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) states that these have a capability to “kill and injure in a particularly brutal manner over a wide area,” and their use by Russia in its bloody suppression of Chechnya met with international condemnation. However, Channel 4 revealed that the Ministry of Defence has placed an order for shoulder-launched weapons equipped to carry “enhanced blast devices.” The programme’s reporter stated that “one order’s been placed for 2009, but another has been quietly made to be in service as soon as possible....

“Channel 4 News has learnt the army also wants Britain’s new Apache helicopters—at use for the first time in Afghanistan—to have their missiles equipped with another form of thermobaric device, called a metal augmented charge.

“Sources in industry and people in the army tell me that an order is a high priority and is coming very soon. That might mean the end of this year or the beginning of next year.”

In June, Channel 4 reported, the MoD had denied it was buying “enhanced blast devices.”

“When they admitted to MPs they had already bought two batches, they then told us these were not thermobaric weapons. They withdrew that claim five hours later and refused to put anyone up for an interview.”

A statement by the MoD stated yhat it was “purchasing a small number of enhanced blast

munitions” for use in Afghanistan. The MoD disputes the term “thermobaric”—with good reason. Such weapons are at odds with the Law of Armed Conflict, which “rests on fundamental principles of military necessity, unnecessary suffering, proportionality, and distinction (discrimination) which will apply to targeting decisions.”

Described as “dual action” devices, thermobaric weapons are able to penetrate bunkers and similar shelters. Containing fuel, two explosive charges and a highly inflammable chemical, the weapons activate on impact, releasing the fuel that, when detonated, creates a massive heat and pressure wave.

A report in the August 2000 issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, an official organ of the American army, described their effect in Grozny.

“...a thermobaric strike on a unit in an urban fight is likely to be very bloody. Those personnel caught directly under the aerosol cloud will die from the flame or overpressure. For those on the periphery of the strike, the injuries can be severe. Burns, broken bones, contusions from flying debris and blindness may result. Further, the crushing injuries from the overpressure can create air embolism within blood vessels, concussions, multiple internal hemorrhages in the liver and spleen, collapsed lungs, rupture of the eardrums and displacement of the eyes from their sockets. Displacement and tearing of internal organs can lead to peritonitis.”

“Thermobaric detonations will create three ‘zones’ of injury,” it continued. “The first is the central zone where most will die immediately from blast overpressure and thermal injuries. Casualties in the second zone will survive the initial blast and burns, but will have extensive burns and those internal injuries listed above....

“Injuries to the extremities and eyes will be common in the third zone.”

The US is already deploying such weapons from the BLU-118 “cave buster” to AGM-114N hellfire, the SMAW-NE bazooka and the XM1060 grenade.

The website *defencetech.org* detailed one “post-action” report on the use of the shoulder mounted assault weapon complete with the new warhead in Iraq. This described how “One unit disintegrated a large one-storey masonry type building with one round from 100 metres.”

Thermobarics also “proved highly effective in the battle for Fallujah,” it states.

The predominantly Sunni city was subject to US attack in 2004, culminating in Operation Phantom Fury, in which three quarters of its 50,000 homes were destroyed and hundreds of civilians—trapped within its confines—were killed. US officers admitted using deadly white phosphorus incendiary bombs against “enemy combatants.”

Marines were also armed with assault weapons containing “about 35% thermobaric novel explosive (NE) and 65% standard high explosive.” Drawing again on the *Gazette*, *defencetech.org* cited how in Fallujah, “SMAW gunners became expert at determining which wall to shoot to cause the roof to collapse and crush the insurgents fortified inside interior rooms.”

The MoD is cynically portraying the move towards thermobaric devices as a means of reducing civilian casualties caused by conventional weapons. Hundreds of civilians have been killed in US-led air strikes, supposedly aimed at insurgents. In one air strike alone in July, 108 civilians, including women and children, were killed in the Bala Boluk district of the western province of Farah. But such indiscriminate bombings are the result of a US offensive—supported by NATO—to intimidate and crush all opposition to foreign occupation.

Britain’s move to thermobaric weapons marks an escalation in its own campaign of terror.

HRW has stated that “In urban settings it is very difficult to limit the effect of this weapon to combatants, and the nature of FAE explosions makes it virtually impossible for civilians to take shelter from their destructive effect.”

Reuben Brigety, an arms researcher at HRW said of the thermobaric assault weapons now being sought by

Britain, “I’m not aware of any other conventional munitions used by a single person that can have the same destructive power.”

Faced with growing casualties as hostility towards its occupation mounts, thermobarics are increasingly being described as the weapon of choice for military operations in urban areas.

A number of British officials have made recent visits to Afghanistan—from UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband to Defence Secretary Des Browne and David Cameron, leader of the Conservative Party. And, at a press conference last week with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Prime Minister Gordon Brown spoke of the need for coordinated military action in Afghanistan.

All of which underscores the perfidious character of calls for a pull-out from Iraq, in order to strengthen the military offensive in Afghanistan. What is being portrayed in some quarters as a progressive, even “anti-war” demand, represents nothing more than a redeployment of forces so as to more effectively focus Britain’s imperial ambitions.

The Liberal Democrat leader, Sir Menzies Campbell, has been in the forefront of calls for such a redeployment. He described the MoD’s thermobaric order as a “serious step change” for the British army. “If these weapons contribute to the deaths of civilians,” he continued, this makes “yet more difficult” Britain’s supposed “battle for hearts and minds.”

Yet Campbell has said of Afghanistan that it is “in a different category altogether from Iraq and it is somewhere where we should be putting resources to bring about, as far as we can, a successful conclusion,”—as if a war of colonial-style subjugation can be maintained without the most brutal methods.



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