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## UN Investigates Israel's 'Uranium Weapons'

by Eric Silver

The United Nations Environment Programme is investigating allegations, first published in The Independent, that Israel may have used uranium-based weapons during this summer's war in Lebanon. Twenty UN experts, working with Lebanese environmentalists, have spent two weeks assessing various samples. They are planning to report their findings in December.

Butros al-Harb, Unep's Middle East director, told a Lebanese radio interviewer at the weekend: "If uranium was used, we will find out and we will announce it. We cannot confirm anything now, but we will wait for results."

Yesterday Israel issued its most explicit denial yet. Major Avital Leibovitz, a spokeswoman for the Israel Defence Forces, said: "We deny using any weapons containing uranium." One official suggested that if the environmentalists had indeed found traces of uranium, they would have to look for a different explanation.

Chris Busby, the scientific secretary of the European Committee on Radiation Risk, based in Brussels, reported last week that two soil samples thrown up by Israeli bombs in the south Lebanese villages of Khiam and At Tiri, centres of fierce fighting between Israel and Hizbollah, showed "elevated radiation signatures". Dr Busby warned that particles from the explosions were long-lived in the environment and could be inhaled into the lungs, causing "significant" health effects on civilians.

The Harwell laboratory for mass spectrometry in Oxfordshire confirmed the concentration of uranium isotopes in the samples, but the European experts were puzzled about what weapons Israel might have been using and why. Chris Bellamy, a professor of military science and doctrine at Cranfield University, said the initial tests "present an enigma". But he dismissed speculation that Israel was using a "dirty bomb" or micro-yield nuclear weapon.

Government officials said Israel had received no approaches from either the Unep or the European committee. Mark Regev, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, said: "If someone comes with a complaint, comes with a charge, we will review it." But he protested that Israel was being singled out when nobody had accused it of deploying weapons banned


under international law or practice. "The sort of munitions we used in the Lebanon campaign," he said, "were almost identical to the sort of weaponry used in conflicts over the past decade by Nato countries, by Western countries. Sometimes there's a feeling that the Jewish state is being singled out for special treatment. One really has to ask why it is that the finger is being pointed at Israel."

Palestinian officials have frequently accused the IDF of firing shells tipped with depleted uranium, a hard metal byproduct of uranium enrichment, in the Gaza Strip. But Israel has denied it and no conclusive evidence has been produced.

\* Israel's Attorney General, Menachem Mazuz, called for President Moshe Katzav to stand down for the duration of any judicial proceedings after police recommended indicting him for alleged sexual offences against women employees.

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