

## **U.S. Invasion Turned Iraqi Cities Hot with Depleted Uranium**

Has the U.S. use of depleted-uranium weapons turned Iraq into a radioactive danger area for both Iraqis and occupation troops?

This question has already had serious consequences. In hot spots in downtown Baghdad months after the March 2003 invasion, reporters have measured radiation levels that are 1,000 to 1,900 times higher than normal background radiation levels.

It has also opened a debate in the Netherlands parliament and media as 1,100 Dutch troops in Kuwait prepare to enter Iraq as part of the U.S./British-led occupation forces. The Dutch are concerned about the danger of radioactive poisoning and radiation sickness in Iraq.

Washington has assured the Dutch government that it used no DU weapons near Al-Samawah, the town where Dutch troops will be stationed. But Dutch journalists and anti-war forces have already found holes in the U.S. stories, according to an article on the Radio Free Europe website.

DU-caused radiation had already raised alarms in Europe after studies showed increased rates of cancers, respiratory ailments and other disabilities of occupation troops from NATO countries stationed in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

In general, the health and environmental dangers of weapons made with DU radioactive waste have received far more attention in Europe than in the U.S.

In this year's war on Iraq, the Pentagon used its radioactive arsenal mainly in the urban centers, rather than in desert battle-

fields as in 1991. Many hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people and U.S. soldiers, along with British, Polish, Japanese and Dutch soldiers sent to join the occupation, will suffer the consequences. The real extent of injuries, chronic illness, long-term disabilities and genetic birth defects won't be apparent for five to 10 years.

**By now, half of all the 697,000 U.S. soldiers involved in the 1991 war have reported serious illnesses.**

According to the American Gulf War Veterans Association, more than 30 percent of these soldiers are chronically ill and are receiving disability benefits from the Veterans Administration. Such a high occurrence of various symptoms has led to the illnesses being named Gulf War Syndrome.

This number of disabled veterans is shockingly high. Most are in their mid-thirties and should be in the prime of health. Before sending troops to the Gulf region, the military had already sifted out those with disabilities or chronic health problems from asthma, diabetes, heart conditions, cancers and birth defects.

### **A long-term problem**

The impact of tons of radioactive waste polluting major urban centers may seem a distant problem to Iraqis now trying to survive in the chaos of military occupation. They must cope with power outages during the intense heat of summer, door-to-door searches, arbitrary arrests, civilians routinely shot at roadblocks, outbreaks of cholera and dysentery from untreated water, untreated sewage and uncollected garbage, more than half the work force unemployed, and a lack of food — which before the war was distributed by the Baathist regime.

But along with these current threats are long-range problems. Around the world a growing number of scientific organizations and studies have linked Gulf War Syndrome and the high rate of assorted and mysterious sicknesses to radiation poisoning from weapons made with depleted uranium.

Scott Peterson, a staff writer for the Christian Science Monitor, reported on May 15 about taking Geiger counter readings at several sites in Baghdad. Near the Republican Palace where U.S. troops stood guard and over 1,000 employees walked in and out of the building, his radiation readings were the “hottest” in Iraq, at nearly 1,900 times background radiation levels. Spent shell casings still littered the ground.

At a roadside vegetable stand selling fresh bunches of parsley, mint and onions outside Baghdad, children played on a burnt-out Iraqi tank. The reporter’s Geiger counter registered nearly 1,000 times normal background radiation. The U.S. uses armor-piercing shells coated with DU to destroy tanks.

The Aug. 4, 2003, the Seattle Post Intelligencer reported elevated radiation levels at six sites from Basra to Baghdad. One destroyed tank near Baghdad had 1,500 times the normal background radiation. “The Pentagon and the United Nations estimate that the U.S. and Britain used 1,100 to 2,200 tons of armor-piercing shells made of depleted uranium during attacks on Iraq in March and April — far more than the 375 tons used in the 1991 Gulf War,” wrote the Post Intelligencer.

The Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle analyzed swabs from bullet holes in Iraqi tanks and confirmed elevated radiation levels.

### **Radioactive and toxic**

The extremely dense DU shells easily penetrate steel armor and burn on impact. The fire releases microscopic, radioactive and toxic dust particles of uranium oxide that travel with the wind and can be inhaled or ingested. They also spread contamination by seeping into the land and water.

**In the human body, DU may cause harm to the internal organs due both to its chemical toxicity as a heavy metal and its release of radiation.**

An otherwise useless by-product of the uranium-enrichment process, DU is attractive to military contractors because it is so cheap, often offered for free by the government.

According to the Uranium Medical Research Center, the toxic and radiological effects of uranium contamination may weaken the immune system. They may cause acute respiratory conditions like pneumonia, flu-like symptoms and severe coughs, renal or gastrointestinal illnesses.

Dr. Asaf Durakovic of UMRC explains that the initial symptoms will be mostly neurological, showing up as headaches, weakness, dizziness and muscle fatigue. The long-term effects are cancers and other radiation-related illnesses, such as chronic fatigue syndrome, joint and muscle pain, rashes, neurological and/or nerve damage, mood disturbances, infections, lung and kidney damage, vision problems, auto-immune deficiencies and severe skin conditions. It also causes increases in miscarriages, maternal mortality and genetic birth defects.

For years the government described Gulf War Syndrome as a post-traumatic stress disorder. It was labeled a psychological problem or simply dismissed as mysterious unrelated ailments. In this same way the Pentagon and the Veterans Administration treated the health problems of Vietnam vets suffering from Agent Orange poisoning.

### **The coverup**

The U.S. government denies that DU weapons can cause sickness. But before the first Gulf War, where DU weapons were used extensively, the Pentagon's own internal reports warned that the radiation and heavy metal of DU weapons could cause kidney, lung and liver damage and increased rates of cancer.

**Ignoring these dangers, the Pentagon went on to use these weapons, which gave it a big advantage in tank battles. But it denied publicly that DU use was related to**

**the enormously high rate of sicknesses among GIs following the war.**

Today the Pentagon plays an even more duplicitous role. It continues to assert that there are no “known” health problems associated with DU. But Army training manuals require anyone who comes within 75 feet of any DU-contaminated equipment or terrain to wear respiratory and skin protection.

The manuals say that “contamination will make food and water unsafe for consumption.” According to the Army Environmental Policy Institute, holding a spent DU round exposes a person to about 200 rems per hour, or twice the annual radiation exposure limit.

In March and April 2003, U.S. and British forces fired hundreds of thousands of DU rounds in dense urban areas. Superfine uranium oxide particles were blown about in dust storms. Yet the Pentagon refuses to track, report or mark off where DU was fired. There is no way Iraqis or the occupying soldiers can keep 75 feet away or use respiratory and skin protection in 120-degree heat.

The American Gulf War Veterans Association (AGWVA) reports that suffering veterans are receiving little, if any, medical treatment for their illnesses. “Whenever veterans become ill, the term ‘mystery illness’ seems to be the first and often the only diagnosis that is ever made. Veterans are then left to fend for themselves, sick and unable to work, with little hope of a normal life again.”

Iraq’s National Ministry of Health organized two international conferences to present data on the relationship between the high incidence of cancer and the use of DU weapons. It produced detailed epidemiological reports and statistical studies. This data showed a six-fold increase in breast cancer, a five-fold increase in lung cancer and a 16-fold increase in ovarian cancer.

Because of the U.S.-imposed sanctions, Iraqi doctors and scientists were barred from presenting their research papers in most of the world.

Doug Rokke of AGWVA, former head of the U.S. Army DU Project, who is seriously ill with respiratory problems, has been campaigning against the use of DU. Rokke reports that U.S. troops presently in Iraq are already falling sick with a series of Gulf War Syndrome symptoms.

The AGWVA says the Department of Defense has information regarding “mystery” deaths of soldiers in this latest war and the emergence of a mysterious pneumonia that has sickened at least 100 men and women.

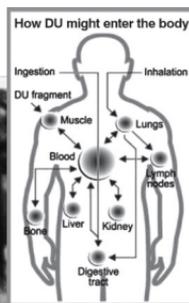
### **U.S. position: no clean-up**

While the U.K. has admitted that British Challenger tanks expended some 1.9 tons of DU ammunition during major combat operations in Iraq in 2003, the U.S. has refused to disclose specific information about whether and where it used DU during the 2003 campaign. It also is refusing to let a team from the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) study the environmental impact of DU contamination in Iraq.

Despite this refusal, it is public knowledge that the U.S. made extensive use of weapons that can fire DU shells. These include the A-10 Warthog tank-buster aircraft with 30-mm cannons that can fire up to 4,200 DU rounds per minute; the AC-130 gunship; the “Apache” helicopter; and Bradley fighting vehicles that fire anti-armor 105-mm to 120-mm tank rounds containing DU.

The U.S. followed the same tactics in the wars in the Balkans. While claiming full cooperation with UNEP’s Balkans studies, the Pentagon delayed releasing target locations for 16 months. It gave misleading map information. Then bomb, missile and cluster-bomb targets were excluded. NATO allowed 10 other teams to visit or clean up sites before UNEP inspections started.

Washington refuses to acknowledge DU use anywhere or that it poses any danger. To acknowledge radiation poisoning would immediately raise demands for a cleanup.



According to Alex Kirby, BBC News Online environment correspondent: “The U.S. says it has no plans to remove the debris left over from depleted uranium weapons it is using in Iraq. It says no cleanup is needed, because research shows DU has no long-term effects.”

### Evidence of DU use

But in the information age, the Pentagon can't suppress all the evidence. The Dutch example shows this. Though the U.S. government specifically denied any firing of DU weapons near the city of Al-Samawah, where Dutch troops were to be stationed, a simple Internet search by journalists undid this lie.

The Dutch government, to get a resolution through the parliament to authorize sending troops to Iraq, depicted the Al-Samawah region as a remote, barely inhabited desert where no noteworthy events had occurred.

In actual fact, Al-Samawah is strategically located on the road from Basra to Baghdad, providing access to a bridge over the Euphrates River. On its march to Baghdad, the U.S. Army encountered fierce resistance from Iraqi forces there, according to Amer-



ican officers. This was well covered by their embedded media.

It was more than a week before the town and the road were cleared of all pockets of resistance. Some 112 civilians, most of them inhabitants of Al-Samawah, were killed in battle.

DU ammunition was extensively used during this operation. In a widely distributed field message, Sergeant First Class Cooper reported that the weapons systems used by the 3rd Infantry, 7th Cavalry, en route to Al-Samawah and on to Najaf, were performing well, especially the 25-mm DU and 7.62 munitions.



Of greater interest to Internet researchers was a letter a young soldier sent home to his parents, which they posted in their church bulletin on the Internet. In the letter E. Pennell, a crew member on a Bradley Fighting Vehicle of the 1st Infantry Battalion, 41st Infantry Regiment, described how his crew fired a 25-mm DU round as they encountered seven Iraqi troops in the town of Al-Samawah.

Pennell's letter has raised concern among groups like the United Federation of Military Personnel, a kind of labor union for Dutch troops. It fears that its members might be at risk of contracting cancer or other diseases because of exposure to DU ammunition.

### **Resistance: the only solution**

Officers and politicians in imperialist countries have always treated rank-and-file soldiers as cannon fodder. These lives are totally expendable. The occupied or colonized people are not counted at all.

As a global movement against imperialist wars grew over the past century, military planners made great efforts to hide the true costs of war, especially the human cost. The nearly 60,000 U.S. combat deaths in the Vietnam War provoked a mighty mass anti-war movement. This time, long before U.S. casualties reached 100 soldiers, the movement to "Bring the Troops Home" had gained momentum.

This new movement must demand a true accounting of the enormous human costs of the war. The impact on the health and future of not only U.S. troops but the millions of people in Iraq must be part of the demand.

A growing international movement must demand full reparations for the Iraqi people. A cleanup of the toxic, radioactive waste is in the interests of all the people of the region. The cost of the war must be calculated in terms of bankrupt social programs

here in the U.S. and the health of all the people who were in the region during the war and will be in the years to come.

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## **Update 2012**

Since this 2003 article and since the International Action Center's 1997 book: *Metal of Dishonor — Depleted Uranium* was published, far more material and scientific studies have confirmed the long-term disastrous impact of the U.S. toxic and radioactive depleted uranium weapons.

The International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, based in Basle, Switzerland in several reports based on a 5-year study- (July 6, 2010 and Dec. 31, 2010) reported that 15 percent of babies born at Fallujah General Hospital in Iraq had cleft palates, spinal cord deformities and other serious birth defects; 14 percent spontaneously aborted, 11 percent were premature. Even these figures, researchers believe, understate an epidemic of abnormalities, because a large number of babies born in Fallujah are born at home with parents reluctant to seek help from authorities. The same journal reported 12-fold increases in childhood cancer in those aged 0-14.

The IJERPH Journal also reported cancers and infant mortality significantly greater than those recorded for survivors of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and Fallujah infected by a chronic environmental contaminant. It focused on depleted uranium, used in weaponry during two U.S. assaults in 2004, as a possible contaminant. The Guardian UK, Dec 31, 2010 and Nov. 13, 2011 reported that defects in newborns are 11 times higher than normal. The British Independent and CounterPunch, April 25, 2012 by Robert Fisk titled: "The Children of Fallujah," provided some of the human impact behind these frightening statistics.