Nukewatch on Uranium Weapons, Before the Dutch Parliament's Committee on Defense

Editor's note: I had the honor of joining an expert panel that presented information on "depleted" uranium (DU) weapons on Feb. 14 to the Dutch Parliament's Standing Committee on Defense, in The Hague, Holland.

Beginning in March 2003, the Dutch had about 1,100 troops in southern Iraq (hit hard by U.S. DU in 1991). They were withdrawn in April 2005, but today about 2,000 Dutch "peacekeeping" soldiers are stationed — until July 2010 — in central Afghanistan.

Asked by Krista van Velzen, Socialist Party Member of Parliament, to speak about the U.S. military's use of DU, these are the slightly expanded remarks I submitted to the committee.~ John LaForge

According to a June 1995 statement by the U.S. Army's Environmental Policy Institute, "Depleted uranium is a radioactive waste and, as such, should be deposited in a licensed repository." The U.S. has been shooting this radioactive waste, in the form of armor-piercing shells, at people around the world: At testing ranges in the U.S., South Korea and on Vieques, at populated areas in Iraq (380 tons in 1991, at least 170 tons in 2003), Afghanistan in 2001 (amounts unknown), Kosovo in 1999 (10 tons), and Bosnia in 1994-5 (5 tons).

Like earlier Pentagon denials about the hazards of Agent Orange, the defoliant widely used in Indochina, or above-ground bomb tests in Nevada, or workplace radiation hazards in H-bomb factories, the U.S. military claims publicly that uranium munitions are not known to cause health problems. Yet, some of the strongest evidence to the contrary comes from its own reports.

On August 16, 1993, the Army's Office of the Surgeon General issued its "Depleted Uranium (DU) Safety Training" manual. The document says the expected effects of DU exposure include possible increase of cancer (lung and bone) and kidney damage. It recommends that the Army "… convene a working group … to identify countermeasures against DU exposure …"

In 1979, the U.S. Army Mobility Equipment, Research & Development Command warned, "Not only the people in the immediate vicinity (emergency and fire fighting personnel) but also people at distances downwind from the fire are faced with potential over-exposure to airborne uranium dust."

In 1995, the U.S. Army Environmental Policy Institute reported, "The radiation dose to critical organs depends upon the amount of time that depleted uranium resides in the organs. When this value is known or estimated, cancer and hereditary risk estimates can be determined." Depleted uranium has the potential to generate "significant medical consequences" if it enters the body.

In 1993, the U.S. Army Surgeon General's Office said, "When soldiers inhale or ingest DU dust, they incur a potential increase in cancer risk. The magnitude of that increase can be quantified … if the DU intake is known …. Expected physiological effects from exposure to DU dust include possible increased risk of cancer (lung or bone) and kidney damage."

The Armed Forces Radiobiology Research Institute found that, "In animal studies, embedded DU, unlike most metals, dissolves and spreads throughout the body depositing in organs like the spleen and the brain, and a pregnant female rat will pass DU along to a developing fetus."

In 1990, the Army's Armaments, Munitions and Chemical Command radiological task group has said that depleted uranium is a "low level alpha radiation emitter … linked to cancer when exposures are internal, [and] chemical toxicity causing kidney damage." The report said that "long term effects of low doses [of DU] have been implicated in cancer … there is no dose so low that the probability of effect is zero."

The military has a long history of deliberately exposing U.S. citizens to dangerous radiation without their knowledge or consent, beginning with the open-air bomb tests that the Pentagon knew would contaminate vast areas. The Atomic Energy Commission considered warning or even evacuating populations they knew would be hit hard by radioactive fallout, but chose to do neither.

These bomb tests exposed Nevada Test Site workers to levels of radiation that the Atomic Energy Commission knew could cause harm. Government records show that the AEC chose not to reduce workers' exposures or to even inform them because doing so would have halted the bomb testing program.

The U.S. government, even after learning of the dangers, refused to inform 600,000 H-bomb-factory workers that their radiation exposures posed serious health risks. Atomic Energy Commission records show that although enough was known in 1948 about radiation to warn the workers, the AEC chose not to do so.

Thousands of unethical human radiation experiments were conducted on thousands of unwitting U.S. citizens between 1944 and 1974, and were covered up for decades. Plutonium was injected into hapless prison inmates and hospital patients including pregnant women, radioactive oatmeal was fed to orphaned children, and over 250,000 soldiers were marched toward ground zero immediately after bomb test detonations.

That the Pentagon has now exposed civilians in foreign countries to radiation exposures it knew could cause cancer, leukemia, lymphoma and other deadly diseases, should come as no surprise to informed citizens.

Just last October, the Associated Press reported that in 1948 the U.S. Army studied the use of "radioactive materials from atomic bomb-making to contaminate swaths of enemy land or to target military bases, factories or troop formations." The Army reported in 1945 that "radioactive fission products from a uranium fueled reactor could be extracted and used 'like a particularly vicious form of poison gas.'"

These days, since the U.S. has actually used "radioactive materials from atomic bomb-making to contaminate swaths of enemy land" — namely uranium munitions by the ton — the military is quick to say that any contamination of soil and water in Kosovo, Bosnia, Afghanistan or Iraq is "incidental" and unrelated to cancers and other health problems experienced by exposed civilians, peace-keeping troops and combat forces.

Even when "radioactive fission products from a uranium fueled reactor" were "extracted and used like a particularly vicious form of poison gas," Pentagon and NATO officials have dismissed the public uproar. In 2001, when plutonium, neptunium and americium — isotopes created only inside reactors — were found in contaminated areas of Kosovo hit by uranium shells, "U.S. officials said the shells contained mere traces of plutonium, not enough to cause harm." NATO representatives said likewise, "Traces of plutonium were not relevant to soldiers' health because of their minute quantities."

Any NATO or Pentagon official who can blandly trivialize the health impact of plutonium exposure should be invited — by parliaments and veterans the world over — to voluntarily ingest a few "mere traces." Their answer to the invitation would be more informative than their lullabies.

Finally, the militaries that both use uranium weaponry and make official denials about its harmfulness have a state interest in avoiding financial liability, and a personal interest in dodging legal liability in the International Criminal Court. It is no wonder the Pentagon and U.S. Department of State object so strenuously to the mere idea of the ICC's universal jurisdiction. They are scared because the law of armed conflict applies to international hostilities regardless of whether a declared "war" exists, and because, under the Hague and Geneva Conventions, "It is especially forbidden to employ poison or poisoned weapons."

— For a footnoted version of this testimony, contact Nukewatch, nukewatch@lakeland.ws

13 Million Pounds of "Unimportant" DU Waste Sent from Kuwait to U.S.

After taking a worried call from members of a Longshoreman's Union about radioactive cargo coming into port, the Washington state *Daily News Online's* Eric Olson reports in a series of articles that 6,700 tons (13.4 million pounds) of uranium-contaminated sand has been shipped from a U.S. military base in Kuwait to a private landfill in Idaho.

The Kuwaiti sand was contaminated with so-called "depleted" uranium, or DU, when an ammunition truck caught fire at the U.S. Army's Camp Doha — a warehouse complex north of Kuwait City — during the 1991 U.S. war in the Persian Gulf.

The Army says it placed the contaminated sand into 306 special bags that were then put in containers. The German cargo ship *BBC Alabama*, flagged in Barbuda, then carried the rad waste to the Port of Longview, north of Portland, Oregon on the Columbia River in Washington state, under a contract reportedly paid for by the Kuwaiti government.

The Longview Longshoremen's Union that had alerted *The Daily News* off-loaded the canisters, which were then sent by rail to American Ecology Corp.'s Grand View, Idaho dump located in the Owyhee desert, 70 miles southeast of Boise. The transport required two separate 76-car railroad shipments which were to be completed by May 22.

American Ecology, headquartered in Boise, operates the Grand View dump and three others — in Beatty, Nevada, Robstown, Texas and Hanford, Washington. AE's Grand View Project manager Chad Hyslop claimed the rail shipment was safe because the concentration of uranium in the sand is so low, "about 10 parts per trillion." In an interview with *The Daily News* on April 15, Hyslop said, without citing particular documentation, "We're talking about levels that you see in nature."

The sand contains "unimportant quantities of source material," according to a Sept. 13 letter from the NRC to the U.S. Army that *The Daily News's* Eric Olson obtained from the port. "Source material" is the NRC's euphemism for cancer-causing radioactive wastes.

Yet if the sand's uranium concentration was actually "low," "unimportant" and at levels one sees "in nature," Kuwait would have no reason to ship 13 million pounds a total of 7,239 miles to a U.S. landfill.

Mike Wilcox, vice president of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union Local 21, told *The Daily News*' Olson he was concerned about the safety of longshoremen and the entire community.

"You hear 'depleted uranium,' and I don't know what it is, but it's dangerous," Wilcox told *The Daily News*.

The U.S. and Britain used hundreds of tons of uranium-238 in armor-piercing ammunition fired from battle tanks, helicopter gunships and warplanes. The ammunition was shot into Iraq, Kuwait, Bosnia, Kosovo and most likely Afghanistan during U.S. and NATO bombardments. The United Nations Environment Program has recommended that DU-contaminated topsoil in Kosovo be removed because of the threat the uranium poses to civilians and the food chain.

European Parliament Strengthens Call For DU Moratorium

An overwhelming majority of the European Parliament has called for a moratorium on the use of DU weapons, and for increased pressure for more research on the munitions' effects — leading ultimately to a treaty banning the munitions.

The EP's May 22 resolution, "strongly reiterates its call on all [27] EU Member States and [26] NATO countries to impose a moratorium on the use of depleted uranium weapons and to redouble efforts towards a global ban." It was the fifth and strongest yet in a series of anti-DU resolutions by the Parliament and was approved with 491 votes in favor, 18 against and 12 abstentions.

The joint resolution adopted by Parliament "urges the Member States to adhere to paragraph 1 of the UN resolution adopted on 5 December 2007 and to submit a report with their views on the effects of the use of armaments and ammunition containing depleted uranium."

The resolution's Section Eight, "Calls on the Member States and the Council to take the lead in working — through the UN or through a 'coalition of the willing' — towards an international treaty establishing a ban on the development, production, stockpiling, transfer, testing and use of uranium weapons as well as the destruction or recycling of existing stocks, should there be conclusive scientific evidence of harm caused by such weapons."

The relentless anti-DU campaigner Ria Verjauw from Belgium, a board member with the International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons, wrote on May 23, "This is a very good lobbying document, especially now that the EP urges member states to submit a report on the harmfulness of DU weapons."

The U.S. Knew About Consequences of Depleted Uranium — British expert

"The United States had information about the dangers of depleted uranium a whole year before the air strike campaign against then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999," according to British scientist Keith Baverstock in an interview with the Frankfurt-based Serbian language daily *Vesti.* Baverstock is the former director of the World Health Organization's European Office of the Radiological Protection Service, and was a participant in the February 14 expert panel on depleted uranium in the Hague.

"We started to see that depleted uranium is not only toxic — that is, bad for kidneys, bones, liver and the lymph system — but also becomes genotoxic when it enters the body, which always leads to cancer," Baverstock told *Vesti*.

He explained that one does not know which elements in the DU cause genotoxicity, and that U.S. military forces and its own Institute for Radiological Research obtained this information after the U.S. hit its own troops with DU anti-tank shells by mistake in its bombardment of Iraq in 1991. ***— JL***