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Washington's secret nuclear war

By *Shaheen Chughtai*

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Illegal weapons of mass destruction have not only been found in Iraq but have been used against Iraqis and have even killed US troops.

But Washington and its allies have tried to cover up this outrage because the chief culprit is the US itself, argue American and other experts trying to expose what they say is a war crime.

The WMD in question is depleted uranium (DU). A radioactive by-product of uranium enrichment, DU is used in ammunition such as tank shells and "bunker busting" missiles because its density makes it ideal for piercing armour.

Thousands of DU shells and bombs have been used in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and - both during the 1990-91 Gulf war and the ongoing conflict - in Iraq.

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"They're using it in Falluja, Baghdad is chock-a-block with DU - it's all over the place"

Major Doug Rokke, ex-head of US army DU project

all over the place," says Major Doug Rokke, director of the US army's DU project in 1994-95.

Scientists say even a tiny particle can have disastrous results once ingested, including various cancers and degenerative diseases, paralysis, birth deformities and death.



The US has dropped tonnes of depleted uranium on Iraq

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And as tiny DU particles are blown across the Middle East and beyond like a radioactive poison gas, the long-term implications for the world are deeply disturbing.

DU has a "half-life" of 4.5 billion years, meaning it takes that long for just half of its atoms to decay.

Sick soldiers

Only 467 US soldiers were officially wounded during the 1990-91 Gulf war.

But according to Terry Jemison at the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), of the more than 592,560 discharged personnel who served there, at least 179,310 - one third - are receiving disability compensation and over 24,760 cases were pending by in September 2004.

This does not include personnel still active and receiving care from the military, or those who have died.

And among 168,528 veterans of the current conflict in Iraq who have left active duty, 16% (27,571) had already sought treatment from the VA by July 2004.



A sixth of the Iraq war veterans have already sought treatment

"That's astronomical," says Rokke, whose team studied how to provide medical care for victims, how to clean contaminated sites, and how to train those using DU weapons.

Rokke admits the exact cause for these casualties cannot be confirmed. But he insists the evidence pointing to DU is compelling.

"There were no chemical or biological weapons there, no big oil well fires," he says. "So what's left?"

Cradle to grave

Dr Jenan Ali, a senior Iraqi doctor at Basra hospital's College of Medicine, says her studies show a 100% rise in child leukaemia in the region in the decade after the first Gulf war, with a 242% increase in all types of malignancies.

The director of the Afghan DU and Recovery Fund, Dr Daud Miraki, says his field researchers found evidence of DU's effect on civilians in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan in 2003 although local conditions make rigorous statistical analysis difficult.

"Many children are born with no eyes, no limbs, or tumours protruding from their mouths and eyes," Miraki told Aljazeera.net. Some newborns are barely recognisable as human, he says. Many do not survive.

Afghan and Iraqi children continue to play amid radioactive debris. But the US army will not even label contaminated equipment or sites

because doing so would be an admission that DU is hazardous.

This "deceitful failure", says Rokke, contradicts the US army's own rules, such as regulation AR 700-48, which stipulates its responsibilities to isolate, label and decontaminate radioactive equipment and sites as well as to render prompt and effective medical care for all exposed individuals.



Iraqi and Afghan doctors have seen a rise in deformed fetuses

"This is a war crime," Rokke says. "The president is obliged to ensure the army complies with these regulations but they're deliberately violating the law. It's that simple."

No remedy

But these blatant violations are practically irrelevant because Rokke's Iraq mission found that DU cannot be cleaned up and there is no known medical remedy.

US President George Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair used Saddam Hussein's alleged possession of illegal weapons to justify invading Iraq. But several prominent jurists hold Bush and Blair guilty of war crimes for waging DU warfare.

The vice-president of the Indian Lawyers Association, Niloufer Bhagwat, sat on an international panel of judges for the unofficial International Criminal Tribunal for Afghanistan.

Bhagwat and her fellow judges ruled that the US had used "weapons of extermination of present and future generations, genocidal in properties".

Friendly fire

And not just against defenceless Afghan civilians.

"Bush was guilty of knowingly using DU weaponry against his own troops," Bhagwat told Aljazeera.net, "because the president knew the effects of DU could not be controlled".



Critics say George Bush (R) and Tony Blair are 'war criminals'

A prominent US international human-rights lawyer, Karen Parker, says there are four rules derived from humanitarian laws and conventions regarding weapons:

- weapons may only be used against legal enemy military targets and must not have an adverse effect elsewhere (the territorial rule)
- weapons can only be used for the duration of an armed conflict and must not be used or continue to act afterwards (the temporal rule)
- weapons may not be unduly inhumane (the "humaneness")

- rule). The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 speak of "unnecessary suffering" and "superfluous injury" in this regard
- weapons may not have an unduly negative effect on the natural environment (the "environmental" rule).

Illegal weapons

"DU weaponry fails all four tests," Parker told Aljazeera.net. First, DU cannot be limited to legal military targets. Second, it cannot be "turned off" when the war is over but keeps killing.

Third, DU can kill through painful conditions such as cancers and organ damage and can also cause birth defects such as facial deformities and missing limbs.

Lastly, DU cannot be used without unduly damaging the natural environment.

"In my view, use of DU weaponry violates the grave breach provisions of the Geneva Conventions," says Parker. "And so its use constitutes a war crime, or crime against humanity."

"Use of DU weaponry violates the grave breach provisions of the Geneva Conventions"

Karen Parker,
human rights lawyer

Parker and others took the DU issue before the UN in 1995, and in 1996, the UN Human Rights Commission described DU munitions as weapons of mass destruction that should be banned.

Deceit

Despite the evidence, Rokke says Pentagon and Energy Department officials have campaigned against him and others trying to expose the horrors of DU.

That charge is echoed by Leuren Moret, a geoscientist who has worked at the Lawrence Berkeley and Lawrence Livermore nuclear weapons research laboratories in California.

White House denials are part of a long-standing cover-up policy that has been exposed before, she says.

"For example, the US denied using DU bombs and missiles against Yugoslavia in 1999," she told Aljazeera.net. "But scientists in Yugoslavia, Greece and Bulgaria measured elevated levels of gamma radiation in the first three days of grid and carpet bombing by the US."



President Bush insists warnings about DU are merely propaganda

Moret says: "A missile landed in Bulgaria that didn't explode and scientists identified a DU warhead.

Then, Lord [George] Robertson, the head of NATO, admitted in public that DU had been used."

Even the US army expressed concern about the use of DU in July 1990, some six months before the outbreak of the first Gulf war.

Those concerns were later echoed by Iraqi officials.

Denial

But brushing his own army's report aside - now said to be "outdated" - US President George Bush has dismissed such warnings as "propaganda".

"In recent years, the Iraqi regime made false claim that the depleted uranium rounds fired by coalition forces have caused cancers and birth defects in Iraq," says Bush on his White House website.

"But scientists working for the World Health Organisation, the UN Environmental Programme and the European Union could find no health effects linked to exposure to depleted uranium," he says.

Bush can point to a World Health Organisation (WHO) report in 2001 that said there was no significant risk of inhaling radioactive particles where DU weapons had been used.

It said the level of radiation associated with DU debris was not particularly hazardous, but it accepted that high exposure could pose a health risk.

Scientific studies

WHO also commissioned a scientific study shortly before the 2003 invasion of Iraq that warned of the dangers of US and British use of DU - but refused to publish its findings.

The study's main author, Dr Keith Baverstock, told Aljazeera.net that "the report was deliberately suppressed" because WHO was pressed by a more powerful, pro-nuclear UN body - the International Atomic Energy Agency. WHO has rejected his claims as "totally unfounded".

The study found DU particles were likely to be blown around and inhaled by Iraqi civilians for years to come. Once inside a human body, the radioactive particles can trigger the growth of malignant tumours.

"[WHO's] report was deliberately suppressed"

Dr Keith Baverstock,
co-author of WHO report on DU

Bush's claim that the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) gives DU pollution a clean bill of health is also disingenuous.

UNEP experts have yet to be allowed into Iraq, its spokesman in Geneva Michael Williams told Aljazeera.net, citing security concerns.

And a scientific body set up in 1997 by Green EU parliamentarians - the European Committee on Radiation Risk (ECRR) - found that DU posed serious health risks.

An eminent Canadian scientist involved with the ECRR, Dr Rosalie Bertell, says the deadliness of DU derived not just from its radioactivity but from the durability of particles formed in the 3000-6000C heat produced when a DU weapon is fired.

"The particles produced are like ceramic: not soluble in body fluid, non-biodegradable and highly toxic," she told Aljazeera.net. "They

tend to concentrate in the lymph nodes, which is the source of lymphomas and leukaemia."

Known killer

The US military and political establishment cannot plead ignorance. As early as October 1943, Manhattan Project scientists Arthur Compton, James Connant and Harold Urey sent a memo to their director, General Leslie Groves, saying DU could be used to create a "radioactive gas".

In 1961, two nuclear experts, Briton HE Huxley and American Geoffrey Zubay, informed the scientific community that DU targeted human DNA and "the Master Code, which controls the expression of DNA", Moret says.



DU targets human DNA and may thus affect future generations

In September 2000, Dr Asaf Durakovic, professor of nuclear medicine at Washington's Georgetown University, told a Paris conference of prominent scientists that "tens of thousands" of US and UK troops were dying of DU.

Death sentence

"There has to be a moratorium on the manufacture, sales, use and storage of DU," geoscientist Moret says, warning that this will not happen unless more Americans realise what is happening.

The Middle East has been severely contaminated, warns Moret. "That region is radioactive forever," she says, but worse is yet to come.

Moret says the air carrying DU particles takes about a year to mix with the rest of the earth's atmosphere.

The radiation released by DU nuclear warfare is believed to be more than 10 times the amount dispersed by atmospheric testing.



Radioactive sites continue to kill and contaminate Iraqi children

As a result, DU particles have engulfed the world in a radioactive poison gas that promises illness and death for millions.

Rokke went to Iraq a fit and healthy soldier, but the major is now beset with a variety of illnesses and each day is a struggle.

He suffers from respiratory problems and cataracts while his teeth - weakened by DU radiation - are crumbling. At least 20 of the 100 primary personnel he worked with on the US army's DU project have died. Most of the rest are ill.

Meanwhile, WHO says cancer rates worldwide are set to rise by 50%

by 2020, although it does not link this publicly to DU.


"They would never say that - they offered various strange explanations," says Moret. "But DU is the key factor. People will slowly die."

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