GlobalResearch
Center for Research on Globalization

Depleted Uranium Radiation resulting from NATO Bombings in Serbia : High Incidence of Cancer

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Global Research, April 01, 2010
All Voices 23 March 2010

Theme: Crimes against Humanity, Militarization and WMD
In-depth Report: THE BALKANS

A leading Serbian expert in the field says the NATO's use of depleted uranium ammunition in it's aggression on Serbia has caused enormous increase in cancer rates and number of newborns with genetic malformations.

Silent killer

"Depleted uranium is not only radioactive, it is very toxic as well," says doctor Radomir Kovacevic, an expert of the Institute for radiology protection "Dr. Dragomir Karajovic" in Belgrade. In an interview for VJ Movement, he explains "Primary it is nephrotoxic, so it affects kidneys, then liver and spleen. Actually, the whole organism is affected from the aspect of toxicity, it is poisoned.".

Four studies conducted so far, on both civilians and those who worked on the spots'decontamination, have shown that the DU exposure causes typical and specific changes on genetic material.

"DNA molecule is very sensitive on aggression – in this case it is radioactivity. Experimental oncology has shown 18 years ago that in the etiopathogenesis of malignity precedes one genotoxic stadium and that is exactly what is visible on those chromosomes," tells doctor Kovacevic, stating that the information obtained so far is enough to link the DU contamination to increase in cancer rates.

Threat to newborn lives

In Vranje area, which is surrounded by four known DU contaminated locations, there has been an enormous increase in cancer rates and number of newborns with genetic malformations. "In 1998, 21 children have been born with deformities. In 2008 there were 73," says Nela Cvetkovic, a Member of the Vranje City Council, in a statement for VJM. The number of newborn didn't change, it is about 800-1000 babies per year.

At the same time, in a six year period after the NATO bombing a number of newly registered cancer cases has more than doubled – from 185 in the year 2000 to 398 new diagnosis in 2006.

Permanent consequences

"The half-life of uranium 238 is very long – 4,5 billion years," reminds nuclear physicist Miroslav Simic, stating that "this way of throwing away the nuclear waste on civil, but also

military targets, is not human as the consequences are permanent."

Traces of uranium 236 and some plutonium isotopes found on bombed locations suggest that at least a part of the material in the projectiles had originated from reprocessing nuclear fuel.

"Plutonium is one million times more toxic than uranium," says Mr Simic in an interview for VJM, and explains that "one particle of plutonium which would enter a human body is enough to cause fatal consequences".

At the same time in Kosovo, doctor Nebojsa Srbljak, who researches the health consequences of the bombing on civil population, accuses NATO of using so-called dirty bombs. "We first started researching when we found traces of Iodine 131 in the tissue extracted from one patient," he says, adding that Iodine 131, also known as radio iodine, is well known as a major factor in health consequences of nuclear disaster in Chernobyl.

Price for Kosovo independence

In Kosovo, none of more than a hundred known DU contaminated locations has been cleaned. Foreign personnel has been warned to stay clear of those areas unless with full radiological protective clothing. But no one warned civilians.

"We, the doctors know what it is, politicians are silent to please their mentors. But the people are in the worst position as there are new cancer cases among young persons every day," says doctor Srbljak, adding that the data on health statistics of Albanian population is completely unavailable.

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