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A Hazardous Decision: Supplying Ukraine with Depleted Uranium Shells



Photograph Source:

http://www.deploymentlink.osd.mil/du_library/du_balkans/images/fig1.gif – Public

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Should they be taking them? Ukraine is desperate for any bit of warring materiel its armed forces can lay their hands on, but depleted uranium shells would surely not be a model example of use. And yet, the UK, in an act of killing with kindness, is happy to

fork them out to aid the cause against the Russians, despite the scandals, the alleged illnesses, and environmental harms.

An outline of the measure was provided by Minister of state for defence Baroness Annabel Goldie's written answer to a question posed by Lord Hylton: "Alongside our granting of a squadron of Challenger 2 main battle tanks to Ukraine, we will be providing ammunition including armour piercing rounds which contain depleted uranium. Such rounds are highly effective in defeating modern tanks and armoured vehicles."

The response from the Kremlin was swift. "If all this happens," warned Russian President Vladimir Putin, "Russia will have to respond accordingly, given that the West collectively is already beginning to use weapons with a nuclear component." Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu also foresaw "nuclear collision".

The statement from Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of the Russian lower house, shifted the focus from potential nuclear catastrophe to the field of medical consequences, reminding his fellow members that the use of such ammunition by the US in former Yugoslavia and Iraq had led to "radioactive contamination and a sharp rise in oncological cases."

News networks were left trying to convey a picture to the public, much of it skimpy on the perilous consequences arising from using such munitions. The BBC's characteristic language of understatement notes that such uranium, stripped of much of its radioactive content, "makes weapons more powerful, but it is feared those weapons could be a threat to people in areas where they are used."

Sky News had its own benign interpretation of the dangers, suggesting that DU, in emitting alpha particles, did not "have enough energy to go through skin, so exposure to the outside of the body is not considered a serious hazard." An admission as to the dangers had to follow. "It can be a serious health hazard, however, if it is swallowed or inhaled."

The US Department of Veterans Affairs outlines a few points on the matter in greater detail. "When a projectile made with DU penetrates a vehicle, small particles of DU can be formed and breathed in or swallowed by service members in the struck vehicle. Small DU fragments can also scatter and become embedded in muscle and soft tissue."

Since their use in the Gulf War (1991), the Kosovo War (1999), the Iraq War (2003) and Afghanistan, the curriculum vitae of such weapons has become increasingly blotchy. The use of such shells has been contentious to the point of being criminal, said to be carcinogenic and a cause of birth defects. A study examining a civilian population sample

from Eastern Afghanistan, published in 2005, revealed that “contamination in Afghanistan with a source consistent with natural uranium has resulted in total concentrations up to 100 times higher than the normal range for various geographic and environmental areas throughout the world.”

Subsequent field research, notably in Iraq, has found instances of serious birth defects, including congenital heart disease, paralysis, missing limbs and neurological problems. While some of these outcomes can be attributable to other activities of the US military and its allies, the role of DU looms large.

The nature of such weaponry is also indiscriminate. As a law firm representing US war veterans acknowledges, those involved in campaigns, notably in Iraq, “may have been exposed to depleted uranium as a result of being in a vehicle that was hit by a projectile, being exposed to burning depleted uranium, or salvaging the wreckage of a vehicle that was hit by a depleted uranium projectile.”

The Department of Veterans Affairs has also admitted that DU is a “potential health hazard if it enters the body, such as through embedded fragments, contaminated wounds, and inhalation or ingestion.” It prefers, however, to treat each claim for disability that might have been the result of DU poisoning “on a case-by-case basis.”

The claimed lack of unequivocal evidence linking such projectiles to adverse effects on the environment and humans has been a consistent theme in investigations – and a boon for militaries using them. A committee of review established by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia that covered, among other things, the use of these shells by NATO forces in the Kosovo campaign, proved less than satisfactory.

In recommending that no investigation be commenced regarding the bombing campaign – hardly a surprise – the members had to concede that NATO’s responses to any queries were “couched in general terms and failed to address specific incidents.” The Committee also found no consensus on whether the “use of such projectiles violate general principles of the law applicable to use of weapons in armed conflict.”

The UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights proved more forthright on the issue, claiming in a resolution that DU are weapons with indiscriminate effects and should therefore be prohibited under international humanitarian law. The UN General Assembly’s latest resolution on the matter, however, suggested a distinct lack of backbone, noting that “studies conducted so far by relevant international organizations have not provided a detailed enough account of the magnitude of the potential long-term effects on human

beings and the environment of the use of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium.”

Little wonder, given such a muddled frame of mind, that the use of DU projectiles has persisted with some relish, despite an avalanche of studies warning of their dangers. Nature abhors a vacuum and fills it accordingly with the mean and ghastly. In November 2015, 5000 rounds of DU ammunition were used in an air raid on oil trucks used by Islamic State forces despite assurances from the US military that it had stopped using such weapons. As to whether it will supply Kyiv with this hazardous product remains unclear – the Pentagon is proving reticent on the subject.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament has attacked the UK’s decision. Its General Secretary, Kate Hudson, outlined her concerns in a statement: “CND has repeatedly called for the UK government to place an immediate moratorium on the use of depleted uranium weapons and to fund long-term studies into their health and environmental impacts.”

Short of a clear treaty on the subject, preferably one with teeth, this is much wishful thinking. The Ukrainian forces, however, should give the whole matter a second thought: the effects of such weapons will not distinguish between the users, the targets, and the civilians. In the long run, it will also prove unsparing to the environment, which promises to be richly contaminated by the toxicity of such lingering munitions.

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