Depleted uranium weapons

International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons

Background
Depleted uranium (DU) is a by-product of the uranium enrichment process, which contains proportionally less of the fissionable uranium isotope U235, and more of the isotope U238 than natural uranium. As a material it is highly dense and pyrophoric, meaning that it has an incendiary effect upon impact. This effect can generate an aerosol of micron and sub-micron particles that can spread between tens and hundreds of metres from the target. DU is used by a number of states in armour-piercing-incendiary ammunition fired by tanks, armoured fighting vehicles, and aircraft.

DU weapons have been controversial since their first major use in the 1991 Gulf War. Radioactive and chemically toxic, DU use creates hotspots of persistent contamination that present a hazard to communities long after conflict ends, particularly for pregnant women, as well as children. Buildings and civilian infrastructure have regularly been targeted with DU and its use can contaminate soils and groundwater and create vast quantities of contaminated military scrap. Effectively managing DU’s post-conflict legacy places a significant financial and technical burden on affected states.

Current context
Formerly classified advice released by the UK’s Iraq War Inquiry in 2016 has served to highlight the continued absence of formal obligations for the clearance of DU. The UK’s 2003 advice observed that: “A nation which has fired DU in conflict is under no legal obligation per se to return to the region post-conflict to clear up any DU that remains. The legality of this issue has developed through custom; there are no special policies that address clearance of DU residue.”

While this advice preceded the UN General Assembly resolutions on the topic, many of which have focused on practical measures to facilitate assessment, risk reduction, and clearance, 13 years on its main observation remains unchanged. It was therefore notable that in its 2014 report to the UN Secretary-General, Iraq, the state most affected by wartime DU contamination, requested assistance from the international community. Meanwhile, advances in analytical methodologies mean that it is now possible to detect DU in humans 30 years after exposure, offering the potential to undertake biomonitoring of communities affected by historical conflicts.

Recent research by PAX has increased the number of localities in Iraq known to be contaminated with DU from 360 to more than 1200; these are distributed across the country. It has also highlighted the breadth of target types that DU has been used against, which goes far beyond tanks and armoured vehicles, including buildings, light vehicles, and unmounted troops. Early
analysis of the data suggests that 80% of the targets were non-armoured. Not only does this challenge the notion that DU is solely an anti-armour weapon but it also has clear implications for the ability to predict and mitigate DU exposure risks for civilians and demining staff.

In July 2016, EU member states were urged by the European Parliament to reach a common position in favour of the resolution—a position that better reflects the parliament’s repeated call for a moratorium on the use of the weapons. European public opinion, like that of affected states and communities and the wider international community, continues to view the weapons as unacceptable. This sustained opposition is influencing the procurement choices of some of their most vociferous advocates, including the US. All states still abstaining on UNGA resolutions should reflect on why they maintain their faith in the weapons, when those states that use them appear to be losing theirs.

**Recommendations**

**During First Committee, delegations should:**
- Vote in favour of the resolution on “Effects of Arms and Ammunitions Containing Depleted Uranium”; and
- Raise concerns over the use of DU weapons in their national and regional statements.

**Beyond First Committee, states should:**
- Disclose targeting coordinates of any use of DU weapons to facilitate clearance and civilian exposure studies;
- Contribute technical and financial assistance to states affected by DU contamination, including public health and environmental monitoring for communities affected by the use of DU;
- Consider how the lack of obligations for the post-conflict management of DU contamination could be addressed and support studies into civilian DU exposure; and
- Impose an immediate moratorium on the use of DU weapons.

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1 For further information on DU, and an overview of key issues, see http://www.bandepleteduranium.org/en/overview.


6 PAX report in press
