

Dennis Kucinich on Depleted Uranium

Animation of Dennis Kucinich on DU
(1.4MB - requires Macromedia Flash)

As President, I will order an end to the United States' illegal use of depleted uranium munitions and will lead an international effort to recover depleted uranium. I will promote environmental remediation. Also, I will develop a program to provide care and restitution for people suffering as a result of the United States' use of depleted uranium munitions, nuclear weapons, nuclear weapons production, nuclear testing, and uranium mining.

Through four wars (Gulf War I, Sarajevo, Afghanistan, and Gulf War II), the U.S. military has deployed tons of nuclear tank missiles of depleted uranium (DU), which are solid 10-pound uranium bullets made from radioactive waste from the U.S. Department of Energy's uranium enrichment process. At least 350 tons of solid radioactive uranium remains in Iraq after Gulf War I, and 2,000 more tons of radioactive rubble has been added from our present Gulf War II. Depleted uranium has a half-life of 4.5 billion years.

The teratogenic nature of DU weapons
and the possible burdening of the gene pool
of future generations raise the possibility
that the use of DU weaponry amounts to genocide.

According to Pentagon experts, approximately 13,000 Gulf War I veterans are now dead as result of injuries and illnesses incurred while participating in military operations between August 1990 and October 1991. As of May 2002, at least 221,000 veterans were on disability as result of injuries and illnesses incurred during military operations in the Persian Gulf combat theater of operations. All of our troops presently in Iraq are continually being exposed to this radioactive depleted uranium contamination, other war related contaminants, water- and food-borne illnesses, and endemic diseases every second they remain there.

A recent study shows that U.S. Gulf War veterans' children have a much higher likelihood of having three specific types of birth defects: two types of heart valve abnormality occurring to children of male veterans, and genital-urinary defects to children born of female veterans. A study of British veterans of the Gulf War, Bosnia, and Kosovo reveals that they have 10 to 14 times the usual level of chromosomal abnormalities.

A Canadian medical research facility recently found that the urine of Afghani people living near the area where the United States carried out military operations contained radioactive isotopes 100 to 400 times as high as Gulf War veterans from the United Kingdom who were tested in 1999. The Canadian team recorded an average of 315.5 nanograms of these isotopes in people in Jalalabad, Tora Bora, and Mazar-e-Sharif. A 12-year-old boy near Kabul tested at 2,031 nanograms. The maximum exposure considered safe by the United States is 9 nanograms/year. With growing evidence of an increase in birth defects and stillborns, the situation should be addressed as an issue of the highest priority.

According to humanitarian law specialist, Karen Parker J.D., a weapon is made illegal in two ways: (1) by adoption of a specific treaty banning it; and (2) because it may not be used without violating the existing law and customs of war. A weapon made illegal only because there is a specific treaty banning it is only illegal for countries that ratify such a treaty. A weapon that is illegal by operation of existing law is illegal for all countries. This is true even if there is also a treaty on this weapon and a country has not ratified that treaty. As there is no specific treaty banning depleted uranium weapons, its illegality must be established in the second fashion.

The laws and customs of war (humanitarian law) include all treaties governing military operations, weapons, and protection of victims of war, as well as all customary international law on these subjects. In other words, in evaluating whether a particular weapon is legal or illegal when there is not a specific treaty, the whole of humanitarian law must be consulted.

There are four rules derived from the whole of humanitarian law regarding weapons:

1. Weapons may only be used in the legal field of battle, defined as legal military targets of the enemy in the war. Weapons may not have an adverse effect off of the legal field of battle. (The "territorial" test).
2. Weapons can only be used for the duration of an armed conflict. A weapon that is used or continues to act after the war is over violates this criterion. (The "temporal" test).
3. Weapons may not be unduly inhumane. (The "humaneness" test). The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 use the terms "unnecessary suffering" and "superfluous injury" for this concept.
4. Weapons may not have an unduly negative effect on the natural environment. (The "environmental" test).

DU weaponry fails all four tests:

1. It cannot be "contained" to legal fields of battle and thus fails the territorial test. Instead, the DU is air-borne far afield of legal targets to illegal (civilian) targets: hospitals, schools, civilian dwellings, and even neighboring countries with which the user is not at war.

2. It cannot be "turned off" when the war is over. Instead, DU weaponry continues to act after hostilities are over and thus fails the temporal test. Even with rigorous cleanup of war zones, the air-borne particles have a half-life of billions of years and have potential to keep killing and injuring former combatants and non-combatants long after the war is over. The toxicity is confirmed by U.S. Army documents. The Director of the U.S. Army Environmental Policy Institute stated in a congressionally mandated report that "No available technology can significantly change the inherent chemical and radiological toxicity of DU. These are intrinsic properties of uranium." (Health and Environmental Consequences of Depleted Uranium Use in the U.S. Army: Technical Report, AEPI, June 1995)
3. It is inhumane and thus fails the humaneness test. DU weaponry is inhumane because of how it can kill -- by cancer, kidney disease, etc. -- and long after the hostilities are over when the killing must stop. DU is inhumane because it can cause birth (genetic) defects such as cranial facial anomalies, missing limbs, grossly deformed and non-viable infants and the like, thus affecting children who may never be a military target and who are born after the war is over. The teratogenic nature of DU weapons and the possible burdening of the gene pool of future generations raise the possibility that the use of DU weaponry amounts to genocide.
4. It cannot be used without unduly damaging the natural environment and thus fails the environment test. Damage to the natural environment includes contamination of water and agricultural land necessary for the subsistence of the civilian population far beyond the lifetime of that population. The U.S. Army also confirms that depleted uranium contamination will affect food and water. The primary U.S. Army training manual: Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks states "NOTE: (Depleted uranium) Contamination will make food and water unsafe for consumption." Cleanup is an inexact science and, in any case, extremely expensive -- far beyond the ability of a poor country to pay for.

In the course of armed conflicts (wars), weapons may only be used against legal military targets and for the duration of the war. Weapons may not cause undue suffering or superfluous injury. Weapons may not use or employ "poison." Weapons may not severely damage the environment. DU weaponry cannot be used in military operations without violating these rules, and therefore must be considered illegal. Use of illegal weapons constitutes a violation of humanitarian law and subjects the violators to legal liability for their effects on victims and the environment, as well as criminal liability. In my view, use of DU weaponry necessarily violates the grave breach provisions of the Geneva Conventions, and hence its use constitutes a war crime or crime against humanity.

Under a Kucinich Administration, all illegal use of depleted uranium munitions will be halted, as the U.S. becomes a leader in the international movement to recover depleted uranium.