

Health

Depleted uranium: the war crime that has no end

By Paul Rockwell

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"Depleted uranium is a crime against God and humanity." —Dr. Doug Rokke, U.S. Army health physicist

February 24, 2004—The international dispatches about the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq—replete with graphic details about overcrowded hospitals, U.S. cluster bomb shrapnel buried in the flesh of children, babies deformed by U.S. depleted uranium, farms and markets destroyed by U.S. bombs—do not make pleasant reading.

The mounting evidence from the invasion of Iraq establishes what many Americans may not want to face: that the highest leaders of our land violated many international agreements relating to the rules of war. Unless we address the war crimes of the Bush administration—and the prima facie evidence is overwhelming—we betray our conscience, our country, and our own faith in democracy.

The United States is bound by customary law and international laws of war: the Hague Conventions of 1889 and 1907, the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and the Nuremberg Conventions adopted by the United Nations, December 11, 1945—all of which set limits beyond which, by common consent, decent peoples will not go. Under the Constitution, all treaties are part of the supreme law of the land. Humanitarian law rests on a simple principle: that human rights are measured by one yardstick. Without that principle, all jurisprudence descends into mere piety and power. Nor do violations of the laws of war by one belligerent vindicate the war crimes of another.

Of all the violations of the laws of war by the highest officials of our country, none is more alarming or portentous than the widespread, premeditated use of depleted uranium in Iraq.

Eleven miles north of the Kuwaiti border on the "Highway of Death," disabled tanks, armored personnel carriers, gutted public vehicles—the mangled metals of Desert Storm—are resting in the desert, radiating nuclear energy. American soldiers who lived for three months in the toxic wasteland now suffer from fatigue, joint and muscle pain, respiratory ailments—a host of maladies often known as the Gulf War Syndrome.

Ever since the end of Desert Storm, when the Pentagon unloaded 350 tons of depleted uranium, American officials have been well aware of the health hazards of the residue that is collected from the processing of nuclear fuel.

When President [sic] Bush and the Pentagon authorized the use of depleted uranium for the shock-and-awe campaign against Iraq in March 1983, the Bush administration not only committed a war crime against the people of Iraq, it demonstrated reckless disregard for the health and safety of American troops.

Article 23 of the Geneva Convention IV is clear and unambiguous: "It is forbidden to employ poison or poisoned weapons, to kill treacherously individuals belonging to the hostile nation or army, to employ arms, projectiles or material calculated to cause unnecessary suffering." The Geneva Protocol of 1925

explicitly prohibits "asphyxiating, poisonous or other gasses, and all analogous liquids, materials or devices."

The radiation produced by depleted uranium in battle is a poison, a carcinogenic material that causes birth defects, lung disease, kidney disease, leukemia, breast cancer, lymphoma, bone cancer, and neurological disabilities.

Depleted uranium is much denser than lead and enables U.S. weapons to penetrate steel, a great advantage in modern war. But under the Geneva Conventions, "the means of injuring the enemy are not unlimited." When DU munitions explode, the air is bathed in a fine radioactive dust, which carries on the wind, is easily inhaled, and eventually enters the soil, pollutes ground water, and enters the food chain. Unexploded casings gradually oxidize, releasing more uranium into the environment. Handlers of depleted uranium in the U.S. are required to wear masks and protective clothing—a requirement that Iraqi and American soldiers, not to mention civilians, are unable to fulfill.

After the Gulf War in 1991, Iraqi hospitals recorded a surge in cancer and birth defects. Hospital statistics from Basra show that in 1988 there were 11 cancer cases per 100,000 people. By 2001, after schools, homes, and entire neighborhoods were leveled from the air, the number increased to 116 per 100,000. Breast and lung cancer and leukemia showed up in all areas contaminated by depleted uranium. Dr. Jawad al-Ali, cancer specialist at the Basra Training Hospital, noted that, "The only factor that has changed here since the 1991 war is radiation." Thirteen members of his staff, all present when the hospital area was bombed, are now cancer patients.

The Christian Science Monitor recently sent reporters to Iraq to investigate long-term effects of depleted uranium. Staff writer Scott Peterson saw children playing on top of a burnt-out tank near a vegetable stand on the outskirts of Baghdad, a tank that had been destroyed by armor-piercing shells coated with depleted uranium. Wearing his mask and protective clothing, he pointed his Geiger counter toward the tank. It registered 1,000 times the normal background radiation. The families who survived the tragic decade of sanctions, even the children who recently survived the bombing of Baghdad, may not survive the radiated aftermath of military profligacy. Uranium remains radioactive for two billion years. That's a long time for reconstruction.

According to Dr. Doug Rokke, U.S. Army health physicist who led the first clean-up of depleted uranium after the Gulf War, "Depleted uranium is a crime against God and humanity." Rokke's own crew, a hundred employees, was devastated by exposure to the fine dust. "When we went to the Gulf, we were all really healthy," he said. After performing clean-up operations in the desert (mistakenly without protective gear), 30 members of his staff died, and most others—including Rokke himself—developed serious health problems. Rokke now has reactive airway disease, neurological damage, cataracts, and kidney problems. "We warned the Department of Defense in 1991 after the Gulf War. Their arrogance is beyond comprehension."

The growing outcry against the use of depleted uranium is not a matter of minor legal technicalities. The laws of war prohibit the use of weapons that have deadly and inhumane effects beyond the field of battle. Nor can weapons be legally deployed in war when they are known to remain active, or cause harm after the war concludes.

The use of depleted uranium is a crime whose horrific consequences have yet to run their course.

Years ago in the midst of France's brutal war in Algeria, the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre admonished the French intelligentsia:

"It is not right, my fellow-countrymen, you who know very well all the crimes committed in our name. It's not at all right that you do not breathe a word about them to anyone, not even to your own soul, for fear of having to stand in judgment of yourself. I am willing to believe that at the beginning you did not realize what was happening; later, you doubted whether such things could be true; but now you know, and still you hold your tongues."

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