All roadblocks cleared: Army to send cloud of lead over nearly half a million people on Thanksgiving Eve

Benjamin Mateus
25 November 2026

All roadblocks have been cleared for the US Army to detonate nearly 10,000 pounds of lead azide at 9 a.m. Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving, at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant, sending a plume of aerosolized lead and other toxic substances over the homes, farms and rivers of Iowa, Illinois and Missouri.

Monday played out as political spectacle. Three weeks after midterm elections that rejected Trump and the Republicans, giving Iowa its first Democratic governor since 2011, President Donald Trump announced the Army would wait for the courts and would not allow the blast unless governor-elect Rob Sand approved, threatening to hold Sand responsible for "any and all death or destruction."

Within hours the appeals court settled the matter in the Army's favor. A three-judge panel of the Eighth Circuit lifted its hold, accepting the Justice Department's claim that "the real choice" lay between a planned detonation and an unplanned explosion. It is a false choice. A third way, chemical neutralization, was under contract in the spring, when the drums were already crystallized but less degraded than now. The Army dropped it with no explanation, and by its own account the drums "deteriorated rapidly" after that decision, producing the very instability it now cites to rule out everything but a blast.

With the ruling in hand, every official fell into line. Sand handed the decision back to the Trump administration, Republican Governor Kim Reynolds endorsed the blast as a "federal operation," and Acting Army Secretary Adam Telle announced that both governors agreed "the call belongs to the experts."

At Tuesday's briefing, FEMA Administrator Cameron Hamilton praised Trump and White House aide Stephen Miller and called the operation "not red, not blue." As one online reply to the Army put it, "Mass poisoning people feels like an act of the enemy."

FEMA has told residents 5 to 20 miles from the plant to stay indoors with windows shut, and Sean Kaufman of the Department of Health and Human Services said pregnant women, children under 6 and people with chronic illnesses in the modeled zone should leave.

Roughly 473,000 people live within 60 miles of the plant, according to a WSWS analysis of 2020 Census data, about 76,000 of them in FEMA's 20-mile shelter zone, spanning Burlington, Fort Madison, Mount Pleasant, Keokuk, Muscatine and Fairfield in Iowa; Macomb, Galesburg and Quincy in Illinois; and Kahoka in Missouri. The radius holds an estimated 25,000 children under five, and about 98,000 people and some 350 farms lie in Wednesday's projected southwest path. The Army's own maps show lead settling above Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) residential clearance levels for floors and window sills, even as the EPA's Tom Crochi called the blast "a short-duration event."

At the news conference, the officials sent to justify the blast conceded facts that amount to a self-indictment of the military. Every institutional check has collapsed, and the capitalist state is preparing to disperse a toxic cloud across working-class communities on the eve of a holiday when tens of millions gather with their families.

Robert Cekada, director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), admitted the nation's stockpile was consolidated in Iowa in 2009, when portions were already more than 60 years old and deterioration had already been noted. He acknowledged the military moved away from lead azide at least 15 years ago because it is so sensitive and so difficult to store.

The Army's own surveillance rules require that potentially hazardous ammunition lots "will be inspected as frequently as necessary," yet the Army has released no inspection records. Col. Aaron Teller, commander of the explosive ordnance disposal group carrying out the blast, told reporters the drums "deteriorated rapidly over the past eight months," precisely the period in which the Army held them under its own emergency permits from the EPA. His sworn court declaration shows what happened. After Army personnel found crystals on 58 of the 68 drums in April, the drums could no longer be safely opened, and American Ordnance skipped the September top-up, letting more of the stabilizing liquid evaporate before winter. Asked whether the drums were full in September, Sakata could say only, "From what we understand, yes."

The procedure that failed is simple and decades old. Since 2009 the lead azide has been kept in plastic drums, which replaced steel drums prone to corrosion and leaks. It is packed in burlap bags in sawdust and submerged in water and ethanol. The water keeps the material desensitized, and the ethanol keeps the water from freezing. Because ethanol evaporates in bunkers with no climate control, which Sakata likened to "above-ground basements," technicians are to inspect the drums monthly through small

© World Socialist Web Site

viewing ports and each September open every drum and top up the liquid. A safety officer at the Savanna Army Depot described the same routine in 1984, warning that the level must be watched because ethanol evaporates and freezing causes spontaneous detonation.

When the level falls, temperature swings turn the exposed lead azide into pure, needle-like crystals that, Cekada said, can detonate simply by breaking under their own weight. By April such crystals coated the drums' outer surfaces, lids, bolts and viewing ports, and turning a single bolt, he said, could set off every drum in the bunker. This September's top-up was skipped, making the one measure that keeps the material stable impossible.

A further question went unasked. If the drums were not full in September 2025, when the Army solicited bids to neutralize the stockpile, the liquid would have evaporated inside them and the crystals would have formed within the barrels, not on their lids and outer surfaces. If they were full but already leaking, the technicians who opened every drum that month should have seen the seepage and recorded it. Either way, crystals coating the outside of 58 of 68 drums by April point to a long-standing process and to inspections that failed to find, or failed to report, what was happening. Only the inspection records, that the Army has not released, can say which.

The colonel dismissed chemical neutralization as "an unsafe method" because the crystals prevented the drums from being opened. Yet an Army contracting officer wrote that the termination of the contractor hired to do it, MuniRem Environmental, "was not based on deficiencies" in its technical approach. MuniRem had proposed spraying the bunker interiors and the outside of the drums to neutralize the hazard before opening them, the very surfaces the colonel described. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found in 2019 that MuniRem's process "can be conducted indoors with little danger to the user or community." The Army itself destroyed half of a Vietnam-era lead azide stockpile chemically at the Savanna depot decades ago.

The acting secretary insisted "every viable option was considered." Yet the same National Academies study found that alternatives to open detonation produce lower emissions. It also found that the Pentagon and the Army gave little priority to funding the disposal of obsolete munitions and had no plan to expand those alternatives. The Army's own neglect created the instability it now cites to justify the blast. The acting secretary's order to inspect every storage facility in the Army's inventory is an admission of systemic failure.

The American Lung Association's guidance makes plain the scale of the public health hazard the detonation will impose on the region. Residents are told to seal door gaps with towels, install MERV 13 furnace filters, run HEPA or homemade box-fan air cleaners, wear N95 masks to scrub outdoor surfaces, keep children off grass and leaves until rain or snow, and watch for vomiting, abdominal pain or seizures. These are instructions for living in a contaminated house, written for households that can afford the equipment and stay home. Moving livestock indoors is "literally not possible," a cattle rancher said, and a retired teacher near the plant said, "I feel like we're guinea pigs."

The Army promises sampling and cleanup, but the Trump administration last year weakened the soil lead standard that triggers urgent residential excavation. A reader in the Midwest recalled that Michigan's polybrominated biphenyl (PBB) contamination, promised to be cleaned up 50 years ago, remains today.

The drive to detonate at any cost exposes the class interests behind it. Ezazul Haque, an environmental toxicologist from John Jay College studying the plume, told the *New York Times* that the only other place to gather such data is in "the middle of a war." The ATF director conceded the stockpile was kept for a wartime "quick draw." The plant is the Army's primary producer of 155 mm artillery shells, most of which, the *Times* reported in 2023, were going to Ukraine, and the Pentagon is racing to replenish munitions consumed in the war on Iran, $22.3 billion worth by the end of June. The Army's Environmental Assessment judged every disposal option by whether it let the plant resume production "as quickly as possible."

The same subordination of human life to profit and war governed the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and was on display again Sunday, when the COP31 climate summit collapsed without an agreement, with the United States not even attending. The real imminent threat is not the decaying drums in Middletown but the capitalist system that treats public health as an expendable cost.

Working people in Iowa, Illinois and Missouri can place no confidence in the courts, the Army or either party. They must demand the release of every inspection record and 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. They must join the fight against imperialist war and the capitalist system that produces it.

Are you a worker at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant, or 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.*

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site