

Why This Parliament Should Support the Depleted Uranium [Prohibition] Bill

What is Depleted Uranium?

- Depleted Uranium (DU) is waste from production of “enriched” natural Uranium used in nuclear weapons or fuelling of nuclear reactors.
- DU is an extremely dense metal (1.7 times denser than lead) which is used in armour-piercing munitions.
- The US and UK military used DU munitions in the 1991 Gulf War, in the Balkans in 1999, and in Iraq in 2003. They may also have been used in Afghanistan since 2001, although this is denied by the US.

Why is DU a Health Hazard?

- On impact DU ignites, burning at a very high temperature, forming uranium oxide nanoparticles like radioactive “smoke” which can be inhaled.
- This dust is also chemically toxic, causing heavy-metal poisoning.
- About one third of the 800,000 veterans of the 1991 Gulf War now claim disability benefits for mystery illnesses.
- There was a sharp increase in cancers and child deformities in Iraq after 1991 and 2003. DU contamination is a potential risk factor for these problems.
- The US and UK governments and military admit that DU munitions pose a health hazard to users, but claim contamination is not enough to cause health problems. However, they are very secretive about their use, refusing to allow independent field research in Afghanistan.

Genetic Damage from DU: effects on future generations

- Uranium can bind chemically to DNA.
- Research by the US Armed Forces Radiobiology Research Institute has found that alpha particles in DU dust can damage DNA, leading to cancer, birth defects and other health effects.
- These findings are consistent with a growing body of peer reviewed literature.

What Has Been Done About It?

- The International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons (ICBUW) has drafted an enforceable global treaty along the lines of the Conventions banning anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions (www.ban-depleteduranium.org).
- The NZ Defence Force [NZDF] does not have any DU munitions, and has stated that it would prefer its allies not to use them – and there are alternatives.
- NZDF personnel returning from Afghanistan provide urine samples for testing for Uranium levels. However, highly sensitive testing is needed and is not currently done for the NZDF.
- Since 2004, the Christchurch-based DU Education Team (DUET) has been campaigning to raise awareness of what is now being referred to as potentially the “Agent Orange of the 21st century”.
- In 2007, Belgium became the first state in the world to impose a national ban on all aspects of DU munitions. Costa Rica followed in 2011, and Ireland is considering a similar ban.
- ***Phil Twyford MP’s Private Member’s Bill would enable New Zealand to emulate Belgium’s lead.***