

ICBUW: Notes on the views from UNEP, WHO and IAEA to the UN Sec Gen in 2010 on the effects of the use of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP):

UNEP called for a precautionary approach to the use of depleted uranium.

UNEP conducted a series of environmental assessments and measurements on depleted uranium targeted sites in the Balkans (2000-2003), in close cooperation with IAEA and WHO. UNEP played a leading role in these surveys and they evaluated and addressed the potential contamination of the environment by depleted uranium.

They state that, in the areas they have assessed, there are no immediate dangers from either particle-based or waterborne toxicity. But they added: *“However, major scientific uncertainties persisted regarding the **long-term environmental impacts** of depleted uranium, particularly with respect to **long-term groundwater contamination**. Because of these scientific uncertainties, **UNEP called for a precautionary approach to the use of depleted uranium, and recommended that action be taken to clean up and decontaminate the polluted sites. It also called for awareness-raising among local populations and future monitoring.**”*

Their experts have also provided capacity-building to countries upon formal request (in 2005-2007, at the request of the Iraqi Government).

UNEP hopes that *“the body of knowledge gained from its assessment and capacity-building activities since the publication of its first report in the year 2001 will help countries to address potential risks related to the contamination of air, soil, water and vegetation from the use of depleted uranium in times of conflict, and stands ready to provide further assistance upon request.”*

The World Health Organization (WHO):

WHO pointed out the indiscriminate nature of DU exposure; they have reviewed the most recent scientific studies and their updated report is under development.

It was significant that the WHO pointed out that: *“**People living or working in affected areas may inhale re-suspended contaminated dusts.**”* in their report. This confirms the *indiscriminate* nature of DU exposure to civilians following the use of DU weapons.

WHO stated: *“As an update to the 2001 report, a review of the most recent scientific evidence on health risks from various DU exposure situations was conducted over the last two years (2008-2009). This material is currently under review before publication.”*

The ICBUW Science Team has requested that WHO review scientifically all peer-reviewed papers published since 2001 and make recommendations based on the *precautionary principle* to avoid any further contamination and potential harm from DU. (See: Open Letter to the WHO <http://www.bandepleteduranium.org/en/a/301.html>)

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA):

IAEA failed to mention that depleted uranium is a controlled radioactive source material under article XX of its Statutes. This has serious implications for its military use and in particular its uncontrolled release into the environment. IAEA recommendations for managing contaminated areas may be unrealistic.

A fundamental problem of the IAEA's report is that it failed to mention that DU weapons involve the non-peaceful use of nuclear materials. The IAEA has defined in its statute that: **"uranium depleted in the isotope 235"** is a radioactive **"source material"**. [ARTICLE XX: definition]. Its use is therefore subject to restrictions. By trading, possessing and using DU weapons, this "source material" has proliferated to many countries without any controls. This situation is clearly against the Statute of the IAEA and should be given serious consideration.

The IAEA adapted: *"the International Basic Safety Standards for Protection against Ionizing Radiation and for the Safety of Radiation Sources"* as the radiological framework for its studies. However, the International Basic Safety Standards (BSS) were derived from *risk-benefit theory*, which cannot apply to the risk assessment of weapons. In the case of DU weapons, the civilians living in affected areas are unlikely to enjoy any benefit from their use.

Another area of importance is that the: *"IAEA did not evaluate the impact of DU ammunition on the troops or the populations at the time of the conflicts."* However, they stated: *"In general, the results of these assessments indicated that the existence of DU residues dispersed in the environment does not pose a radiological hazard to the population of the affected regions."* IAEA made this statement based on assessments done years after the conflicts.

The recommendations made by IAEA to the national authorities were as follows: *"in all the cases studied where to collect any DU ammunition or fragments and any war equipment which have been in direct contact with these ammunitions and isolate them from the public in appropriate locations until it can be processed as low level radioactive waste and eventually safely disposed of."* This is not possible in war-torn countries that have suffered from damaged infrastructure such as a lack of storage for low level radioactive waste. Another problem is that without transparency from DU users, national governments will not know where DU munitions were used in their countries during the conflict.

And finally: *"IAEA generally concluded that the radiological risk was not significant and could be controlled with simple countermeasures conducted by national authorities."* In the Balkans, where decontamination has been undertaken, the reality has proved somewhat more complicated. The presence of mines and cluster munitions has hindered assessment and clearance, while the technical challenges involved in decontamination have been considerable. These factors and others have made decontamination work extremely expensive. For example, the Serbian government spent around US\$280,000 and 5000 working hours to decontaminate a single location to the standards suggested by UNEP of 480 30mm rounds.

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