

Iraqi Doctors Call Depleted Uranium Use “Genocide”

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Contamination from depleted uranium (DU) munitions is causing sharp rises in congenital birth defects, cancer cases and other illnesses throughout much of Iraq, according to numerous Iraqi doctors.

Iraqi doctors and prominent scientists believe that DU contamination is also connected to the emergence of diseases that were not previously seen in Iraq, such as new illnesses in the kidney, lungs and liver, as well as total immune system collapse. DU contamination may also be connected to the steep rise in leukaemia, renal and anaemia cases, especially among children, being reported throughout many Iraqi governorates.

There has also been a dramatic jump in miscarriages and premature births among Iraqi women, particularly in areas where heavy US military operations occurred, such as Fallujah during 2004, and Basra during the 1991 US war on Iraq.

It is estimated that the United States used 350 tons of DU munitions in Iraq during the 1991 war, and 1,200 tons during its 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation.

Official Iraqi government statistics show that, prior to the outbreak of the first Gulf War in 1991, the country's rate of cancer cases was 40 out of 100,000 people. By 1995, it had increased to 800 out of 100,000 people, and, by 2005, it had doubled to at least 1,600 out of 100,000 people. Current estimates show the trend continuing.

The actual rate of cancer and other diseases is likely to be much higher than even these figures suggest, due to a lack of adequate documentation, research and reporting of cases.

“Cancer statistics are hard to come by, since only 50 percent of the health care in Iraq is public,” Dr. Salah Haddad of the Iraqi Society for Health Administration and Promotion told Truthout. “The other half of our health care is provided by the private sector, and that sector is deficient in their reporting of statistics. Hence, all of our statistics in Iraq must be multiplied by two. Any official numbers are likely only half of the real number.”

“Genocide”

“The world should know that Iraqi people were the victims of the aggression inflicted by the use of DU munitions by the American and British troops during these wars, and this is genocide,” Dr. Jawad al-Ali, a consultant physician and oncologist, told Truthout.

Al-Ali, an expert oncologist at the Basra Cancer Treatment Center, member of the Iraqi Cancer Board and a member of the Basra Cancer Research Group, estimates that there are

300 sites throughout Iraq that are contaminated with radiation from the DU munitions.

He attributes the extreme rates of birth defects in Fallujah to the US use of DU there during its two sieges of the city in 2004.

An epidemiological study titled “Cancer, Infant Mortality and Birth Sex-Ratio in Fallujah, Iraq 2005-2009” involved a door-to-door survey of more than 700 Fallujah households. The research team interviewed Fallujans about abnormally high rates of cancer and birth defects.

One of the authors of the study, chemist Chris Busby, [said](#) that the Fallujah health crisis represented “the highest rate of genetic damage in any population ever studied.”

The crisis in Iraq is bad enough that the country [recently called for a global treaty ban on all DU weapons](#). At this time, it is unknown whether DU munitions are still being used in Iraq, but it seems unlikely they are as US attacks are presently limited to airstrikes, while most DU in the past was used in rifle rounds and tank shells.

In a report submitted to the UN Secretary General in August, Iraq “expresses its deep concern over the harmful effects of the use in wars and armed struggles of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium, which constitute a danger to human beings and the environment (the air and the soil).”

In September, the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York submitted a [Freedom of Information Act \(FOIA\) request](#) to the US Department of Defense (DOD) and the State Department on behalf of itself and Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), seeking the firing coordinates of weapons used in Iraq that contained depleted uranium.

According to a 2013 report by the Netherlands-based organization Pax Christi, Iraq has been subject to the [largest use of DU munitions](#) of all areas of conflict and test sites, conservatively estimated to be at least 440 metric tons – though the UN Environment Program has estimated an amount up to five times that based on satellite imagery.

Meanwhile, doctors in Fallujah continue to witness the aforementioned steep rise in severe congenital birth defects, including children being born with two heads, children born with only one eye, multiple tumors, disfiguring facial and body deformities, and complex nervous system problems.

Residents there have told Truthout that many families are too scared to have children, as an alarming number of women are experiencing consecutive miscarriages and infant deaths with critically deformed and ill newborns.

Dr. Samira Alani, a pediatric specialist at Fallujah General Hospital, has taken a personal interest in investigating an explosion of congenital abnormalities that have mushroomed in the wake of the US sieges since 2005.

“We have all kinds of defects now, ranging from congenital heart disease to severe physical abnormalities, both in numbers you cannot imagine,” Alani told Truthout at her office in the hospital last year, while sharing countless photos of shocking birth defects.

Alani also co-authored a study in 2010 that showed the rate of heart defects in Fallujah to be 13 times the rate found in Europe. And, for birth defects involving the nervous system,

the rate was calculated to be 33 times that found in Europe for the same number of births.

In pursuit of answers, Alani visited Japan, where she met with Japanese doctors who study birth defect rates they believe are related to radiation from the US nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Alani was told birth defect incidence rates in Hiroshima and Nagasaki are currently between 1 and 2 percent. Alani's log of cases of birth defects amounts to a rate of 14.7 percent of all babies born in Fallujah, more than 14 times the rate in the effected areas of Japan.

In March 2013, Alani informed Truthout that the incident rates of congenital malformations remained around 14 percent. Alani has had to flee the city due to bombardments from the Iraqi government, including shellings that targeted clinics and hospitals, as [Truthout previously reported](#).

Basra

Iraq's southern city of Basra was heavily bombarded with DU munitions by US warplanes during the 1991 war.

Al-Ali was heavily involved in working on two birth defect studies carried out in the wake of that war.

"The types of birth defects were hydrocephaly [an abnormal buildup of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) in the ventricles of the brain], anencephaly [the absence of a large part of the brain and the skull], cleft lip and phocomelia [loss of limbs]," al-Ali told Truthout. "Other consequences are the cancers which increased three-fold during the last two decades."

He said that clusters of cancers occurring at higher incidence within the same family were another new phenomenon seen in Iraq only after the 1991 and 2003 wars.

"Other diseases related to effects of DU were the kidney failure of unknown cause and stone formation," he added. "Respiratory problems like asthma and also myopathy and neuropathy are now very common as well."

In Babil Province in southern Iraq, cancer rates have been escalating at alarming rates since 2003. Dr. Sharif al-Alwachi, the head of the Babil Cancer Center, blames the use of depleted uranium weapons by US forces during and following the 2003 invasion.

"The environment could be contaminated by chemical weapons and depleted uranium from the aftermath of the war on Iraq," Alwachi told Truthout. "The air, soil and water are all polluted by these weapons, and as they come into contact with human beings they become poisonous. This is new to our region, and people are suffering here."

According to a study published in the Bulletin of Environmental Contamination and Toxicology, there was a sevenfold increase in the number of birth defects in Basra between 1994 and 2003.

In addition, never before has such a high rate of neural tube defects ("open back") been recorded in babies as in Basra, and the rate continues to rise. According to the study, the number of hydrocephalus ("water on the brain") cases among newborns is six times as high in Basra as it is in the United States.

Childhood cancer also appears to be unusually prevalent in Basra.

“We have noticed bouts of malignant tumors affecting children’s limbs,” an Iraqi doctor who has worked in various parts of the country for 20 years told Truthout. He requested anonymity for security reasons. “These malignancies are usually of very aggressive types and in the view of the shortage of facilities we are running in our hospitals they usually have a fatal outcome.”

His prognosis was grim.

“The only help we can provide to those children is amputation, which sometimes does nothing but prolonging their suffering, in addition to the great psychological impact on both the child and the parents,” he said. “We know that it is possible to save most of these children in specialized oncology centers by advanced salvage surgery, with the attendant chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Unfortunately, this seems to be a kind fantasy for our government and health administrations, which are currently busy with the large amount of trauma overwhelming our hospitals’ resources.”

Other Struggles

Al-Ali, Alani and the anonymous doctor all agreed that the two biggest challenges they face today are security and the lack of adequate supplies and equipment.

“Since 2003 and just [a] few months after the American occupation of the country, we witnessed the emergence of gangs and mafias specialized in threatening and kidnapping for ransoms and assassinations,” the anonymous doctor told Truthout. “Most of these groups work under Islamic logos, yet their affiliations are ambiguous. Amongst the target victims were doctors and their families.”

He himself had to hide in hospitals and the homes of relatives for more than half a year after he and his family was threatened.

Al-Ali said the major challenge in the south of Iraq now is the difficulty in obtaining new medicines – things like equipment for PET scans – “and also the advanced centers for bone marrow transplantation.”

The anonymous doctor explained that the security situation has degraded from bad to worse.

He explained that when Mosul was under control of the Iraqi military, military personnel regularly threatened doctors.

Now, of course, doctors across the country are under a new security threat, with militants affiliated with the Islamic State now in control of many areas of Iraq.

“The greatest concern now is the future,” al-Ali said. “After the many blind airstrikes that destroyed civilian housing and sacrificed innocent lives, we believe that the war against ISIS is going to be a process of retaliation against Sunni people in an indiscriminate way. This is how things go on in Iraq, terrorism against terrorism, blood for blood, destruction for destruction, and the vicious circle goes on.”

Ultimately, he, like many Iraqis today, blames the United States and Iran for triggering and

maintaining the chaos that is engulfing Iraq.

The violence contributes to an exodus of doctors from the country, as more than half of all medical personnel in Iraq have fled the country since 2003.

“Doctors are trying to escape outside the country to save themselves and their families,” al-Ali added. “Doctors that have remained in the cities are still there for humanitarian reasons.”

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