The Horror of Depleted Uranium is not limited to Iraq

By James Denver
Global Research, May 06, 2005
caduceus.info 16 June 2005

Region: Middle East & North Africa
Theme: Militarization and WMD
In-depth Report: Depleted Uranium

DU may well be at our doorsteps. The information which some governments are concealing is presented here.

> American Use Of DU is "A crime against humanity which may, in the eyes of historians, rank with the worst atrocities of all time." US Iraq Military Vets "are on DU death row, waiting to die."

"I'm horrified. The people out there – the Iraqis, the media and the troops – risk the most appalling ill health. And the radiation from depleted uranium can travel literally anywhere. It's going to destroy the lives of thousands of children, all over the world. We all know how far radiation can travel. Radiation from Chernobyl reached Wales and in Britain you sometimes get red dust from the Sahara on your car."

The speaker is not some alarmist doom-sayer. He is Dr. Chris Busby, the British radiation expert, Fellow of the University of Liverpool in the Faculty of Medicine and UK representative on the European Committee on Radiation Risk, talking about the best-kept secret of this war: the fact that, by illegally using hundreds of tons of depleted uranium (DU) against Iraq, Britain and America have gravely endangered not only the Iraqis but the whole world.

For these weapons have released deadly, carcinogenic and mutagenic, radioactive particles in such abundance that-whipped up by sandstorms and carried on trade winds – there is no corner of the globe they cannot penetrate-including Britain. For the wind has no boundaries and time is on their side: the radioactivity persists for over 4,500,000,000 years and can cause cancer, leukemia, brain damage, kidney failure, and extreme birth defects – killing millions of every age for centuries to come. A crime against humanity which may, in the eyes of historians, rank with the worst atrocities of all time.

These weapons have released deadly, carcinogenic and mutagenic, radioactive particles in such abundance that there is no corner of the globe they cannot penetrate – including Britain . Yet, officially, no crime has been committed. For this story is a dirty story in which the facts have been concealed from those who needed them most. It is also a story we need to know if the people of Iraq are to get the medical care they desperately need, and if our troops, returning from Iraq, are not to suffer as terribly as the veterans of other conflicts in which depleted uranium was used.

A Dirty Tyson

‘Depleted’ uranium is in many ways a misnomer. For ‘depleted’ sounds weak. The only weak thing about depleted uranium is its price. It is dirt cheap, toxic, waste from nuclear power plants and bomb production. However, uranium is one of earth’s heaviest elements and DU packs a Tyson’s punch, smashing through tanks, buildings and bunkers with equal ease, spontaneously catching fire as it does so, and burning people alive. ‘Crispy critters’ is what US servicemen call those unfortunate enough to be close. And, when John Pilger encountered children killed at a greater distance he wrote: “The children’s skin had folded back, like parchment, revealing veins and burnt flesh that seeped blood, while the eyes, intact, stared straight ahead. I vomited.” (Daily Mirror)

The millions of radioactive uranium oxide particles released when it burns can kill just as surely, but far more terribly. They can even be so tiny they pass through a gas mask, making protection against them impossible. Yet, small is not beautiful. For these invisible killers indiscriminately attack men, women, children and even babies in the womb-and do the gravest harm of all to children and unborn babies.

A Terrible Legacy

Doctors in Iraq have estimated that birth defects have increased by 2-6 times, and 3-12 times as many children have developed cancer and leukaemia since 1991. Moreover, a report published in The Lancet in 1998 said that as many as 500 children a day are dying from these sequels to war and sanctions and that the death rate for Iraqi children under 5 years of age increased from 23 per 1000 in 1989 to 166 per thousand in 1993. Overall, cases of lymphoblastic leukemia more than quadrupled with other cancers also increasing ‘at an alarming rate’. In men, lung, bladder, bronchus, skin, and stomach cancers showed the highest increase. In women, the highest increases were in breast and bladder cancer, and non-Hodgkin lymphoma.1

On hearing that DU had been used in the Gulf in 1991, the UK Atomic Energy Authority sent the Ministry of Defense a special report on the potential damage to health and the environment. It said that it could cause half a million additional cancer deaths in Iraq over 10 years. In that war the authorities only admitted to using 320 tons of DU-although the Dutch charity LAKA estimates the true figure is closer to 800 tons. Many times that may have been spread across Iraq by this year’s war. The devastating damage all this DU will do to the health and fertility of the people of Iraq now, and for generations to come, is beyond imagining.

The radioactivity persists for over 4,500,000,000 years killing millions of every age for centuries to come. This is a crime against humanity which may rank with the worst atrocities of all time.

We must also count the numberless thousands of miscarried babies. Nobody knows how many Iraqis have died in the womb since DU contaminated their world. But it is suggested that troops who were only exposed to DU for the brief period of the war were still excreting uranium in their semen 8 years later and some had 100 times the so-called ‘safe limit’ of uranium in their urine. The lack of government interest in the plight of veterans of the 1991 war is reflected in a lack of academic research on the impact of DU but informal research has found a high incidence of birth defects in their children and that the wives of men who served in Iraq have three times more miscarriages than the wives of servicemen who did

not go there.

Since DU darkened the land Iraq has seen birth defects which would break a heart of stone: babies with terribly foreshortened limbs, with their intestines outside their bodies, with huge bulging tumors where their eyes should be, or with a single eye-like Cyclops, or without eyes, or without limbs, and even without heads. Significantly, some of the defects are almost unknown outside textbooks showing the babies born near A-bomb test sites in the Pacific.

Doctors report that many women no longer say 'Is it a girl or a boy?' but simply, 'Is it normal, doctor?' Moreover this terrible legacy will not end. The genes of their parents may have been damaged for ever, and the damaging DU dust is ever-present.

Blue on Blue

What the governments of America and Britain have done to the people of Iraq they have also done to their own soldiers, in both wars. And they have done it knowingly. For the battlefields have been thick with DU and soldiers have had to enter areas heavily contaminated by bombing. Moreover, their bodies have not only been assaulted by DU but also by a vaccination regime which violated normal protocols, experimental vaccines, nerve agent pills, and organophosphate pesticides in their tents. Yet, though the hazards of DU were known, British and American troops were not warned of its dangers. Nor were they given thorough medical checks on their return-even though identifying it quickly might have made it possible to remove some of it from their body. Then, when a growing number became seriously ill, and should have been sent to top experts in radiation damage and neurotoxins, many were sent to a psychiatrist.

Over 200,000 US troops who returned from the 1991 war are now invalided out with ailments officially attributed to service in Iraq -that's 1 in 3. In contrast, the British government's failure to fully assess the health of returning troops, or to monitor their health, means no one even knows how many have died or become gravely ill since their return. However, Gulf veterans' associations say that, of 40,000 or so fighting fit men and women who saw active service, at least 572 have died prematurely since coming home and 5000 may be ill. An alarming number are thought to have taken their own lives, unable to bear the torment of the innumerable ailments which have combined to take away their career, their sexuality, their ability to have normal children, and even their ability to breathe or walk normally. As one veteran puts it, they are 'on DU death row, waiting to die'.

Whatever other factors there may be, some of their illnesses are strikingly similar to those of Iraqis exposed to DU dust. For example, soldiers have also fathered children without eyes. And, in a group of eight servicemen whose babies lack eyes seven are known to have been directly exposed to DU dust.

They too have fathered children with stunted arms, and rare abnormalities classically associated with radiation damage. They too seem prone to cancer and leukemia. Tellingly, so are EU soldiers who served as peacekeepers in the Balkans, where DU was also used. Indeed their leukemia rate has been so high that several EU governments have protested at the use of DU.

The Vital Evidence

Despite all that evidence of the harm done by DU, governments on both sides of the Atlantic have repeatedly claimed that as it emits only 'low level' radiation DU is harmless. Award-winning scientist, Dr. Rosalie Bertell who has led UN medical commissions, has studied 'low-level' radiation for 30 years. 2 She has found that uranium oxide particles have more than enough power to harm cells, and describes their pulses of radiation as hitting surrounding cells 'like flashes of lightning' again and again in a single second.2 Like many scientists worldwide who have studied this type of radiation, she has found that such 'lightning strikes' can damage DNA and cause cell mutations which lead to cancer.

Moreover, these particles can be taken up by body fluids and travel through the body, damaging more than one organ. To compound all that, Dr. Bertell has found that this particular type of radiation can cause the body's communication systems to break down, leading to malfunctions in many vital organs of the body and to many medical problems. A striking fact, since many veterans of the first Gulf war suffer from innumerable, seemingly unrelated, ailments.

In addition, recent research by Eric Wright, Professor of Experimental Haematology at Dundee University, and others, have shown two ways in which such radiation can do far more damage than has been thought. The first is that a cell which seems unharmed by radiation can produce cells with diverse mutations several cell generations later. (And mutations are at the root of cancer and birth defects.) This 'radiation-induced genomic instability' is compounded by 'the bystander effect' by which cells mutate in unison with others which have been damaged by radiation-rather as birds swoop and turn in unison. Put together, these two mechanisms can greatly increase the damage done by a single source of radiation, such as a DU particle. Moreover, it is now clear that there are marked genetic differences in the way individuals respond to radiation-with some being far more likely to develop cancer than others. So the fact that some veterans of the first Gulf war seem relatively unharmed by their exposure to DU in no way proves that DU did not damage others.

The Price of Truth

That the evidence from Iraq and from our troops, and the research findings of such experts, have been ignored may be no accident. A US report, leaked in late 1995, allegedly says, 'The potential for health effects from DU exposure is real; however it must be viewed in perspective… the financial implications of long-term disability payments and healthcare costs would be excessive.'3

Clearly, with hundreds of thousands gravely ill in Iraq and at least a quarter of a million UK and US troops seriously ill, huge disability claims might be made not only against the governments of Britain and America if the harm done by DU were acknowledged. There might also be huge claims against companies making DU weapons and some of their directors are said to be extremely close to the White House. How close they are to Downing Street is a matter for speculation, but arms sales makes a considerable contribution to British trade. So the massive whitewashing of DU over the past 12 years, and the way that governments have failed to test returning troops, seemed to disbelieve them, and washed their hands of them, may be purely to save money.

The possibility that financial considerations have led the governments of Britain and America to cynically avoid taking responsibility for the harm they have done not only to the people of Iraq but to their own troops may seem outlandish. Yet DU weapons weren't used

by the other side and no other explanation fits the evidence. For, in the days before Britain and America first used DU in war its hazards were no secret.4 One American study in 1990 said DU was 'linked to cancer when exposures are internal, [and to] chemical toxicity-causing kidney damage'. While another openly warned that exposure to these particles under battlefield conditions could lead to cancers of the lung and bone, kidney damage, non-malignant lung disease, neuro-cognitive disorders, chromosomal damage and birth defects.5

A Culture of Denial

In 1996 and 1997 UN Human Rights Tribunals condemned DU weapons for illegally breaking the Geneva Convention and classed them as 'weapons of mass destruction' 'incompatible with international humanitarian and human rights law'. Since then, following leukemia in European peacekeeping troops in the Balkans and Afghanistan (where DU was also used), the EU has twice called for DU weapons to be banned.

Yet, far from banning DU, America and Britain stepped up their denials of the harm from this radioactive dust as more and more troops from the first Gulf war and from action and peacekeeping in the Balkans and Afghanistan have become seriously ill. This is no coincidence. In 1997, while citing experiments, by others, in which 84 percent of dogs exposed to inhaled uranium died of cancer of the lungs, Dr. Asaf Durakovic, then Professor of Radiology and Nuclear Medicine at Georgetown University in Washington was quoted as saying, 'The [US government's] Veterans Administration asked me to lie about the risks of incorporating depleted uranium in the human body.' He concluded, 'uranium does cause cancer, uranium does cause mutation, and uranium does kill. If we continue with the irresponsible contamination of the biosphere, and denial of the fact that human life is endangered by the deadly isotope uranium, then we are doing disservice to ourselves, disservice to the truth, disservice to God and to all generations who follow.' Not what the authorities wanted to hear and his research was suddenly blocked.

During 12 years of ever-growing British whitewash the authorities have abolished military hospitals, where there could have been specialized research on the effects of DU and where expertise in treating DU victims could have built up. And, not content with the insult of suggesting the gravely disabling symptoms of Gulf veterans are imaginary they have refused full pensions to many. For, despite all the evidence to the contrary, the current House of Commons briefing paper on DU hazards says 'it is judged that any radiation effects from possible exposures are extremely unlikely to be a contributory factor to the illnesses currently being experienced by some Gulf war veterans.' Note how over a quarter of a million sick and dying US and UK vets are called 'some'.

The Way Ahead

Britain and America not only used DU in this year's Iraq war, they dramatically increased its use-from a minimum of 320 tons in the previous war to at minimum of 1500 tons in this one. And this time the use of DU wasn't limited to anti-tank weapons-as it had largely been in the previous Gulf war-but was extended to the guided missiles, large bunker busters and big 2000-pound bombs used in Iraq 's cities. This means that Iraq 's cities have been blanketed in lethal particles-any one of which can cause cancer or deform a child. In addition, the use of DU in huge bombs which throw the deadly particles higher and wider in huge plumes of smoke means that billions of deadly particles have been carried high into the air-again and again and again as the bombs rained down-ready to be swept worldwide by the winds.

The Royal Society has suggested the solution is massive decontamination in Iraq . That could only scratch the surface. For decontamination is hugely expensive and, though it may reduce the risks in some of the worst areas, it cannot fully remove them. For DU is too widespread on land and water. How do you clean up every nook and cranny of a city the size of Baghdad ? How can they decontaminate a whole country in which microscopic particles, which cannot be detected with a normal geiger counter, are spread from border to border? And how can they clean up all the countries downwind of Iraq -and, indeed, the world?

So there are only two things we can do to mitigate this crime against humanity. The first is to provide the best possible medical care for the people of Iraq , for our returning troops and for those who served in the last Gulf war and, through that, minimize their suffering. The second is to relegate war, and the production and sale of weapons, to the scrap heap of history-along with slavery and genocide. Then, and only then, will this crime against humanity be expunged, and the tragic deaths from this war truly bring freedom to the people of Iraq , and of the world.

James Denver writes and broadcasts internationally on science and technology.

The original source of this article is caduceus.info
Copyright © James Denver, caduceus.info, 2005

Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page

Become a Member of Global Research

Articles by: James Denver

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca