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Troops in Gulf to use depleted uranium shells

IAN BRUCE

- "The shame is that if there is an invasion of Iraq, then hundreds of allied servicemen and perhaps thousands of Iraqi civilians are going to be exposed to the killer after-effects once again."

THE two armoured regiments which will form the spearhead of any British contribution to a US-led attack on Iraq will be relying on radioactive! depleted uranium shells to fight their way through the tanks of Saddam Hussein's republican guard, military sources admitted yesterday.

The DU rounds, blamed by veterans for contributing to Gulf war syndrome, a rash of terminal illnesses suffered by those who served in Kosovo in 1999, and by environmentalists for long-term radioactive soil contamination, will also have to be test-fired on Kuwaiti ranges before the British Challenger 2 crews can go into action.

DU is the most effective anti-tank weapon ever devised. Formed into penetrator rods from low-level nuclear reactor waste, it is capable of generating massive kinetic energy which can smash through all known armour.

The other characteristics which make it attractive for conversion to munitions is that it is the densest material on the market, available in large quantities, and is virtually free as an unwanted waste-product of the atomic energy industry.

The Ministry of Defence announced last year it was to buy a tungsten-tipped, armour-piercing round amid concern over the side-effects of the DU shells, although it continues to deny that the ammunition is the source of cancers contracted by servicemen in areas where it was used in battle since its introduction in 1991.

The Royal Navy has also stopped using DU shells for the Phalanx rapid-fire anti-missile gatling guns fitted to most surface warships as a last-ditch defence, because the American manufacturer ceased production to avoid potential lawsuits.

Tank crews in the British, American, French and Russian armies still insist that it is the most effective type of shell they have and most are willing to risk the effects of low-level radiation as an alternative to using tungsten-tipped or other kinds of ammunition.

A direct hit with a DU round at 1500 metres - the optimum battle range for tanks - is almost certain to destroy an enemy vehicle and its crew.

Although there is almost no danger to crewmen handling the DU rounds, when they punch through an enemy tank they disintegrate in a cloud of uranium dioxide dust.

This can be breathed in by anyone near the stricken vehicle for some time after the impact. While veterans' organisations claim the particles can cause brain, lung and lymph node cancers, the MoD insists the risks are "overstated" and that it would take 50 hours for troops involved in salvaging damaged or knocked-out armoured vehicles to inhale enough dust to pose a health threat.

Shaun Rusling, chairman of the UK National Gulf War Veterans and Families Association, a lobby group on health and environmental issues, said: "The shame is that if there is an invasion of Iraq, then hundreds of allied servicemen and perhaps thousands of Iraqi civilians are going to be exposed to the killer after-effects once again."

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The MoD said: "We have never said we are going into wholesale tungsten at the expense of! DU. It's an alternative."

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