

DEPLETED URANIUM WEAPONS - WHY THEY MUST BE BANNED

Depleted Uranium is a chemically toxic, pyrophoric, heavy metal. When it spontaneously ignites on impact (as it does when used in shells and bombs), the tiny particles of Uranium Oxide which are formed can be carried in the air over long distances, and emit alpha, beta and gamma radiation. These tiny particles can easily be ingested, can lodge in the lung tissue, or pass through the lungs into the blood and lymphatic systems. Although DU is not as radioactive as Uranium-235, British radiation expert, Roger Coghill, has observed that a single particle of DU lodged in a lymph node can devastate the entire immune system. It is obvious that such weapons are "indiscriminate" in their destructive effects, and their use contravenes UN Resolutions 1996/16 and 1997/36 as well as many other international treaties.



It has been argued by some that DU is non-hazardous because of its relative stability in relation to Uranium-235, but although DU itself has a very long half-life (4.5 billion years), it poses a significant risk because of the very short half-lives of its 'daughter' isotopes Thorium-234 and Protoactinium-234 (24 days and 6.75 hours respectively). A 2 micrometer diameter particle of Uranium Oxide presents a "significant radiological hazard to local tissue" according to the publication *Radioactive Times*.

But does Depleted Uranium really contaminate large areas in former war zones? There is no question that where DU weapons have been used, widespread environmental contamination has resulted. For example, the 2nd United Nations Environment Programme Report on DU in the Balkans examined 6 sites over 2 years after the end of the conflict, finding "widespread DU contamination" in 5 of the 6 sites, all of which were supposed to have already been 'cleaned up'. The Report notes: "This indicates that during the conflict, DU dust was widely dispersed into the environment following the explosion of DU rounds." At 2 of the 6 sites, airborne DU particles were also detected, showing that the airborne risk from DU continues long after the initial impact and dispersal.

In spite of this, the UNEP Report concludes that "No alarming levels of DU contamination were detected," prompting the writer of an article in *CADU NEWS* to ask, "How high do the risks have to be to be considered too high? How much radiological and toxic pollution is too much?" A new study begins to answer these questions. The research, reported in *New Scientist*, has found worrying new evidence of the genetic damage DU can cause "even at levels deemed so low as to be non-toxic." The research findings suggest that the toxic and radioactive qualities of DU somehow reinforce one another to give a greater effect than a simple sum of the two separate effects.

Apart from its extremely high density and pyrophoric qualities, one of the major attractions of DU for military applications is the fact that it is ridiculously cheap and available in vast quantities. CADU's information page on its website contains the following information. "It [DU] is now given practically free of charge to the military and arms manufacturers... Making weapons and other items out of the waste products of the nuclear business is a very 'convenient', very cheap, but potentially deadly way to get rid of nuclear waste."

Depleted Uranium is a major issue for veterans of conflicts in which these warheads have been used. It is also a major issue for the innocent civilians who live in former war zones, and it is an issue for innocent civilians in the UK, who are unfortunate enough to live in areas close to where DU weapons are tested. DU munitions are tested at Kirkcudbright Military Range in Scotland, and there are concerns about clusters of cancers and leukaemias amongst people who live close to the Range. According to *Heddwch*, the magazine of CND Cymru, the Atomic Weapons establishment has found levels of radioactivity in these areas to be eight times the normal background count.

But the last word should go to Major Doug Rokke, former head of the Pentagon's Depleted Uranium Project, who campaigns tirelessly against Depleted Uranium weapons since he has seen first hand their devastating effects. Rokke has said:

"The US Army made me their expert. I went into the project with the total intent to ensure they could use uranium munitions in war, because I'm a warrior. What I saw as Director of the project, doing the research and working with my own medical conditions and everybody else's, led me to one conclusion: **Uranium munitions must be banned from the planet, for eternity.**"

More information from:



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