

The Shameful Legacy of Radioactive Weaponry

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POLITICS | 6.14.2003

Disturbing new evidence puts the US military's use of radioactive weaponry in the spotlight, casting doubt on the Bush administration's upbeat estimates on civilian war casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq.

A study by the Washington, D.C. based Uranium Medical Research Center (UMRC) suggests coalition forces used Afghanistan as a testing ground for radioactive weaponry, thereby placing generations of civilians--not to mention US service members--at unspeakable future risk.

The UMRC study found "astonishing" levels of uranium in the urine of Afghan civilians living in Nangarhar province, one of many places coalition forces bombarded with a new generation of "cave-busting" and seismic shock warheads. Interestingly, none of the civilians tested at Nangarhar showed traces of depleted uranium (DU), yet hundreds exhibited symptoms resembling those of DU-exposed Gulf War veterans.

The implications are ominous. Independent studies show coalition forces used toxic uranium alloys and hard-target uranium warheads in Afghanistan, but if the "mystery" uranium in Nangarhar isn't DU, what is it? What kinds of radioactive ammunition were used elsewhere in Afghanistan? What are the long-term health implications for civilians and service members? And what are the moral, let alone criminal, implications of radiating civilian populations?

Unfortunately, Afghanistan isn't the only country reeling under the Bush administration's idea of "liberation"--Iraq has arguably fared worse. New evidence suggests the US invasion may have killed up to 10,000 Iraqi civilians, many from cluster bombs dropped into densely populated civilian areas. Meanwhile, US and British occupying forces are accused of illegally detaining and torturing Iraqi civilians, and the US military has kicked around the idea of having Iraqi "hooligans ... either captured or killed."

Of course, if Iraq was used as a testing ground for radioactive weaponry, as appears to have been the case in Afghanistan, then the true civilian costs in cancers, birth defects and human suffering could be immeasurable.

As might be expected, the US Department of Defense (DOD) has shown little interest in pinpointing the medical effects of radioactive weaponry. In the 1991 Gulf War, an estimated 320 tons of DU ammunition was dumped on Iraq, and the Pentagon later acknowledged over 900 American soldiers had sustained "moderate to heavy" DU exposure. Few epidemiological studies have been conducted to assess the damage though, and even worse, US government officials have lied to cover up bad results.

For example, a Pentagon spokesperson recently told the NATO press corps, "We have seen no cancers or leukemia" in a group of 60 Gulf War vets involved in a DU-study program, despite the fact that two participants had in fact contracted cancer. And in a press briefing last March, a DOD spokesperson downplayed health risks associated with DU, claiming Iraqis complained about it only "because we kicked the crap out of them."

Fortunately, British researchers have taken the DU issue more seriously. Scientific studies in the UK have shown Gulf veterans can have up to 14 times the normal level of genetic chromosome abnormalities, which means their children are also at increased risk for

deformities and genetic diseases. It's also been proven that DU-exposed vets have a greater likelihood of contracting lymphatic or bone marrow cancer.

Findings like these have prompted the European Parliament to call for a moratorium on DU ammunition (and other types of uranium warheads) pending independent investigations into their possible harmful effects. Similarly, the UN Environment Program (UNEP) has announced plans to test the Iraqi environment for DU, and the World Health Organization (WHO) may begin similar testing on the human population.

The ultimate irony, of course, is that America may have used radioactive weaponry to justify invading other countries to search for radioactive weaponry. Bitter irony too that US service members were put at increased risk because of the weapons their government provided.