

# Depleted Uranium Update

By John LaForge

## Belgian Parliament May Ban DU Weapons

A federal law in Belgium bans the possession and trade in certain types of weapons, and the statute allows the addition of new weapons if the Parliament finds that the device should be outlawed. The 1933 rule has had anti-personnel land mines and cluster bombs added to the list in recent years.

Senators Sabine de Bethune and Erika Thijs have introduced amendments that, if adopted, would see “weapons containing depleted uranium” added to the list of banned weapons in Belgium. Senator Bethune says of the proposal, “Indeed, in the long-term, [DU weapons] constitute a huge danger for civilians after the conflict has ended. Therefore, Belgium has to be at the forefront of the struggle against the use of weapons with depleted uranium, this by analogy with the worldwide ban on the use of anti-personnel mines.”

## Britain: DU Safer Than Home Smoke Detector

Former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, the equivalent of the U.S. Secretary of State, was asked last November if he would use his seat on the European Council of Ministers to endorse the European Parliament’s November 17, 2005, call for a moratorium on the use of so-called “depleted” uranium munitions. As reported by the British Campaign Against Depleted Uranium (CADU), the

# Pakistan: Friend or Foe? Nuclear Menace

By Paul Vos Benkowski

The notion of nuclear weapons as a deterrent to war works until it is no longer abided and then it is over, over for everyone on earth. Yet the fear of losing a war and the ignorance of not being able to avoid a war drives this build up of nuclear weapons, and to what end? Pakistan and India have been faithful partners in this pissing contest. To consider one without the other would be telling only half the story and as luck would have it Pakistan won the coin toss. Fittingly, because depending on which side of the coin shows, Pakistan is either a favored country by the U.S., following all nuclear concerns, or it is a villainous thug showing its strength while thousands suffer the ravages of nuclear proliferation.

A history of Pakistani nuclear ambitions reveals a program with a singular aim toward nuclear weaponry and the usual consequences of an unsafe industry as well as nefarious scientist, in this case Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, who spearheads the development of a nuclear bomb. Dr. Khan, an Indian born, German trained metallurgist, arrived back in Pakistan after being employed by the URENCO uranium enrichment facility in the Netherlands. He brought with him the knowledge of gas centrifuge technologies as well as allegedly stolen uranium enrichment technologies. He was found guilty of this charge in absentia, only years later to have the charges dropped because he was not properly served court papers. Dr. Khan immediately set to work building, equipping and operating Pakistan’s first gas centrifuge uranium enrichment facility in Kahuta producing highly enriched uranium (HEU). Under Khan’s direction, Pakistan employed an extensive clandestine network in order to obtain the necessary materials and technology for its developing uranium enrichment capabilities from the usual suspects: China, the USSR and other former Soviet Bloc countries.

In 1985, Pakistan crossed the threshold of weapons-grade uranium production, and by 1986 it is thought to have produced enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon. Pakistan continued advancing its uranium enrichment program, and according to Pakistani sources, the nation acquired the ability to carry out a nuclear explosion in 1987. It was not until May 28, 1998, that Pakistan announced that it had successfully conducted five nuclear tests, just two weeks after India had conducted five nuclear weapons tests of their own. Neither Pakistan nor India signed onto the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and both show open contempt for the treaty itself, hence a reckless one-upmanship has brought the two countries dangerously close to nuclear warfare. Even as recently as May 2002, Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf has stated that Pakistan does not want a conflict with India but that if it came to war he would “respond with full might.”

And there beneath the threat of annihilation and the poison of radioactivity are the villagers of Baghalchur, home of Pakistan’s former uranium mine and yellowcake manufacturing site. From the inception of Pakistan’s nuclear program this remote village has been the main source of uranium until it was mined to exhaustion and shut down in 2000. That was the end of the mines but the start of the villager’s troubles as the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) began using the abandoned mines as a dump site for radioactive uranium waste. Though the mines are cordoned off, villagers recall seeing 1,000 barrels of waste dropped off and left outside, just across the road from nearby houses. After weeks of complaints the PAEC finally moved the barrels inside the mines. Unfortunately barrels of waste left outside in plain view are the least of the villager’s

Foreign Office’s formal reply said that “DU is less dangerous than the americium in your household smoke detector.” This standard apples-and-oranges comparison disguises and distracts attention from the deadly hazards of internal radiation contamination (produced by inhalation or ingestion of DU particles). Americium in smoke detectors poses none of the internal threats posed by DU, unless it becomes aerosolized or powdered in a fire.

The Foreign Office letter even went on to claim erroneously that several reports on DU have found that “DU is harmless.” The letter neglected to note that the UK’s Royal Society’s study failed to account for the effects of internal radiation emitters, that the World Health Organization’s efforts have been stymied by interference from member states and that the United Nations Environment Program has not completed a single post-conflict assessment in Iraq or Afghanistan.

## International Coalition Drafts UN General Assembly Resolution on DU

The ICBUW (International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons) has drafted a resolution for consideration by the UN General Assembly. In view of the historic hostility to investigation of the use and effects of DU led by the United States and its client states, the draft is limited in scope — supporting more field study, urging a halt to use of the weapons pending outcome of these studies, invites member states to study the Draft Convention banning DU and

problems. There are two main safety and environmental problems that come with uranium mining: the first is that dangerous poisons, such as arsenic, uranium, molybdenum and other heavy metals find their way into the soil, air and water; and the second is radon gas and its various radioactive products. Near a uranium mine tiny dust particles containing various radionuclides are easily spread by the wind — this toxic wind creates cancers and genetic damage.

Such is the case for the 50,000 people who live in hamlets around the abandoned mine/waste site near Baghalchur and the nearly 500,000 people who live in nearby Dera Ghazi Khan. Local hospital records recount many children being born with extra digits, missing palates or suffering through one month of life with high fevers and unexplained cancers. According to 30 year records the rate of leukemia around Baghalchur is six times higher than the national average. Villagers also talk of their once prized livestock, now frail and dying out at alarming rates. Despite all this evidence the PAEC has stuck to the same party lines that everyone else in the nuclear world adheres to, “we know what we are doing. There is no crisis and there is no evil going on,” said a PAEC spokesperson. “We have no interest in creating an unsafe environment for the citizens of Pakistan.” Yet villagers claim that malodorous piles of “yellowcake” lie in the open air and trucks hauling hundreds of barrels to the site are common.

Despite the comforting reassurances from the PAEC a group of villagers have done the unspeakable and petitioned the Supreme Court of Pakistan with a complaint that the nuclear waste dumped in the area has contaminated the environment and affected the health of both humans and animals — a bold move in a country where the channels of dissent are few and perilous. According to Pervez Hoodbhoy, a physicist and internationally known peace activist, “The fact that ordinary villagers, who are normally frightened of confronting the government, on even minor matters, have dared to take the powerful PAEC to court is a sign of the enormity of the problem.” In response to the charges the PAEC has petitioned the court for more time to gather information and they have also successfully lobbied the court to close the hearings to the public.

Nonetheless this is a familiar tale of nuclear skullduggery that has taken place the world over and one that will surely be repeated, and all for what? Apparently, only for nuclear weapons, because Pakistan’s nuclear output contributes only 2.4 percent toward the country’s electricity. This means the four reactors it is known to have and the twin reactors it is planning to build as well as another reactor with no civil uses whatsoever are busy producing weapons grade plutonium for a singular purpose: weapons. And it was recently announced that the U.S. will assist Pakistan with a planned sale of 36 F-16 jet fighters at a cost of \$6.8 billion dollars. The U.S. has withheld this proposed sale for 15 years to protest Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program but has now decided to move forward with the sale to “reward Pakistan’s assistance in the war on terror.”

So it appears the coin toss has landed in Pakistan’s favor and they once again bask in the glow of U.S. support, much to the chagrin of India. But India’s time will come soon enough and the U.S. will be able to peddle its wares there as well, assuring either a tenuous standoff or mutual destruction. Either way the disregard of human life and the environmental damage caused by every aspect of the nuclear industry, from the dangerous mining of uranium to the irresponsible dumping of radioactive waste, spreads throughout the world, and it will take brave people, such as the besieged villagers of Baghalchur, to take a stand against this reprehensible progression and nuclear menace.

requests that the Secretary General produce a report on “all aspects of the effects of the use of weapons containing depleted uranium.”

The ICBUW is seeking a lead country and partners that are willing to stand up to U.S. harassment and to introduce the resolution to the General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament. Possible leads appear to be Norway, New Zealand, Mexico, Belgium or Finland. Watch for news of progress and join this campaign during the Review Conference for the UN Conventional Weapons Convention, in Geneva this November.

## Military Ignoring its own DU Regulations

The U.S. and British military both continue to disregard their own regulations requiring medical care for individual service personnel exposed to uranium munitions contamination. Pentagon rules mandating clean up of dispersed radioactive contamination caused by exploded uranium shells are also being ignored, according to a former director of the U.S. Army Depleted Uranium Project (ADUP).

“U.S. and British officials have arrogantly refused to comply with their own regulations, orders and directives that require the Department of Defense to provide prompt and effective medical care” to all contaminated troops, said Dr. Doug Rokke, who was assigned to “clean up the initial ‘depleted’ uranium mess from Gulf War I,” in 1991. Dr. Rokke points to the Army’s mandatory requirements on health care and clean up operations — rules that he helped draft following his tenure at the ADUP — in a July 26 article published by the Traprock Peace Center.

Medical attention for soldiers exposed to the toxic, radioactive uranium dust or “metal fumes” that result from the use of the uranium munitions is mandated under Army Regulation — AR 700-48, in a section titled “Medical Management of Unusual Depleted Uranium Casualties,” established in 1993.

Clean up of areas contaminated with the same depleted uranium dust was made mandatory under a separate section of the same regulation.

Dr. Rokke’s paper also documents a campaign of personal attacks waged by the Pentagon and Energy Department against critics of DU weapons. Their use in wars in Iraq, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Bosnia, and their manufacture and testing in: Vieques, Puerto Rico; Colonie, New York; Concord, Massachusetts; Jefferson Proving Grounds, Indiana; and Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, have been condemned by environmentalists, human rights organizations and independent scientists around the world.

“I am dismayed that the DOD and the DOE . . . continue to silence or discredit those of us who are demanding that medical care be provided to all DU casualties and the environmental remediation is completed in compliance with U.S. Army Reg. 700-48.” — Dr. Rokke’s paper is available at: <[www.traprockpeace.org/twomemos.html](http://www.traprockpeace.org/twomemos.html)>

## DU Resources Available

The International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons, now being coordinated by CADU, has launched an informational newsletter — *Friendly Fire* — that is available online at <[www.bandedpleteduranium.org](http://www.bandedpleteduranium.org)>. You may also want to subscribe to: <[info@bandedpleteduranium.org](mailto:info@bandedpleteduranium.org)> in order to stay up-to-date on the latest international news of weapons containing uranium.



*The Pathfinder* is the quarterly newsletter of **Nukewatch**, a project of **The Progressive Foundation**, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded in 1981 by Samuel H. Day, Jr.

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Write us. *The Pathfinder* submission deadlines:  
Nov. 15, Feb. 15, May 15 & Aug. 15.  
Suggested subscription donation: \$25/yr.

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