

# UK radiation jump blamed on Iraq shells

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by Mark Gould and Jon Ungoes-Thomas

RADIATION detectors in Britain recorded a fourfold increase in uranium levels in the atmosphere after the “shock and awe” bombing campaign against Iraq, according to a report.

Environmental scientists who uncovered the figures through freedom of information laws say it is evidence that depleted uranium from the shells was carried by wind currents to Britain.

Government officials, however, say the sharp rise in uranium detected by radiation monitors in Berkshire was a coincidence and probably came from local sources.

The results from testing stations at the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) in Aldermaston and four other stations within a 10-mile radius were obtained by Chris Busby, of Liverpool University’s department of human anatomy and cell biology.

Each detector recorded a significant rise in uranium levels during the Gulf war bombing campaign in March 2003. The reading from a park in Reading was high enough for the Environment Agency to be alerted.

Busby, who has advised the government on radiation and is a founder of Green Audit, the environmental consultancy, believes “uranium aerosols” from Iraq were widely dispersed in the atmosphere and blown across Europe.

“This research shows that rather than remaining near the target as claimed by the military, depleted uranium weapons contaminate both locals and whole populations hundreds to thousands of miles away,” he said.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) countered that it was “unfeasible” depleted uranium could have travelled so far. Radiation experts also said that other environmental sources were more likely to blame.

The “shock and awe” campaign was one of the most devastating assaults in modern warfare. In the first 24-hour period more than 1,500 bombs and missiles were dropped on Baghdad.

During the conflict A10 “tankbuster” planes — which use munitions containing depleted uranium — fired 300,000 rounds. The substance — dubbed a “silver bullet” because of its ability to pierce heavy tank armour — is controversial because of its potential effect on

human health. Critics say it is chemically toxic and can cause cancer, and Iraqi doctors reported a marked rise in cancer cases after it was used in the first Gulf conflict.

The American and British governments say depleted uranium is relatively harmless, however. The Royal Society, the UK's academy of science, has also said the risk from depleted uranium is "very low" for soldiers and people in a conflict zone.

Busby's report shows that within nine days of the start of the Iraq war on March 19, 2003, higher levels of uranium were picked up on five sites in Berkshire. On two occasions, levels exceeded the threshold at which the Environment Agency must be informed, though within safety limits. The report says weather conditions over the war period showed a consistent flow of air from Iraq northwards.

Brian Spratt, who chaired the Royal Society's report, cast doubt on depleted uranium as a source but said it could have come from natural uranium in the massive amounts of soil kicked up by shock and awe.

Other experts said local environmental sources, such as a power station, were more likely at fault. The Environment Agency said detectors at other sites did not record a similar increase, which suggested a local source.

A MoD spokesman said the uranium was of a "natural origin" and there was no evidence that depleted uranium had reached Britain from Iraq.

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