

Israel used chemical weapons in Lebanon and Gaza

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Israel has admitted using phosphorous bombs during the war against Lebanon last summer, just days after being accused by an Italian television documentary programme of using dense inert metal missiles, which are highly carcinogenic, against the Palestinians in Gaza in July and August.

After previously claiming that phosphorous bombs were only used to mark targets, Israeli cabinet minister, Jacob Edery, has now confirmed that “the Israeli army made use of phosphorous shells during the war against Hezbollah in attacks against military targets in open ground.”

Phosphorus weapons cause chemical burns and the Red Cross and human rights groups argue they should be treated as chemical weapons. The use of chemical weapons against civilians or against military targets in civilian areas is outlawed by the Geneva Conventions. The US has insisted that Saddam Hussein be tried for using chemical weapons against civilians.

The Lebanese government had accused Israel of using banned weapons, including phosphorus incendiary bombs and vacuum bombs during the recent war. Doctors in hospitals in southern Lebanon had said they suspected some of the burns they were seeing were caused by phosphorous bombs.

Israel dropped more than a million cluster bombs on south Lebanon in the last few days before the ceasefire that have resulted in at least three deaths a day, mainly of women and children, and which have rendered the area almost uninhabitable.

Israel’s reversal of its previous claim that its weapons used in Lebanon did not contravene international conventions can only strengthen the claims by Palestinian doctors that Israel has used experimental heavy metal weapons against the people of Gaza.

The Italian state television’s satellite channel, RAI News 24, which last year documented the US military’s use of white phosphorus against civilians during attacks on Fallujah, followed up reports from Gaza of inexplicably serious injuries.

Doctors had appealed for help in identifying the cause of these strange injuries that were small, often invisible to X-rays, and cuts provoked by intense heat in the lower limbs. They observed an unusually large number of wounded that had had to have one or both of their legs amputated just below the genitals due to burns. Dr. Habas al-Wahid, head of the emergency centre at the Shuhada al-Aqsa hospital, told the journalists that the legs of the injured were sliced from their bodies “as if a saw was used to cut through the bone.”

Dozens of victims had completely burned bodies and shrapnel type injuries that X-ray machines had been unable to detect. Doctors said they had removed microscopic particles of carbounium and tungsten, a highly carcinogenic substance, from wounds. Dr. Juma Saka, of Shifa hospital in Gaza City, said that doctors had found small entry wounds on the bodies of the dead and wounded, and a powder on the victims' bodies and in their internal organs. "The powder was like microscopic shrapnel, and this is likely what caused the injuries," Saka said.

In many cases, doctors found that their patients, after initially appearing to recover, suddenly died after one or two days. "We don't know what it means, new weapons or something added to a previous weapon," said Saied Joudda, the deputy director at the Kamal Odwan hospital in Beit Lahiya.

These injuries were first seen in July after Israel launched a massive military offensive against Gaza at the end of June, ostensibly to find Corporal Gilad Shalit, who had been seized by Palestinian militants, and to put an end to the firing of Qassem rockets into Israel. The six-week-long war against a largely defenceless people destroyed roads, bridges, homes, water treatment and electricity plants, killed at least 286 Palestinians and injured 4,200, according to Gaza's emergency services' estimate. Overshadowed by Israel's barbaric war against Lebanon, it received little publicity in the world's press.

Most of the deaths and injuries were caused by Israeli drones, unmanned light planes that dropped weapons using precise remote-controlled devices against pre-established targets.

The programme reported that the doctors in Gaza had compiled extensive documentary evidence of the injuries. Dr. Mouawia, a cardio-vascular surgeon and director general of emergency services in Gaza, explained, "In the main hospitals of Gaza, such as the Shifa Hospital, our medical colleagues have treated wounds that present small holes, especially at the legs; in some other cases, within the body itself metallic fragments of various dimensions have been found, which are actually larger than the small wounds."

"Personally I have collected in a CD the documentation relative to 86 cases that I am ready to show in Italy or anywhere else so that people can know what has happened here in the past months, when the public opinion was directed especially at the war in Lebanon," he continued.

"In our opinion, Israel has also used chemical weapons, such as numerous cases demonstrate, documented cases, with persons having extremely serious burns to their internal organs in the absence of external wounds.

"In the Gazan hospitals," Dr. Mouawia added, "the doctors are facing a situation that is truly difficult, worsened by the state of siege that we in the Gaza Strip are forced to live under. It is like an open-air prison: many of those wounded have died due to the seriousness of the wounds provoked by these weapons that are 'different' from the traditional ones up to this moment used by the Israeli aviation." He said that no new cases had been recorded since August.

After lengthy research and analysis of the samples of metals found in the victims' bodies and examining the unusual wounds, the programme's reporters believed that the most likely cause of these injuries were missiles very similar to the US made Dense Inert Metal Explosive (DIME).

According to the military magazine Defence Tech, DIME is a carbon-encased missile that shatters on impact into minuscule splinters, at the same time setting off an explosive that shoots blades of energy-charged, heavy metal tungsten alloy (HMTA) powder, such as cobalt and nickel or iron, with a carbon fibre casing. It turns to dust on impact, as it loses inertia very quickly due to air resistance, burning and destroying through a very precise angulation everything within a four-meter range, as opposed to the shrapnel which results from the fragmentation of a metal casing.

The designation of the metal as “inert” is due to the metal’s non-involvement in the blast, rather than the metal being chemically or biologically inert.

This technology is one of a new range of “low collateral damage” or LCD weapons designed to minimise the damage to nearby property, by confining its increased lethal effects to a restricted space. So it is “ideal for densely populated areas” and “helping the warfighter to prevent the loss of public support,” according to its enthusiastic proponents.

The television programme did not address the question as to whether the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) developed this weapon themselves or had been supplied by the US to test the weapons, using the Palestinians as guinea pigs.

When questioned by the journalists, a spokesman for the IDF stated, “Israel uses no weapons that are not legal under international law.” But since DIME is new, international law has not passed judgment on its legality.

The IDF evidently refused to talk to the Italian reporters officially since they only cited Yitzhak Ben-Israel, major-general in the Israel air force, a former head of the army’s weapons-development program. He did not deny it was a DIME-type weapon, stating instead that “One of the ideas is to allow those targeted to be hit without causing damage to bystanders or other persons.”

He told the reporters “this is a technology that allows the striking of very small targets.”

In other words, DIME would be the perfect weapon for Israel’s programme of targeted assassinations of Palestinian opponents of the ongoing suppression and humiliation of the Palestinian people.

But the huge ratio of dead to injured in Gaza’s densely populated cities suggests that supposedly “low lethality” weapons—that provide increased lethality within a narrow zone—may have precisely the opposite effect.

Tungsten, the main material that would stray outside of the target zone, is also said to be highly carcinogenic and harmful to the environment. According to New Scientist magazine, John Kalinich’s team at the Armed Forces Radiobiology Research Institute in Maryland said that in a study designed to simulate shrapnel injuries, pellets of weapons-grade tungsten alloy were implanted in 92 rats. Within five months all the animals developed a rare cancer called rhabdomyosarcoma.

The carcinogenic effects of HMTA have been studied by the US Armed Forces since at least 2000 (along with depleted uranium). These alloys were found to cause neoplastic transformations of human osteoblast cells.

Dr. Mark Witten, a cancer researcher from the University of Arizona, said he was concerned

about the possible links between tungsten and leukaemia. "My opinion is that there needs to be much more research on the health effects of tungsten before the military increases its usage," he said.

Carmela Vaccaio, a doctor at University of Parma, examined samples sent by the Italian reporters from the Gaza Strip and found a very high concentration of carbon, as well as copper, aluminium and tungsten, which she considered to be unusual materials. In her report she concluded, "These findings could be in line with the hypothesis that the weapon in question is DIME."

To add to their suffering, the Palestinian survivors of this new weaponry can expect to fall victim to cancer.

Later, in a statement issued after the programme, the IDF denied the use of DIME weapons, adding that "Due to operational reasons, the IDF cannot specify the types and use of weapons in its possession."

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