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Iraq War Records Reignite Debate Over US Use of Depleted Uranium

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Records detailing as many as 181,000 rounds of depleted uranium munitions shot in 2003 by American forces in Iraq have been unearthed by researchers, representing the most significant public documentation of the controversial armament's use during the US-led invasion.

The cache, released to George Washington University in 2013 but until now not made public, shows that a majority of the 1,116 sorties carried out by A-10 jet crews during March and April of 2003 were aimed at so-called "soft targets" like cars and trucks, as well as buildings and troop positions. This runs parallel to accounts that the munitions were used on a wide array of targets and not just against the tanks and armoured vehicles that the Pentagon maintains super-penetrative DU munitions are intended for.

The strike logs were originally handed over in response to a Freedom of Information Act request by George Washington University's National Security Archive, but were not evaluated and analysed independently until now.

Earlier this year, the Archive provided the records to researchers at the Dutch NGO PAX, and an advocacy group, the International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons (ICBUW), who were fishing for new information. IRIN obtained both the data and analysis done by PAX and ICBUW, which is contained in a report that will be published later this week.

Confirmation that the munitions were used more indiscriminately than previously acknowledged could renew calls for scientists to look deeper into the health effects of DU on civilian populations in conflict areas. The munitions have been suspected – but never conclusively proven – of causing cancer and birth defects, among other issues.

But as a function of both the continued insecurity in Iraq and an apparent unwillingness on the part of the US government to share data and conduct research, there remains a dearth of epidemiological studies in Iraq. This has created a vacuum in which theories have proliferated about DU, some conspiratorial.

Knowledge that DU was shot across the country, but confusion over where and in what quantities has been frustrating for Iraqis, who are now once more facing a landscape wracked by war, death, and displacement.

Today, the same A-10 planes are once more flying over Iraq, as well as Syria, where they target forces of so-called Islamic State. Though US military press officers say DU has not been fired, there are no Pentagon restrictions against doing so, and contradictory information provided to Congress has raised questions over its possible deployment last

year.

The scientific haze

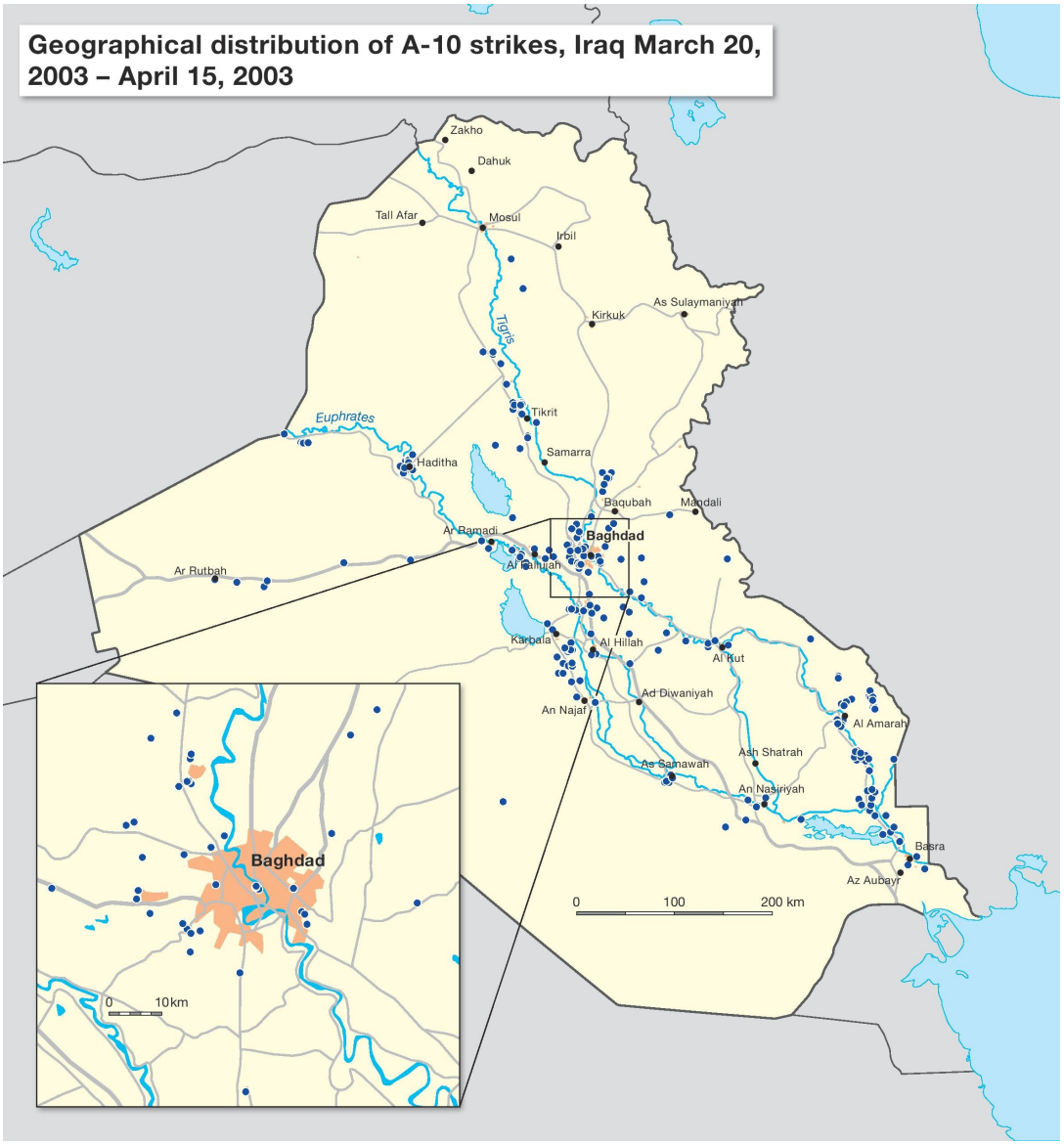
Depleted uranium is what's left over when the highly radioactive substance uranium-235 is enriched – its isotopes are separated in a process that's used to make both nuclear bombs and energy.

DU is less radioactive than the original, but is still considered a toxic chemical and a "radiation health hazard when inside the body", according to the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Many doctors believe any possible negative health effects would most likely stem from the inhalation of particles after a DU weapon is used, though ingestion is also a concern. Though studies have been carried out in laboratory settings and on small numbers of veterans, no extensive medical research has been carried out on civilian populations exposed to DU in conflict areas, including Iraq.

There is "very limited credible direct epidemiological evidence" proving a correlation between DU and health effects in these settings, David Brenner, director of Columbia University's Center for Radiological Research, explained to IRIN. After first finding an ailment to track – for instance lung cancer – Brenner said such a study would need to "identify the exposed population, and then quantify what were the exposures to each individual". That's where the targeting data comes into play.

The data may also be useful for clean-up efforts, if they were ever to be done on a large scale. But only 783 of the 1,116 flight logs contain specific locations, and the US has not released such data for the first Gulf War, when more than 700,000 rounds were fired. Activists have dubbed that conflict "the most toxic" in history.



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Within the United States, DU is tightly controlled, with limits on how much can be stored at military sites, and clean-up protocols are followed at firing ranges. In 1991, when a fire broke out at an American military base in Kuwait and DU munitions contaminated the area, the US government paid for the clean-up and had 11,000 cubic metres of soil removed and shipped back to the US for storage.

Fearing that spent DU rounds could remain dangerous for years, experts say such steps – and similar ones taken in the Balkans after conflicts there – should still be carried out in Iraq. But first of all, authorities would need to know where to look.

“You can’t say meaningful things about the risk of DU if you don’t have a meaningful baseline of where weapons have been used and what steps have been taken,” said Doug Weir, international coordinator at ICBUW.

What the data shows – and what it doesn’t

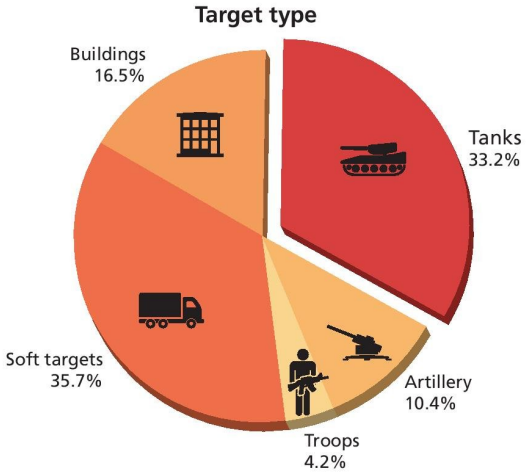
With the release of this new data, researchers are closer to this baseline than ever before, although the picture is still not nearly complete. More than 300,000 DU rounds are

estimated to have been fired during the 2003 war, mostly by the US.

The FOIA release, issued by US Central Command (CENTCOM), increases the number of known sites with potential DU contamination from the 2003 war to more than 1,100 – three times as many as the 350 that officials at Iraq's environment ministry told PAX it was aware of and attempting to clean up.

Some 227,000 rounds of so-called "combat mix" – a combination of mostly Armour-Piercing Incendiary (API) munitions, which contain DU, and High-Explosive Incendiary (HEI) munitions – were reported fired in the sorties. At CENTCOM's own estimated ratio of 4 API to every HEI munition, researchers arrived at a total of 181,606 rounds of DU spent.

While the 2013 FOIA release is extensive, it still doesn't include data from US tanks, or reference to possible contamination emanating from storage sites during the war, or anything about the use of DU by US allies. The UK has provided information related to limited firing by British tanks in 2003 to the UN's environmental agency, UNEP.



The new data shows DU munitions were used on a wide array of targets

A 1975 US Air Force review recommended that DU weapons be siloed only "for use against tanks, armoured personnel carriers or other hard targets". It was suggested that deployment of DU against personnel be prohibited unless no other suitable weapons are available. The new firing records, wrote PAX and ICBUW in their analysis, "clearly demonstrate that the restrictions proposed in the review have been largely ignored". Indeed, only 33.2 percent of the 1,116 targets listed were tanks or armoured vehicles.

"It clearly shows that despite all the arguments given by the US, that the A-10s are needed to defeat armour, most of what was hit were unarmoured targets, and a substantial amount of those targets were near populated areas," Wim Zwijnenburg, senior researcher at PAX, told IRIN.

The legal haze

Unlike mines and cluster munitions, as well as biological or chemical weapons – even blinding lasers – there is no treaty dedicated to regulating the production or use of DU weapons.

“The legality of using DU in armed conflict situations is indeterminate,” Beth Van Schaack, professor of human rights at Stanford University, and a former US State Department official, told IRIN.

The customary international law of armed conflict includes bans on weapons that may be expected to cause long-term harm and prohibitions on methods of warfare that cause superfluous injury and unnecessary suffering. “Absent better data on the immediate and long-term effects of DU on human health and the natural environment, however, it is difficult to apply these norms with any specificity,” said Van Schaack.

In a 2014 UN report, the Iraqi government expressed “its deep concern over the harmful effects” of depleted uranium deployed in conflicts and called for a treaty banning its use and transfer. It called on countries that have used such weapons in conflict to provide local authorities “with detailed information about the location of the areas of use and amounts used,” in order to assess and potentially contain contamination.

Silence and confusion

Pekka Haavisto, who chaired UNEP’s post-conflict work in Iraq during 2003, told IRIN it was commonly known at the time that DU munitions hit buildings and other non-armoured targets with regularity.

Though his team in Iraq was not officially tasked with surveying DU use, signs of it were everywhere, he said. In Baghdad, ministry buildings were marked with damage from DU munitions, which UN experts could clearly make out. By the time Haavisto and his colleagues left Iraq following a 2003 bombing that targeted the Baghdad hotel serving as UN headquarters, he said there were few signs that American-led forces felt obliged to clean up DU or even notify Iraqis of where it had been shot.

“When we dealt with the DU issue, we could see that the militaries who used it had quite strong protection measures for their own personnel,” said Haavisto, currently a member of Parliament in Finland.

“But then the similar logic is not valid when you speak about the people who live in the locations where it has been targeted – that of course was a bit disturbing for me. If you think it can put your military in hazard, of course there are similar hazards for people who after the war are living in similar circumstances.”

Several towns and cities in Iraq, including Fallujah, have reported congenital birth defects that locals suspect may be linked to DU or other war materials. Even if they are not related to to DU use – Fallujah, for instance, barely features in the FOIA release – researchers say full disclosure of DU target location is as important for ruling it out as the cause.

“Not only is [the new] data concerning, but the gaps in it are too,” said Jeena Shah, a professor of law at Rutgers University who has helped advocates try to pry targeting logs from the US government. Both US veterans and Iraqis, she said, need all data on toxic

munitions, so authorities can “conduct remediation of toxic sites to protect future generations of Iraqis, and provide necessary medical care to those harmed by the use of these materials”.

Is DU Back?

This week, a Pentagon spokesperson confirmed to IRIN that there is no “policy restriction on the use of DU in Counter-ISIL operations” in either Iraq or Syria.

And while the US Air Force repeatedly denied that DU munitions have been used by A-10s during those operations, Air Force officials have given a different version of events to at least one member of Congress. In May, at the request of a constituent, the office of Arizona Representative Martha McSally – a former A-10 pilot with A-10s based in her district – asked if DU munitions had been used in either Syria or Iraq. An Air Force congressional liaison officer replied in an email that American forces had in fact shot 6,479 rounds of “Combat Mix” in Syria over two days – “the 18th and 23rd of Nov 2015”. The officer explained the mix “has a 5 to 1 ratio of API (DU) to HEI”.

“So with that said, we have expended ~5,100 rounds of API,” he wrote, referring to DU rounds.

Those dates fell within an intense period of US-led strikes against IS oil infrastructure and transport vehicles, dubbed “Tidal Wave II”. According to coalition press statements, hundreds of oil trucks were destroyed in the second half of November in Syria, including 283 alone on 22 November.

The content of the emails and the Air Force’s response were originally forwarded to local anti-nuclear activist Jack Cohen-Joppa, who shared them with IRIN. McSally’s office later confirmed the content of both. Reached this week, multiple US officials could not explain the discrepancy.

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