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# Depleted Uranium Radiation Threatens Canadian Troops in Afghanistan

By Global Research
Global Research, November 05, 2006
Toronto Star 5 November 2006

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

**Saving troops from a deadly, invisible enemy**
**Plastic instruments worn around neck warn of radiation**

**Toronto Star**
**Oct. 30, 2006. 01:00 AM**
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OTTAWA—In addition to their flak jackets, rifles and helmets, Canada's troops in Afghanistan are carrying another little known piece of protective equipment: radiation meters.

It's a reminder that amid the threat of suicide bombers and rocket-propelled grenades, the soldiers face a more insidious, and invisible, concern on the battlefield.

For their six-month tours of duty, soldiers wear the plastic dosimeters around their necks next to their dog tags to measure any "chance encounter" with gamma and X-ray radiation during patrols outside the base.

"It's a protective measure to ensure the safety and the health of the troops," said Chris Knowlton, the environmental health and safety officer for the Canadian Expeditionary Force, the military branch that looks after overseas operations.

Knowlton says the dosimeters are worn to protect troops against a threat that first arrived in the war-torn country a quarter-century ago.

Old Soviet military gear now litters the landscape in Afghanistan, remnants of that country's invasion and occupation. And some of that equipment contains radium, a radioactive substance once used for the glow-in-the-dark dials.

"The one consideration that we looked at was the fact there could be ex-Soviet dials floating around," Knowlton said. "Nothing sits around for very long so any of the damaged or destroyed vehicles get scavenged.

"There have been examples out there where people have dispersed radioactive and contaminated things not knowing what they're doing."

But some question whether there's a more recent radiation worry lingering on the Afghan battlefield — depleted uranium found in modern-day weapons and armour.

Depleted uranium is what is left over after the more radioactive elements have been removed to make enriched uranium. This heavy, dense metal is prized by the military.

The U.S. says it uses depleted uranium for some of its munitions, armour and armour-piercing projectiles.

“DU’s high density, self-sharpening qualities and the fact that it is easily combustible make its projectiles capable of readily penetrating armour,” according to one U.S. Army fact sheet.

While military fact sheets downplay the risks of depleted uranium because of its low radioactivity, excessive exposures can damage the kidneys.

“Depleted uranium is only one of many potentially hazardous substances that soldiers may be exposed to during deployment and combat operations,” the U.S. fact sheet said.

Depleted uranium saw large-scale use during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, sparking some worries that it was responsible for the mysterious illnesses suffered by some U.S. veterans.

It was used again during NATO’s bombing of the Balkans in the mid-1990s. That’s when Canadians — who served an extended tour there — were first equipped with dosimeters.

“For the Balkans and as well Afghanistan, it’s more the chance encounter … like a rogue source or a device that contains radiation,” Knowlton said, adding dosimeters are now a “routine force protection measure.”

NATO was put on the offensive in 2001 after media reports linked the use of depleted uranium ammunition in Kosovo and Bosnia with the possibility of a higher incidence of leukemia and other cancers among some allied troops and local residents.

“To date, the scientific and medical research continues to disprove any link between depleted uranium and the reported negative health effects,” according to a NATO statement.

The Americans and British have denied using depleted uranium weapons in Afghanistan. Canada says it eliminated depleted uranium munitions from its stockpile in 1998, in part because of the logistical challenges of storing the material, since it required special precautions.

Knowlton said he doesn’t see a significant radiation risk for the 2,500 Canadian troops now serving in southern Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the dosimeters have all come back with no excessive exposure measured — except for two, he said.

“We followed up and it was because it was accidentally passed through a baggage X-ray.”



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