

Published on Monday, February 17, 2003 by the [Globe & Mail/Canada](#)

The Weapon We Gave Iraq

by Scott Taylor

Since U.S. President George W. Bush put Saddam Hussein on notice that the "game is over," a countdown to a military intervention in Iraq appears to have begun. This prospect has heightened concerns from the allied veterans of the last war in the Persian Gulf, many of whom still suffer from serious health problems that they believe resulted from exposure to depleted uranium.

A senior Iraqi medical official warns that any U.S.-led military action against Iraq will face this threat. "If they wish to launch Gulf War II, they had better be prepared to lose many of their soldiers to Gulf War Syndrome II," said Dr. Mona al-Jibowei, dean of the science faculty at Baghdad University. "The allied soldiers went home after being exposed to depleted uranium. Iraq has lived with its devastating effects for the past 12 years."

Since the end of the gulf war, tens of thousands of allied veterans have developed debilitating illnesses. These ex-service members have been compensated by Washington and other allied governments, yet U.K. and U.S. officials say there is no scientific proof their illnesses are linked to service in the Persian Gulf or exposure to depleted uranium.

Depleted uranium is the waste byproduct of nuclear reactors. In the 1980s, U.S. researchers recognized that the material's density gave it tremendous armour-piercing potential. Not only can shells coated with depleted uranium punch through layers of hardened steel, they ignite on impact, creating a fiery burst of radioactive particles inside an enemy armored vehicle. It is this "aerosol" that most experts believe causes the variety of long-term health problems associated with gulf war syndrome.

A former paratrooper and representative for the French gulf war veterans association, Norbert Simion served with the French division that swept into Iraq in Operation Desert Storm. He and his comrades engaged and destroyed an Iraqi armored force outside the desert village of As-Salman. As a result, French and Iraqi soldiers alike were exposed to the depleted uranium aerosol created by the exploding tank shells.

"When our troops first began developing strange illnesses, our military doctors told us it was all in our heads," said Mr. Simion. Last April, Mr. Simion and a delegation of allied gulf war veterans visited old battle sites in an effort to initiate co-operation between Western journalists and Iraqi health officials on the effects of depleted uranium. "As the casualty

figures rise and independent scientists continue revealing the dangers of DU, the French government keeps telling us there is no proof."

Depleted uranium itself contains only low levels of radiation. But once tiny aerosol particles are breathed in and become lodged in the lymph nodes, their radiation can attack the immune system and affect reproduction.

A British-educated toxicologist, Dr. al-Jibowei is on the executive committee of a special Iraqi research project to monitor the health hazards associated with depleted uranium and has discussed DU with other international experts. "The gulf war was the first time that depleted uranium munitions were used on an actual battlefield," she says. "No one at the time had any idea what effect they would have on the body."

To press for an international study of those regions in Iraq most affected by DU weapons, Mr. Simion's Paris-based organization has joined forces with British, U.S. and Canadian gulf war veterans. Canadian activist Louise Richard, a former field hospital nurse now suffering from an array of illnesses, says she cannot believe that it has come to this: looking to the Iraqis for help. "But after years of being stonewalled and treated like collateral damage by our Defense Department, we have little choice."

Iraqi researchers say that the epicenter ("Ground Zero") for DU effects is around the city of Basra, in southern Iraq. It was here, in 1991, that U.S. and coalition jets ravaged the retreating Iraqi army, leaving behind the smoldering hulks of thousands of vehicles. The U.S. and British air forces expended an estimated 300 tonnes of depleted-uranium ammunition in and around this area; it has since been dubbed the "Highway of Death."

The preponderance of birth defects among children born in the Basra region over the past decade defies explanation. Birth-deformity cases in other parts of Iraq are often traced to Basra. Geneticist Selma Taher, part of an Iraqi research team studying this phenomenon, discovered that three babies born with a similar congenital anomaly in the village of Dholuiya, about 700 kilometers from Basra, were fathered by men who served in the same regiment on the Highway of Death.

Should U.S.-led forces again invade Iraq, and should Canadians join them (something that has not been ruled out by Defense Minister John McCallum), they would probably move from Kuwait straight up the Highway of Death to Basra. The aerosol from the depleted-uranium-coated shells has long since dissipated from the hulks of Iraqi vehicles along the road. But Iraqi scientists believe the particles remain in the desert sands. Uranium possesses a radioactive half-life of 200 million years; it would still pose a serious risk.

Despite increasing evidence linking DU to degenerative health disorders, the British and U.S. militaries steadfastly refuse to suspend their use of such weapons. On Aug. 16, 2002, at the annual UN Human Rights Convention, a motion was tabled to ban the use of depleted-uranium munitions until a full-scale medical survey could be conducted. The only two countries to vote against the motion were Britain and the United States.

"If the Americans do attack us, they will inherit a hostile environment of radioactive toxicity," said Dr. al-Jibowei. "They will face the same tragedy that Iraq is already suffering. Everyone

will end up buried in Iraq."

A former soldier, Scott Taylor is the editor of Esprit de Corps magazine. He covered the 1991 gulf war as a correspondent. He has just returned from Baghdad.

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