Army detonation threatens to send cloud of lead over parts of Iowa, Illinois and Missouri

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The US Army has set Wednesday, November 25, the eve of Thanksgiving, to deliver the government's holiday offering to the working people of Iowa, Illinois and Missouri: a cloud of lead, blasted into the air above their homes, waterways and farms.

On Monday afternoon, President Donald Trump ordered the Army to wait until a court gives its approval to the detonation, in an apparent effort to forestall expressions of popular hostility. This was no more than a public relations stunt, however, as a federal appeals court issued an order within hours, permitting the military to proceed.

The Army's plan is to blow up 68 drums holding nearly 10,000 pounds of lead azide, a highly volatile explosive, which would propel 7,000 pounds of lead particles into the air. The claim is that the chemical, stable when liquid, has crystalized, making an uncontrolled explosion a likelihood as soon as freezing temperatures hit the area.

In the space of four days, the Army's stated reason has shifted three times.

On Thursday the blast was put off until "the latest possible moment" before a freeze. On Saturday it had become an immediate threat requiring action by Tuesday, and on Sunday night it was postponed to Wednesday for "optimal weather conditions."

Court filings show that the Army convened a working group on alternatives as early as January, two months before it notified the EPA of the degraded material. No government at any level has opposed the blast itself.

The legal maneuvering turns on the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), the 1976 federal law governing hazardous waste. Federal rules establish two methods for handling a munitions emergency. The first is to declare an immediate threat and destroy explosives without seeking a permit. The second is to seek an emergency permit from the EPA, which can be done without taking public comment.

The Army followed the permit route for eight months, obtaining four successive emergency permits. It claimed the immediate-response exemption only after the appeals court issued an administrative stay. The Army's own expert certified the emergency, which was triggered not by the condition of the explosives, but by the legal obstacles encountered.

How the Army arrived at this point is a record of neglect. Lead azide is a very sensitive explosive used in tiny amounts to set off larger charges. Kept wet, it is manageable, but when its liquid evaporates or freezes, it forms crystals that can explode on their own. The US has had no domestic manufacturer since at least 2005, and a 2014 Army article records that research on a replacement began in 2004 because of concern over a deteriorating 40-year-old stockpile at the Iowa plant.

On or about March 12, 2026, the Army notified the EPA, and the drums were legally reclassified from "potential production" stock into "unserviceable hazardous waste." The Army says the liquid in the drums had evaporated and crystals had formed. It has provided no account of inspections before March 2026.

The plant at the center of this crisis is a government-owned, contractor-operated facility, meaning the Army owns it and a private company runs it for profit. It covers roughly 19,000 acres just west of Burlington, and its operator, American Ordnance, a subsidiary of Day & Zimmermann, performs load, assemble and pack operations, filling empty shells with explosive and finishing them for shipment.

As a 2023 *New York Times* feature described, workers in hazmat suits and respirators melt explosive flakes in steam-heated kettles inside 80-year-old structures and pour the molten fill into steel casings. Of the shells produced each month, the *Times* reported, "Most will go to Ukraine." Munitions finished at the plant have armed other US wars abroad, including Israel's genocide in Gaza.

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An M830A1 tank shell fragment recovered from the wreckage of the ambulance sent to rescue six-year-old Hind Rajab in Gaza, where she, six family members and two paramedics were killed in January 2024, was traced by its serial number to the Iowa plant, according to *The Nation*.

In September 2026, the Defense Department Inspector General reported that the US war on Iran, launched February 28, had consumed $22.3 billion in munitions by the end of June, leaving "strategic inventory shortfalls." To replenish depleted stockpiles, the Pentagon set a goal of 100,000 155 mm artillery shells a month, but production had reached only 36,000 by March 2026. To accelerate output, the Army awarded a $635 million contract to build the Future Artillery Complex at the same plant. But that requires removing the dangerous stockpile of lead azide.

Political leaders of both parties have issued face-saving statements while offering no real resistance. Iowa's Republican Governor Kim Reynolds, who celebrated the plant's expansion at the July groundbreaking, merely asked for a brief postponement. Democratic governor-elect Rob Sand has asked why the Army rejected alternatives, but asks for no more than "transparency over how we got here." No governor or member of Congress has opposed the blast itself, and neither Iowa nor Illinois has gone to court.

Both the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention maintain that no safe level of lead exposure exists. Children absorb up to four to five times as much ingested lead as adults, while the finest airborne lead particles are almost completely absorbed through the lungs. During pregnancy, lead crosses the placenta, raising the risk of miscarriage and premature birth and harming the baby's brain and nervous system.

The ecological stakes reach far beyond the blast site. Even the plume's reach keeps changing. The Army's first maps showed airborne lead across an area up to 20 miles wide, advisories went to communities as far as 100 miles away, and the *New York Times* now reports a plume that could stretch as far as 60 miles. The facility sits less than 10 miles from the Mississippi River, which supplies drinking water to millions, and the Army identifies stormwater runoff as the primary pathway for contaminating water.

When the Army asserted online that the health and safety of Americans "has and always will be our first priority," thousands pushed back. One response, drawing roughly 11,000 likes, read simply, "Happy Thanksgiving, enjoy the lead poisoning."

"People are scared, scared to death," a Burlington-area resident who grew up close to the plant told the *World Socialist Web Site* on Monday. "It's causing people to not be able to sleep at night. They're scared about what's going to happen to their children."

He said people in the area did not trust what the government or Army were telling them. He continued, "How many parts of the world have people been living with this sort of stuff happening all the time? Now all of a sudden it's on our back step. I'm totally opposed to the wars. Of any sort, of any shape."

"I've been around enough things in my life to understand how the business of capitalism works," he said. War is "the quickest way to get filthy riches, you know, to steal the land from somebody."

Iowa already faces one of the highest cancer rates in the country, another resident in southern Iowa told the WSWS. He said the looming lead detonation is "another good example of capitalism failing, with government handing off private contracts, and the private companies failing, facing no consequences, while the poor and workers deal with 100 percent of the consequences."

Working people in Iowa, Illinois and Missouri can place no confidence in the Army, the EPA, the courts or either party. They must demand the release of every document on the stockpile and the decision to blow it up, independent monitoring of the air, soil and water, free blood lead testing for every child and pregnant woman in the plume's path, and cleanup at public expense. That fight cannot be separated from the fight against the wars that produced this poison and the profit system that drives them.

Do you live in southeast Iowa, western Illinois or northeast Missouri? Contact the World Socialist Web Site *and the Socialist Equality Party by filling out the form below to tell us what you think and to get involved. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

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