

UN vote backs precautionary approach to depleted uranium weapons

138 states have supported a resolution calling for a precautionary approach to depleted uranium weapons at the United Nations First Committee.

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The United Nations First Committee has passed its fourth and most far reaching resolution to date on DU weapons. The resolution recalls the positions taken by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) after their fieldwork on DU affected sites in the Balkans, which called for a precautionary approach to DU. In UNEP's view, precaution should be backed by clean-up and decontamination, awareness raising measures to reduce the risk of civilian exposure and the long-term monitoring of contaminated sites.

The resolution was tabled by the Non-Aligned Movement and, as with previous years, the text was actively opposed by the **US**, **UK** and **France**. The three DU users once again argued that various agencies such as the WHO, NATO and IAEA have undertaken long term studies into DU's health and environmental impact. However, this simplification ignored the fact that none of the bodies cited have undertaken long-term health or environmental studies into civilian populations affected by DU contamination. The three states also complained that UNEP's position had been selectively quoted, in spite of UNEP highlighting the need for precaution and remedial measures after each of its field assessments.

"ICBUW welcomes this resolution as another valuable step towards global action on DU and all toxic remnants of war," said an ICBUW spokesperson. *"We are particularly pleased that a significant majority of states accept that precaution is justified and recognise the need for post-conflict measures to protect civilian health from the toxic legacy of conflict. This resolution helps reinforce the need for environmental and health protection norms to be adopted to reduce the humanitarian impact of conflict."*

Other states also submitted explanations for their votes. **Germany** voiced the concerns from the UK and France outlined above about UNEP's position. **Japan** recognised that uncertainties over the long-term impact of the weapons continue and called for more research on the ground and a greater role for civil society in the debate. **The Netherlands** continued to highlight their discomfort with the resolution wording, arguing that they would prefer the term 'possible health effects' instead of 'potential health effects'. Finally **Belgium** once again highlighted that it had been the first state to ban the weapons through recourse to the precautionary principle and offered its assistance to any UN member states that are considering their own domestic legislation.

The resolution built on previous texts and once again included a call for greater transparency from DU users. It contained the same language as 2010's resolution which called for states to transfer quantitative and geographic data on DU usage to affected governments when requested to do so. The US had refused to share data on DU use in Iraq with UNEP, something that, together with security problems, ensured that they were unable to fully survey contamination in the country.

First Committee resolutions are voted on for a second time early in December by the full UN General Assembly. While General Assembly resolutions are non-binding in character, they are a useful means of raising awareness of arms control issues.