

Iraq: 'Special Weapons' Have a Fallout on Babies

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FALLUJAH, Jun 12 (IPS) - Babies born in Fallujah are showing illnesses and deformities on a scale never seen before, doctors and residents say.

The new cases, and the number of deaths among children, have risen after "special weaponry" was used in the two massive bombing campaigns in Fallujah in 2004.

After denying it at first, the Pentagon admitted in November 2005 that white phosphorous, a restricted incendiary weapon, was used a year earlier in Fallujah.

In addition, depleted uranium (DU) munitions, which contain low-level radioactive waste, were used heavily in Fallujah. The Pentagon admits to having used 1,200 tonnes of DU in Iraq thus far.

Many doctors believe DU to be the cause of a severe increase in the incidence of cancer in Iraq, as well as among U.S. veterans who served in the 1991 Gulf War and through the current occupation.

"We saw all the colours of the rainbow coming out of the exploding American shells and missiles," Ali Sarhan, a 50-year-old teacher who lived through the two U.S. sieges of 2004 told IPS. "I saw bodies that turned into bones and coal right after they were exposed to bombs that we learned later to be phosphorus.

"The most worrying is that many of our women have suffered loss of their babies, and some had babies born with deformations."

"I had two children who had brain damage from birth," 28-year-old Hayfa' Shukur told IPS. "My husband has been detained by the Americans since November 2004 and so I had to take the children around by myself to hospitals and private clinics. They died. I spent all our savings and borrowed a considerable amount of money."

Shukur said doctors told her that it was use of the restricted weapons that caused her children's brain damage and subsequent deaths, "but none of them had the courage to give me a written report."

"Many babies were born with major congenital malformations," a paediatric doctor, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IPS. "These infants include many with heart defects, cleft lip or palate, Down's syndrome, and limb defects."

The doctor added, "I can say all kinds of problems related to toxic pollution took place in Fallujah after the November 2004 massacre."

Many doctors speak of similar cases and a similar pattern. The indications remain anecdotal, in the absence of either a study, or any available official records.

The Fallujah General Hospital administration was unwilling to give any statistics on deformed babies, but one doctor volunteered to speak on condition of anonymity — for fear of reprisals if seen to be critical of the administration.

“Maternal exposure to toxins and radioactive material can lead to miscarriage and frequent abortions, still birth, and congenital malformation,” the doctor told IPS. There have been many such cases, and the government “did not move to contain the damage, or present any assistance to the hospital whatsoever.

“These cases need intensive international efforts that provide the highest and most recent technologies that we will not have here in a hundred years,” he added.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) expressed concern Mar. 31 about the lack of medical supplies in hospitals in Baghdad and Basra.

“Hospitals have used up stocks of vital medical items, and require further supplies to cope with the influx of wounded patients. Access to water remains a matter of concern in certain areas,” the ICRC said in a statement.

A senior Iraqi health ministry official was quoted as saying Feb. 26 that the health sector is under “great pressure”, with scores of doctors killed, an exodus of medical personnel, poor medical infrastructure, and shortage of medicines.

“We are experiencing a big shortage of everything,” said the official, “We don’t have enough specialist doctors and medicines, and most of the medical equipment is outdated.

“We used to get many spinal and head injuries, but were unable to do anything as we didn’t have enough specialists and medicines,” he added. “Intravenous fluid, which is a simple thing, is not available all the time.” He said no new hospitals had been built since 1986.

Iraqi Health Minister Salih al-Hassnawi highlighted the shortage of medicines at a press conference in Arbil in the Kurdistan region in the north Feb. 22. “The Iraqi Health Ministry is suffering from an acute shortage of medicines...We have decided to import medicines immediately to meet the needs.”

He said the 2008 health budget meant that total expenditure on medicines, medical equipment and ambulances would amount to an average of 22 dollars per citizen.

But this is too late for the unknown number of babies and their families who bore the consequences of the earlier devastation. And it is too little to cover the special needs of babies who survived with deformations.

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