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Depleted Uranium Weapons: Dead Babies in Iraq and Afghanistan Are No Joke

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The horrors of the US Agent Orange defoliation campaign in Vietnam, about which I wrote on Oct. 15, could ultimately be dwarfed by the horrors caused by the depleted uranium weapons which the US began using in the 1991 Gulf War (300 tons), and which it has used much more extensively–and in more urban, populated areas–in the Iraq War and the now intensifying Afghanistan War.

Depleted uranium, despite its rather benign-sounding name, is not depleted of radioactivity or toxicity. The term "depleted" refers only to its being depleted of the U-235 isotope needed for fission reactions in nuclear reactors. The nuclear waste material from nuclear power plants, DU as it is known, is what is removed from the power plants' spent fuel rods and is essentially composed of the uranium isotope U-238 as well as U-236 (a product of nuclear reactor fission, not found in nature), as well as other trace radioactive elements. Once simply a nuisance for the industry, that still has no permanent way to dispose of the dangerous stuff, it turns out to be an ideal metal for a number of weapons uses, and has been capitalized on by the Pentagon. 1.7 times heavier than lead, and much harder than steel, and with the added property of burning at a super-hot temperature, DU has proven to be an ideal penetrator for warheads that need to pierce thick armor or dense concrete bunkers made of reinforced concrete and steel. Once through the defenses, it burns at a temperature that incinerates anyone inside (which is why we see the carbonized bodies of bodies in the wreckage of Iraqi tanks hit by US fire). Accordingly it has found its way into 30 mm machine gun ammunition, especially that used by the A-10 Warthog ground-attack fighter planes used extensively in Iraq and Afghanistan (as well as Kosovo). It is also the warhead of choice for Abrams tanks and is also reportedly used in GBU-28 and the later GBU-37 bunker buster bombs, each of which can have 1-2 tons of the stuff in its warhead. DU is also used as ballast in cruise missiles, and this burns up when a missile detonates its conventional explosive. Some cruise missiles are also designed to hit hardened targets and reportedly feature DU warheads, as does the AGM-130 air-to-ground missile, which carries a one-ton penetrating warhead. In addition, depleted uranium is used in large quantities in the armor of tanks and other equipment. This material becomes a toxic source of CU pollution when these vehicles are attacked and burned.

While the Pentagon has continued to claim, against all scientific evidence, that there is no hazard posed by depleted uranium, US troops in Iraq have reportedly been instructed to avoid any sites where these weapons have been used—destroyed Iraqi tanks, exploded bunkers, etc.—and to wear masks if they do have to approach. Many torched vehicles have been brought back to the US, where they have been buried in special sites reserved for dangerously contaminated nuclear materials. (Thousands of tons of DU-contaminated sand

from Kuwait, polluted with DU during the US destruction of Iraq's tank forces in the 1991 war, were removed and shipped to a waste site in Idaho last year with little fanfare.) Suspiciously, international health officials have been prevented or obstructed from doing medical studies of DU sites in Iraq and Afghanistan. But an excellent series of articles several years ago by the Christian Science Monitor described how reporters from that newspaper had visited such sites in Iraq with Geiger-counters and had found them to be extremely "hot" with radioactivity.

The big danger with DU is not as a pure metal, but after it has exploded and burned, when the particles of uranium oxide, which are just as radioactive as the pure isotopes, can be inhaled or ingested. Even the smallest particle of uranium in the body is both deadly poisonous as a chemical, and over time can cause cancer—particularly in the lungs, but also the kidneys, testes and ovaries.

There are reports of a dramatic increase in the incidence of deformed babies being born in the city of Fallujah, where DU weapons were in wide use during the November 2004 assault on that city by US Marines. The British TV station SKY UK, in a report last month that has received no mention in any mainstream American news organization, found a marked increase in birth defects at local hospitals. Birth defects have also been high for years in the Basra area in the south of Iraq, where DU was used not just during America's 2003 "shock and awe" attack on Iraq, but also in the 1991 Gulf War.

Deformed baby born in post-US Invasion Iraq: DU's legacy?

Further, a report sent to the UN General Assembly by Dr Nawal Majeed Al-Sammarai, Iraq's Minister of Women's Affairs since 2006, stated that in September 2009, Fallujah General Hospital had 170 babies born, 24% of which died within their first week of life. Worse yet, fully 75% of the babies born that month were deformed. This compares to August 2002, six months before the US invasion, when 530 live births were reported with only six dying in the first week, and only one deformity. Clearly something terrible is happening in Fallujah, and many doctors suspect it's the depleted uranium dust that is permeating the city.

But the real impact of the first heavy use of depleted uranium weaponry in populous urban environments (DU was used widely especially in 2003 in Baghdad, Samara, Mosul and other big Iraqi cities), will come over the years, as the toxic legacy of this latest American war crime begins to show up in rising numbers of cancers, birth defects and other genetic disorders in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Of course, as in the case of Agent Orange in Vietnam, the toxic effects of this latest battlefield use of toxic materials by the US military will also be felt for years to come by the men and women who were sent over to fight America's latest wars. As with Agent Orange, the Pentagon and the Veterans Affairs Department have been assiduously denying the problem, and have been just as assiduously denying claims by veterans of the Gulf War and the two current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who claim their cancers and other diseases have anything to do with their exposure to DU.

The record on Agent Orange should lead us to be suspicious of the government's claims.

The deformed and dead babies in Iraq should make us demand a cleanup of Iraq and Afghanistan, medical aid for the victims, and a ban on all depleted uranium weapons.

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