



A HEARING WITH MAJOR WITNESSES ON THE "BALKANS SYNDROME "
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DOSSIER ON DEPLETED URANIUM



Dossier on Depleted Uranium

My name is Carlo Gubitosa and I am here on behalf of Associazione Peacelink, a voluntary organisation that has used new information technology since 1992 to offer an alternative to messages proposed by large editorial and television corporations. Peacelink co-operates with other voluntary associations, teachers and social workers who are concerned with peace, non-violence, human rights, liberation of oppressed people, the environment and freedom of expression. Peacelink has no connection with political parties or movements and its only financial source is the contribution of citizens who choose who support it.

During the 1999 bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, thanks to the commitment of all the volunteers who gathered information and documents, we created an alternative information source via the Internet. This is how a grass-root information network was created all over the world behind "official" information coming from press agencies, journals and television channels, thanks to the initiative of citizens and groups of volunteers who were interested in analysing the problems of Kosovo in a critical manner, by taking an active role in the process of information.

Since 1999, we have never stopped showing maps, articles and scientific documents on our Internet pages, as well as other detailed information coming from first-hand and qualified sources to document the use of nuclear waste in the military and civilian sectors alike, under the name of "depleted uranium".

In the last few weeks, we have constantly updated our dossier on depleted uranium, and by means of public data we have shown a number of maps of Kosovo where it is possible to see the sites where NATO used depleted uranium bombs in 1999.

On the basis of the information we have gathered, we have reached a number of powerful conclusions concerning the legal and scientific questions surrounding the use of depleted uranium in the military and civilian sectors alike.

◆ Legal aspects

In a meeting held in Brussels on January 9, the North Atlantic Council refused the Italian proposal for a moratorium on the use of depleted uranium weapons, in accordance with the statement of NATO spokesperson Mark Leaty. Leaty declared explicitly that depleted uranium rounds are "legal weapons, that nobody and no national law obliges us to ban".

Leaty's declaration is in fact contradicted by a UN Resolution approved on August 29, 1996, an official UN document that explicitly asks member states to "to be guided in their national policies by the need to curb the production and the spread of weapons of mass destruction or with indiscriminate effect, in particular nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, fuel-air bombs, napalm, cluster bombs, biological weaponry and weaponry containing depleted uranium".



Another source in international law that prohibits the use of weapons that can damage the environment is the Geneva Conventions first additional protocol that states that war will be conducted without causing extended, serious and long-lasting damage to the environment. This protection includes the prohibition to use war methods and means that were conceived or can be expected to cause such damage to the environment, and to jeopardise the health or survival of the population.

Another document that should curb the use of depleted uranium is the "principle of precaution" established by art. 15 of the June 1992 "Rio Declaration on environment and development". The text of this article states that in order to favour environmental protection, precautionary measures must be applied by States as largely as possible. Where there are threats of serious and irreversible damage, the lack of complete scientific knowledge should not represent a reason to delay effective measures to prevent environmental deterioration.

On the basis of the precautionary principle, we believe that given the absence of certainties and the risk to the environment, and to civilians and militaries that come into direct contact with depleted uranium, it is an ethical duty to stop and reflect on the seriousness of these dangers, and suspend the use of this material until the total absence of risks is demonstrated.

The fact that the UN Resolution has passed unnoticed while the debate inside NATO was in the spotlight of the mass media seems to us to be a worrying signal that the authority of the United Nation has weakened: it seems to be a symptom of the crisis of an institution that still represents the hopes of those who do not resign to the idea that the world should be governed by a regional military Alliance representing 19 countries, rather than by a global Assembly of Nations. The consideration of this Resolution would have a political meaning much greater than the practical consequences of an actual ban on depleted uranium. Indeed, it would be a strong sign of the strengthening and re-evaluation of the United Nations and the values that it embodies.

◆ **Scientific aspects**

As far as the scientific debate on the risks of depleted uranium is concerned, there is an upsetting series of scientific evidence that lead us to the conclusion that soldiers and civilians who have come into contact with this material might be in serious danger.

Based on the documents we examined, as well as the report by the Italian commission "Scienziati e scienziati contro la guerra" (Scientists against war) we believe that depleted uranium is indeed harmless when inert, but it becomes very dangerous when, after combustion or oxidation, it is inhaled or ingested in the form of dust or oxide. Apart from the damage caused by radioactivity itself, the risk of chemical toxicity should also be taken into account.

This argument, powerfully supported by numerous scientific publications, is reinforced by two broadcasts shown by the US armed forces, entitled "Depleted uranium: hazard awareness" and "Contaminated and damaged equipment management operation" illustrating all the possible risks of contamination and the



necessary precautionary measures. A copy of these films is presented as a visual support that those who are interested can consult.

Another controversial point is the actual composition of DU, that can be produced either from nuclear fuel waste or as a reprocessing of exhausted fuel.

In the latter case, as has been confirmed by military sources, on top of several uranium isotopes there might be traces of transuranium elements such as plutonium or uranium 236, which is produced in nuclear reactors. In the documents attached to this report, we have inserted a document by the US Department of Energy, confirming the presence of plutonium inside the depleted uranium kept inside some US depot.

In short, talking about "depleted uranium" is just not enough: it is equally important to establish where this uranium comes from, the industrial process by which it has been obtained and its chemical composition, because the alleged presence of plutonium may make depleted uranium radiologically dangerous even in the absence of combustion and ingestion.

◆ **Civilian uses of uranium**

A vast sector of the application of DU are civilian. DU is used as counterweight in the tail of planes, in helicopters, in ship keels, in golf bats, as an additional element in colouring substances and as a rinse aid in paillettes. It is just not enough to know that DU is used, in order to understand the dangers of its use: it is necessary to know the composition and the use. The higher the possibility of oxidation and combustion, the higher the risks and the potential health hazard. The quantity of DU used is also important to evaluate the potential risks. On the basis of these factors, we believe that as far as civilian uses are concerned, the highest risks are connected with DU used as a counterweight in plane tails, as the large quantity of DU necessary to serve as a counterweight should have a strong environmental impact in case of crash.

In case of accident, the risk of combustion is joined by the risk of corrosion, that can cause the scattering of DU particles in the air. In the light of these risks, the substitution of DU in counterweights with other materials should be favoured (e.g. by the use of wolfram). The costs of substitution are weaker than the environmental and health costs that may be necessary in case of crash, or if the counterweight went on fire.

Member states should also make relevant data on DU in civilian aeroplanes public, in order to facilitate intervention by firemen and make it possible for civilian airports to elaborate effective precautionary measures, e.g. preventing the risk of radioactive contamination.

For these reasons, it is equally important that EU citizens can verify how much DU there is in EU countries, which companies import, export and use DU, in which industrial sectors.

By consulting the US-based International Trade Commission Internet website we have managed to find data on European import of DU from the US, but we still do not know the composition of this material, and we therefore cannot establish the



degree of danger, nor the way in which is it used, nor the companies that use it, nor the safety measures that can be deployed to avoid contamination. As DU also comes from exhausted nuclear fuel, nuclear waste produced by EU countries should also be monitored, but we have no official data on this as yet.

◆ **The war of information**

On April 23, 1999, by bombing the Serbian television RTS, NATO demonstrated that, outside the territory of the Alliance, war policy considers information, or censorship on information, as a priority target, as important as military bases, or even more than those.

We ask: why does not peace policy consider information, debate and research as a priority sector of activity? We are convinced that if correct and transparent information had been made, we would not be in doubt now (as many are) or certain of (as we are) the fact that the Balkans have suffered a humanitarian and environmental catastrophe: all this would have been stopped, or made clear, when we still had time.

By using data in the public domain, we have compiled maps of Kosovo where DU-contaminated areas are shown. Our Web pages have suddenly witnessed an overwhelming increase in the number of accesses and a few days later, the same data were released by the Italian Ministry of Environmental Affairs. Parents of servicemen now in Kosovo continue to write to us to ask for data on the conditions of the areas where their children are. By helping these people, not only do we feel solidarity, but we are also angry at the loneliness and lack of information that struck all these people, who would like to know more about the problems connected with the possibility of contamination.

One thing we experiment every day in our activity as a voluntary information service is the lack of real information at the citizens' disposal. It seems almost absurd that in a civilised country it should be pacifist volunteers who try to safeguard the health of soldiers by compiling maps with data on contamination, whereas this task would normally belong to public institutions. Even more absurd is the fact that civilians who live in area that were bombed by NATO are still kept in the dark, without knowing the elementary rules to adopt in order to reduce the risk of contamination. We ask if the task of informing civilians in Kosovo belongs to those who have materially bombed them or if it belongs to those information means that have tried to stop the bombing.

An important lesson from the debate on DU is that the relationship between political institutions, military structures, information media and the population should be as transparent as possible: otherwise, a destructive mechanism is triggered, a "domino effect" that strikes everybody, with risks to health and life. When military secret kills soldiers, this may well amount to high treason.

We therefore believe that insisting on withdrawing a reply to these urgent requests would amount to a serious betrayal. It is necessary now to learn which arms used by European armies contain DU, how many they are, where they are and how they have been used in Bosnia and Yugoslavia. The people of Kosovo, whom we have



tried to defend from violence, have the right to know the risks and the possible violence that they might suffer from because of the presence of DU in soil, water and air. If we abandon these people, without taking responsibility to de-contaminate and refund the environmental damage caused by our own military action, our form of government will not prove any better than the dictatorship that those bombs wanted to reverse.

In the light of what happened up to now, the military structure, rules and doctrine, especially as regards safety and secrecy, should be reconsidered. Today, the modern instruments of war are strongly different from the past. Technology can trigger irreversible processes, such as nuclear and chemical contamination that cannot be controlled by soldiers.

It is necessary to discuss our ideas of safety, in order to build a European concept of safety based on progress and solidarity, rather than on fragile assumptions of violence and coercion. Far from being a purely economic issue, the strengthening and cohesion of the EU can be an invaluable opportunity to lay down new principles of Peace and international relationships. Dear Members of the European Parliament: It is your responsibility to act in such a way as for future acts to promote, rather than curb, progress for Europe and for humans in general. Fundamental decisions for the future of the EU, such as the development of a rapid-reaction European force, militarisation of the European territory, rules concerning arms trade, the attitude towards the US project for a spatial shield, monitoring the environment, especially greenhouse effect, are drawing nearer.

Then, it will be important to remember the lesson that we learned from the environmental emergency in the Balkans, in order to stop a State from scattering its own nuclear waste on to another sovereign state, passing this off as "humanitarian intervention". If you are convinced that the truth is different, please demonstrate it in a straightforward way, in transparency toward the EU citizens and in honesty towards the populations that will mow the fruits of the uranium that we have sown in their lands.

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