

Forget North Korea, America is the Nuclear Menace

The Case Against Depleted Uranium



When the US Army advertises for recruits, it emphasizes jobs and benefits the Army offers, but nowhere are prospects informed about the risk of illness, sickness and death caused by the Army's use of radioactive munitions.

On September 7, in the first court case on Gulf War I to reach Federal Court, nine veterans from a National Guard unit argued their case before a judge in New York, claiming the Army violated its own safety protocols by exposing them to radioactive depleted uranium and refusing to provide medical care. Representing the US Army, Assistant US Attorney John Cronan asked the court to dismiss the lawsuit immediately because courts can't decide "sensitive military matters" and a 1950 Supreme Court decision ruled that soldiers can't sue the government for injuries caused by their military service. The Court has not reached a decision.

Depleted uranium remains a nagging problem for the US Army, which extensively used such munitions during fighting in Gulf War I, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. DU is a chemically toxic, radioactive element with a half-life of 4.5 billion years that damages the kidneys and lungs, causes genetic mutations and cancer, and is associated with a number of medical problems.

The US nuclear industry has produced 1.2 billion pounds of DU waste as a by-product of nuclear energy and weapons production. This nuclear waste is being recycled into DU munitions, which many believe were given to Israel in the form of armor piercing shells for use in the 1973 Sinai war. Since then, DU has been tested, manufactured and sold to a number of countries by US arms manufacturers. Considered highly-effective in penetrating armor, uranium munitions are used by the main US Abrams battle tanks, Bradley Fighting vehicles, A-10 attack aircraft and a host of other ammunition, including bunker busters.

Upon impact, DU munitions burn at 3000 to 6000 degrees Centigrade and combust into a radioactive gas of fine particles of uranium oxide dust, which remain suspended in the air and, once inhaled, become a chronic source of uranium heavy metal and contact radiation poisoning. Estimates vary on the total tonnage of DU used by the US and include: during the US bombing of Yugoslavia, 34 tons of DU; in Gulf War I, up to 375 tons; in Afghanistan in 2001, 1,000 tons; and in Gulf War II in 2003, up to 2,200 tons.

The release of radioactive and chemically toxic dust and uranium fragments causes serious medical problems. According to Lauren Moret, an independent scientist and international radiation specialist, depleted uranium is considered a factor in Gulf War syndrome, which affects many of the 325,000 Gulf War I veterans who are on permanent medical disability.

In August 2004, the VA reported that over 518,739 Persian Gulf veterans were on medical disability since 1991. Moret attributes many of these disabilities to DU exposure. Although some remain controversial, Moret compiled a list of 100 illnesses that veterans associated with DU, including brain tumors, Hodgkin lymphoma, leukemia, rectal cancer, Parkinson's disease,

respiratory problems, rashes, kidney and eye problems, and thyroid cancer. Others point to definite connections between DU and brain tumors, and Hodgkin and non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

"Under international law, depleted uranium meets the definition of WMD and violates US military law as well as the Geneva and Hague conventions," says Moret. "There has been a cover-up by three administrations including Bush Senior, Clinton and Bush the younger because reparations, which the countries attacked are entitled to, would bankrupt the US."

The Pentagon asserts that DU "is only mildly radioactive" and a White House website stated that reports of health problems and cancers caused by DU are propaganda, although a US Army report by Col. E. Wakayama in August 2002, confirms serious health and environmental problems. The report recommends long-term sampling of water and milk from sites heavily contaminated with DU and the removal of contaminated soil from populated areas.

Vietnam and Gulf War veteran and former US Army Depleted Uranium Project director Doug Rokke charges that the Department of Defense (DOD) deliberately ignores its own orders for testing soldiers who come in contact with DU. In August, 1993, General Eric Shinseki issued an order requiring training for anyone who "may come in contact" with DU equipment, complete medical testing for soldiers "exposed to DU contamination," and the development of "a plan for DU contaminated equipment." Rokke cites a number of other orders including an April 2004 Surgeon General's order and US Army regulations requiring medical and environmental clean up from DU contamination.

Rokke charges government and political officials with a deliberate cover-up to limit liability and to ensure uranium munitions use during combat. He insists that DOD officials provide medical care for all DU casualties, complete environmental mediation, and complete decontamination of all DU damaged equipment, structures, and terrain as required by US regulations. He also emphasizes that documented health problems exist in many of the 55 US locations where DU is stored, processed and tested.

"Clinton and Bush totally were aware of the use of DU and made conscious choices to disregard the law," said Rokke. "The world needs to know about it: It's a horrible mess and it will continue until someone holds these people accountable for what they've done and demands compliance. The children of the world don't deserve this."

The Pentagon took 25 years to acknowledge problems with the corrosive defoliant Agent Orange, used in Vietnam to destroy the jungle. It took 40 years before sick WWII veterans were compensated for exposure to atomic bomb radiation. Officials today can't say, "We didn't know," because they are fully aware of the dangers of DU. How long will it take them to stop using radioactive ammunition and exposing soldiers and civilians to genetic damage, cancer and other illnesses?

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