

Is NATO using Depleted Uranium in Yugoslavia?

The long term effects of the war

Militarily, politically, economically, and socially, the war in Yugoslavia will undoubtedly have a lasting effect on the Balkans. But what are some of the other possible consequences of this military action? If the past sheds any light on the present situation, the use of high-tech weapons by the NATO alliance may have some serious, lasting environmental and health effects on the people of the Balkans.

Much has been written about Gulf War syndrome - the unexplained illness that is rarely acknowledged by the military. No less than 85,000 of Veterans have complained of symptoms ranging from skin disorders, short and long-term memory deficits, confusion and loss of motor skills, trouble controlling bowels and bladder, kidney disorders, respiratory complications, thyroid deterioration, lung and other forms of cancer, hair loss, toxic encephalopathy of the brain, problems with vision, babies with birth defects, and more.

A number of potential causes for Gulf War Syndrome have been presented. Stress, vaccination by the military against botulism, anthrax and other diseases, smoke and chemical pollutants from oil fires, pesticides and insecticides such as DDT, exposure to depleted uranium, parasitic diseases from sand flies, the release of Iraqi chemical, nerve and biological warfare weapons due to their destruction by the allies, and electromagnetic radiation due to the massive numbers of radios, radar and transmitters used are all possibilities. The real cause of the broad spectrum of symptoms associated with Gulf War Syndrome is probably a combination of the above, and varies from person to person. But one of these culprits seems to come up in reports with great regularity - depleted uranium.

Depleted Uranium is literally toxic waste - the remains of uranium-238 and uranium-235 used in nuclear reactors. It is used in tank armor, missile and aircraft counterweights and navigational devices, and in tank, anti-aircraft and anti-personnel artillery. It is 1.7 times as dense as lead, and when used in tank and aircraft ammunition, it allows the rounds to penetrate steel plated armor like a "hot knife through butter". There are over a billion pounds of D.U. in the United States, and is therefore very cheap - not to mention a convenient way to dispose of nuclear waste.

D.U. ammunition was developed in the late 1970s as a counter to the new Warsaw Pact armor, especially as a response to the Soviet T-72 which in many ways surpassed all NATO armor, and was seemingly impenetrable by traditional shells. Tested in battle for the first time in the Gulf War, it did a marvelous job of tearing through Iraqi armored units. According to one veteran, "It leaves a nice round hole, almost like someone had welded it out." Used in US M1 Abrams tanks, Bradley armored personnel carriers, and the A-10 Warthog "tank killer" planes; some 14,000 large caliber, and 940,000 smaller caliber D.U. rounds were fired during the 100 hour ground war, destroying 1,400 Iraqi tanks. (The Nation, October 21, 1996)

Yet for all its effectiveness, the D.U. round has one slight drawback - it is radioactive. D.U. emits low-level radiation and is therefore poisonous. According to the Military Toxins Project it is "roughly 60% as radioactive as naturally occurring uranium and has a half-life of 4.5 billion years." When a D.U. round hits its target, up to 70% of the D.U. penetrator is oxidized - causing an aerosol of tiny radioactive particles that can travel hundreds of miles.

During the war, there were literally thousands of veterans who crawled into burned out Iraqi tanks looking for souvenirs. One study by the Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm Association found that out of 10,051 Gulf War veterans who have reported mysterious illnesses, 82 percent had entered captured enemy vehicles. There were also incidents of ammo trucks exploding - leaving a cloud of radioactivity hovering over Army bases. Also, in several friendly fire incidents, pieces of D.U. shrapnel made their way into allied soldiers. Other soldiers used smaller D.U. rounds or chunks of D.U. shrapnel and wore them as necklaces. Said one soldier, "We didn't know any better. We didn't find out until long after we were home that there even was such a thing as D.U." (The Nation, October 21, 1996)

Yet the Pentagon would also have us believe that Gulf War Syndrome cannot be traced to exposure to D.U. In a 121-page study issued in 1998, it claims that while many thousands were exposed to radiation due to D.U., "the possibility of receiving an intake high enough to cause health effects is extremely remote." (The Examiner, August 5, 1998)

This assessment has been called a lie and an absolute fabrication. Paul Sullivan, executive director of the National Gulf War Resource Center, a Washington, D.C.-based coalition of veterans groups, says, "We believe the people looking into the microscopes - not the propaganda artists at the Pentagon who have a policy of promoting the use of depleted uranium ammunition." In response to the report, one veteran suffering kidney, respiratory and skin disorders since the war commented ironically, "I guess I'm not sick." (The Examiner, August 5, 1998)

This is how the Pentagon treats its men and women in the armed services. From a Marxist perspective, soldiers are nothing but workers in uniform, so it is no surprise they are treated with the contempt with which the ruling class sees all members of the working class. Lies, deception, evasion, and half-truths are the norm when it comes to "objective" information from the Pentagon. But why should it tell the truth? Weapons using D.U. are part of the reason for the much higher than expected performance of anti-tank operations in Iraq. As Dan Fahey, a former Navy officer who served in the Gulf War says, "the Army seems to think that if they are going to keep using D.U., the less they tell people about it the better." (The Nation, October 21, 1996)

But not only that. The restrictions for the sale of D.U. ammunition are minimal, so it is very likely that in the future, US troops themselves will have to confront these weapons - this time on the receiving end. Even the traditionally conservative Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion recently passed resolutions calling on the Defense Department to reconsider its use of these weapons. Ironically, there is an alternative to the use of D.U. in the manufacturing of armor-piercing shells - tungsten. Yet even though tungsten is almost as effective as D.U., and without the risk of radioactive poisoning, it is more expensive, and must be imported. Thus, as in all cases of capitalist "morality" and "public safety", it comes down to profit. As Bill Arkin, a columnist for The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists who has consulted on D.U. for Greenpeace and Human Rights Watch says, "It's just a cost issue." (The Nation, October 21, 1996)

However the effects of D.U. go far beyond the veterans of the Gulf War. The people of Iraq are the real losers in this disaster. At the end of the Gulf War, some 300 tons of expended D.U. materiel was left behind by US forces in Iraq and Kuwait. This represents a virtual toxic waste dump, which will haunt the region for decades.

The dangers of low-level radioactive exposure are well documented. Frogs with nine legs, rabbits with four ears, fish with three eyes and worse have been found in areas of the world contaminated by nuclear waste. Since the end of the war, there has been a sharp rise in cases of leukemia, other forms of cancer, birth defects, and unexplained diseases in the southern Iraqi region of Basra. According to a report from the British Atomic Energy Authority leaked to the London Independent in November 1991, there was enough D.U. left behind to account for up to 500,000

potential deaths due to cancer. However, this figure was based on an estimate that only 40 tons of D.U. was left behind!

Thousands of Iraqi children picked up empty shells as toys, bringing them home and placing them in their homes. In one case, a little girl collected 12 of them, and died thereafter of leukemia. One researcher for the Austrian chapter of Yellow Cross International, gathered D.U. rounds in Iraq, but had them confiscated upon entering Germany. He was told that just one projectile emitted more radiation in five hours than is allowed per year under German regulations! To clean up such a mess would cost billions if it were even possible, and of course the Pentagon happily points out that "no international law, treaty, regulation, or custom requires the U.S. to remediate Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm battlefields." (The Nation, October 21, 1996)

As if an embargo that has killed no less than one million civilians since the end of the Gulf War were not enough, the people of Iraq must now live in a land contaminated by radioactive waste. The state of healthcare in Iraq is appalling - many hospitals cannot stock enough gauze and anesthetics, let alone attempt to deal with the alarming rates of cancer and birth defects. This is the legacy of the Gulf War.

Now the United States and its NATO allies are waging an undeclared war on Yugoslavia, with supposed "humanitarian" intentions. Much has been made recently of the fact that NATO forces are attacking units responsible for the "ethnic cleansing" of Kosovo - troop concentrations, armored personnel carriers and tanks. It is interesting to observe that on one side of the battlefield, the Yugoslav Army uses the same Soviet-era equipment that the D.U. rounds were developed to destroy. On the other, the US is using the A-10 "tank-busting" planes to go after many of these targets. It does not take a genius to put two and two together - it is highly likely that this radioactive anti-tank ammunition is part of NATO's arsenal in Yugoslavia.

But even more unsettling is the significant evidence that laser and satellite-guided bombs and missiles may also be produced using D.U. These high-tech weapons are well known to hit residential areas as well as "military targets" such as automobile factories and heating plants with "pinpoint accuracy". According to The Iraqi press: "In a letter from Robin Cook to the relief organization [the WHO], the minister mentioned US forces as the principal accomplice in the crime of firing, in his own words, far more than the 100 depleted uranium-coated missiles that the British did." (Baghdad al-Qadisiyah June 4, 1998)

We are all familiar by now with the images of mini-mushroom clouds billowing over the scorched remains of military and civilian targets in Yugoslavia. If these already terrifying weapons of mass destruction have in fact been made more "effective" by the addition of depleted uranium, then the environmental and health hazards posed by launching missiles and dropping bombs over civilian areas is almost unimaginable.

While not yet substantiated, several governments, as well as environmental groups have alleged that the D.U. round is in fact being used in Yugoslavia. Moreover, there is compelling evidence that D.U. ammunition was used by NATO in the 1995 bombing of Bosnia. According to the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency, when bombing military and civilian targets in the Serb Republic, NATO forces "used special ammunition made of depleted uranium that exposed the armed forces, the civilian population, and the whole environment to the danger of radioactive contamination". (Belgrade NIN, November 30, 1997)

The same publication states:

"While the creators of the Dayton peace agreement, with all their efforts, have been trying to maintain the mosaic of a state whose future is still uncertain, medical experts and members of some ecological movements and organizations have been warning for two years that the local

people were not only victims of mutual destruction, but also of a morbid NATO experiment, the consequences of which, it is certain, will be far-reaching." (Belgrade NIN November 4, 1997)

And:

"The frequent appearance of "Gulf syndrome" in the regions of Sarajevo, Foca, Doboje and Knin is grounds for suspicion that the NATO aviation, breaching the Geneva conventions on the protection of the victims of war, used radioactive projectiles in the Serb Republic and the Knin Krajina (the covering of which contains 'depleted' uranium), just as they did during operation "Desert Storm." (Belgrade NIN November 4, 1997)

The United States and its allies are perfectly aware of the danger posed by leaving these expended rounds in the environment. If not why would so many close military allies demand investigations into the use of D.U. on their territory? In 1997, there was a dispute with the Japanese over the use of D.U. bullets by US troops at firing ranges on Japanese soil. Environmental activists in South Korea want these types of weapons removed. There has also been controversy over the use of these rounds by the British military at testing grounds in Scotland. Even American satellite Panama has lodged similar complaints. Burned out tanks hit by friendly fire during the Gulf War were later buried in a radioactive waste disposal site run by the Energy Department. So any attempts at writing off D.U. as "harmless" are ridiculous.

The consequences of NATO aggression may reach far beyond the tragic deaths and displacement of countless civilians, the destruction of the infrastructure of Yugoslavia, and the further destabilization of the region. As Bill Arkin of The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists said, "nobody ever thought through what would happen when we shoot a lot of this stuff around the battlefield. It's not a question of whether a thousand soldiers were exposed or fifty soldiers were exposed. We were probably lucky in the Gulf War. What happens when we're fighting a war that makes the Gulf War look like small potatoes?" (The Nation, October 21, 1996)

The use of air-delivered D.U. weapons is ghastly enough, but if ground troops are brought in, and with them tanks, artillery, air defense and other units capable of firing D.U. rounds, the results could be catastrophic. Is this the "humanitarian" mission of NATO? For all the talk of returning the Kosovar Albanians to their homes, the question must be asked - what sort of homes will they be? Many villages have already been bombed and burned to the ground by NATO or Serb paramilitary forces. Must they also face the prospect of living in a land poisoned by radioactive waste? We have seen the attitude of the US and its allies towards the remediation of battlefields in Iraq - we can only assume they will have no greater consideration for the long-term well being of the people of Yugoslavia.

This is the face of imperialism in the age of capitalist decay. The events which are unfolding in Yugoslavia are a vivid confirmation of Lenin's words when he described capitalism as "horror without end". Until recently, these images of massacre, terror, and mass exodus were thought to be a thing of the past, or were confined to "insignificant" parts of the world like Rwanda, Burundi, or Angola. First in Croatia, then Bosnia-Herzegovina, now in the emaciated remains of Yugoslavia itself, this anguish has returned to the heart of Europe with a force not seen since World War II. Yet it is qualitatively more destructive and alarming than in the past - this is warfare with weapons more dreadful and inhumane than before. Not only will the living be forced to suffer, but quite likely many generations of Balkan people will suffer the consequences of this unbridled imperialist brutality.

NATO aggression must be unconditionally opposed. There is absolutely nothing progressive in its selfish aims in the Balkans. Slobodan Milosevic and his clique of nationalist demagogues must also be opposed. Only a socialist alternative can put an end to this bloody quagmire. Only a voluntary federation of all Balkan peoples based on the democratic control of the means of

production, distribution, and exchange, in harmony with the environment, can lead humanity out of the blind alley of capitalism, and to a Socialist Federation of the World.

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The author is interested in receiving any views, comments or criticisms of this article. Send e-mail to socialistlabor@iname.com

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