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Cancer as Weapon: Sowing Battlefields With Depleted Uranium



Mark 149 Mod 2 20mm depleted uranium ammunition for the Phalanx CIWS aboard USS Missouri. Photo: US Navy.

*With the UK's unconscionable decision to send Depleted Uranium ammunition to Ukraine, it's perhaps useful to revisit the environmental and health consequences of the US's widespread use of such weapons in Iraq and Kuwait during the first Gulf War. This short essay is adapted from my book, *Been Brown So Long It Looked Like Green to Me: the Politics of Nature*.*

At the close of the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussein was denounced as a ferocious villain for ordering his retreating troops to destroy Kuwaiti oil fields, clotting the air with poisonous clouds of black smoke and saturating the ground with swamps of crude. It was justly called an environmental war crime.

But months of bombing of Iraq by US and British planes and cruise missiles has left behind an even more deadly and insidious legacy: tons of shell casings, bullets and bomb fragments laced with depleted uranium. In all, the US hit Iraqi targets with more than 970 radioactive bombs and missiles.

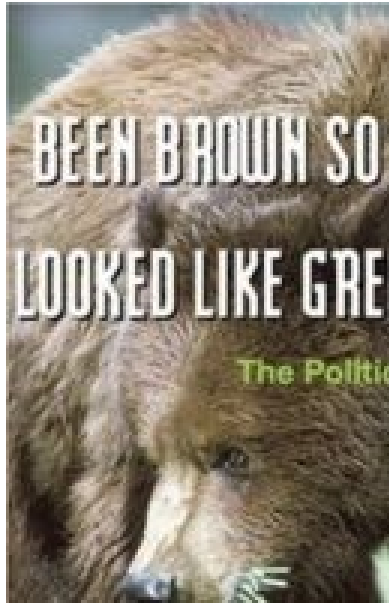
It took less than a decade for the health consequences from this radioactive bombing campaign to begin to coming into focus. And they are dire, indeed. Iraqi physicians call it “the white death”-leukemia. Since 1990, the incident rate of leukemia in Iraq has grown by more than 600 percent. The situation is compounded by Iraq’s forced isolations and the sadistic sanctions regime, recently described by UN secretary general Kofi Annan as “a humanitarian crisis”, that makes detection and treatment of the cancers all the more difficult.

“We have proof of traces of DU in samples taken for analysis and that is really bad for those who assert that cancer cases have grown for other reasons,” said Dr. Umid Mubarak, Iraq’s health minister.

Mubarak contends that the US’s fear of facing the health and environmental consequences of its DU bombing campaign is partly behind its failure to follow through on its commitments under a deal allowing Iraq to sell some of its vast oil reserves in return for food and medical supplies.

“The desert dust carries death,” said Dr. Jawad Al-Ali, an oncologist and member England’s Royal Society of Physicians. “Our studies indicate that more than forty percent of the population around Basra will get cancer. We are living through another Hiroshima.” Most of the leukemia and cancer victims aren’t soldiers. They are civilians. And many of them are children. The US-dominated Iraqi Sanctions Committee in New York has denied Iraq’s repeated requests for cancer treatment equipment and drugs, even painkillers such as morphine. As a result, the overflowing hospitals in towns such as Basra are left to treat the cancer-stricken with aspirin.

This is part of a larger horror inflicted on Iraq that sees as many as 180 children dying



every day, according to mortality figures compiled by UNICEF, from a catalogue of diseases from the 19th century: cholera, dysentery, tuberculosis, e. coli, mumps, measles, influenza.

Iraqis and Kuwaitis aren't the only ones showing signs of uranium contamination and sickness. Gulf War veterans, plagued by a variety of illnesses, have been found to have traces of uranium in their blood, feces, urine and semen.

Depleted uranium is a rather benign sounding name for uranium-238, the trace elements left behind when the fissionable material is extracted from uranium-235 for use in nuclear reactors and weapons. For decades, this waste was a radioactive nuisance, piling up at plutonium processing plants across the country. By the late 1980s there was nearly a billion tons of the material.

Then weapons designers at the Pentagon came up with a use for the tailings: they could be molded into bullets and bombs. The material was free and there was plenty at hand. Also uranium is a heavy metal, denser than lead. This makes it perfect for use in armor-penetrating weapons, designed to destroy tanks, armored-personnel carriers and bunkers.

When the tank-busting bombs explode, the depleted uranium oxidizes into microscopic fragments that float through the air like carcinogenic dust, carried on the desert winds for decades. The lethal dust is inhaled, sticks to the fibers of the lungs, and eventually begins to wreck havoc on the body: tumors, hemorrhages, ravaged immune systems, leukemias.

In 1943, the doomsday men associated with the Manhattan Project speculated that uranium and other radioactive materials could be spread across wide swaths of land to contain opposing armies. Gen. Leslie Grove, head of the project, asserted that uranium weapons

could be expected to cause “permanent lung damage.” In the late, 1950s Al Gore’s father, the senator from Tennessee, proposed dousing the demilitarized zone in Korea with uranium as a cheap failsafe against an attack from the North Koreans.

After the Gulf War, Pentagon war planners were so delighted with the performance of their radioactive weapons that ordered a new arsenal and under Bill Clinton’s orders fired them at Serb positions in Bosnia, Kosovo and Serbia. More than a 100 of the DU bombs have been used in the Balkans over the last six years.

Already medical teams in the region have detected cancer clusters near the bomb sites. The leukemia rate in Sarajevo, pummeled by American bombs in 1996, has tripled in the last five years. But it’s not just the Serbs who are ill and dying. NATO and UN peacekeepers in the region are also coming down with cancer. As of January 23, eight Italian soldiers who served in the region have died of leukemia.

The Pentagon has shuffled through a variety of rationales and excuses. First, the Defense Department shrugged off concerns about Depleted Uranium as wild conspiracy theories by peace activists, environmentalists and Iraqi propagandists. When the US’s NATO allies demanded that the US disclose the chemical and metallic properties of its munitions, the Pentagon refused. It has also refused to order testing of US soldiers stationed in the Gulf and the Balkans.

If the US has kept silent, the Brits haven’t. A 1991 study by the UK Atomic Energy Authority predicted that if less than 10 percent of the particles released by depleted uranium weapons used in Iraq and Kuwait were inhaled it could result in as many as “300,000 probable deaths.”

The British estimate assumed that the only radioactive ingredient in the bombs dropped on Iraq was depleted uranium. It wasn’t. A new study of the materials inside these weapons describes them as a “nuclear cocktail,” containing a mix of radioactive elements, including plutonium and the highly radioactive isotope uranium-236. These elements are 100,000 times more dangerous than depleted uranium.

Typically, the Pentagon has tried to dump the blame on the Department of Energy’s sloppy handling of its weapons production plants. This is how Pentagon spokesman Craig Quigley described the situation in chop-logic worthy of the pen of Joseph Heller.: “The source of the contamination as best we can understand it now was the plants themselves that produced the Depleted uranium during the 20 some year time frame when the DU was produced.”

Indeed, the problems at DoE nuclear sites and the contamination of its workers and contractors have been well-known since the 1980s. A 1991 Energy Department memo reports: “during the process of making fuel for nuclear reactors and elements for nuclear weapons, the Paducah gaseous diffusion plant... created depleted uranium potentially containing neptunium and plutonium”

But such excuses in the absence of any action to address the situation are growing very thin indeed. Doug Rokke, the health physicist for the US Army who oversaw the partial clean up of depleted uranium bomb fragments in Kuwait, is now sick. His body registers 5,000 times the level of radiation considered “safe”. He knows where to place the blame. “There can be no reasonable doubt about this,” Rokke told Australian journalist John Pilger. “As a result of heavy metal and radiological poison of DU, people in southern Iraq are experiencing respiratory problems, kidney problems, cancers. Members of my own team have died or are dying from cancer.”

Depleted uranium has a half-life of more than 4 billion years, approximately the age of the Earth. Thousand of acres of land in the Balkans, Kuwait and southern Iraq have been contaminated forever. If George Bush Sr., Dick Cheney, Colin Powell and Bill Clinton are still casting about for a legacy, there’s a grim one that will stay around for an eternity.

Jeffrey St. Clair is editor of *CounterPunch*. His most recent book is [*An Orgy of Thieves: Neoliberalism and Its Discontents*](#) (with Alexander Cockburn). He can be reached at: sitka@comcast.net or on Twitter [@JeffreyStClair3](https://twitter.com/JeffreyStClair3).

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