Depleted uranium weapons
International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons

Background
Since 2007, the General Assembly has passed six increasingly comprehensive resolutions on depleted uranium (DU) weapons. As they are biennial, 2017 is an opportunity for states to reflect on the need to implement 2016’s text, which focused on the complexity of DU clearance and the ongoing concerns of communities living and working in affected areas.

DU is a by-product of the uranium enrichment process; 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.

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 and 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
As states were debating 2016’s text, it emerged that US aircraft had used DU munitions in Syria in 2015, in spite of assurances to the contrary. That the munitions, claimed to be restricted for use against armoured targets, had been used against oil trucks, reflected past examples of use in Iraq and in the Balkans, where DU use has been documented against everything from unmounted troops to buildings: patterns of use that contrast starkly with the DU users military necessity justifications. All members of the coalition against Islamic State—many of which have voted in favour of past resolutions—share responsibility for the use of DU in Syria. A similar pattern of attacks against fuel convoys and other targets by US A-10 aircraft continued throughout 2016, making it possible that its use has been more extensive than the US military has acknowledged.

The refusal to fully acknowledge use, or to share strike coordinates with international organisations or national authorities, is testament to the unacceptability of DU munitions, and the reluctance of users to accept liability for contamination. This deliberate policy of ambiguity greatly increases the risk of human exposure to DU, preventing harm reduction measures and clearance. Problems compounded further by the continuing absence of any clear obligations on
either user or affected states for the post-conflict assessment and remediation of sites.\textsuperscript{5}

There is a clear disparity in the approaches taken by DU users to post-conflict DU management, with that in peacetime, which also extends to the guidelines intended to protect service personnel from exposure, and the absence of standards for civilians in contaminated areas.\textsuperscript{6} The handling, production, testing, and environmental management of DU and contaminated areas are regulated in peacetime, because DU is recognised as hazardous.\textsuperscript{7} Similarly, personnel benefit from training and post-deployment DU exposure testing, due to the potential health risks from exposure.

DU’s advocates at First Committee typically argue that the environmental and long-term health effects of the use of DU munitions have been “thoroughly investigated”.\textsuperscript{8} While there have indeed been laboratory studies—which confirm that DU is both genotoxic and a carcinogen—statistically useless follow-up studies on small numbers of veterans and geographically and temporally limited environmental surveys of a tiny fraction of affected sites\textsuperscript{10} have done little to increase our understanding of the health consequences of DU use on civilians. A recent meta-analysis of DU research in the Balkans found that there is a pressing need to study potentially exposed populations.\textsuperscript{11} Yet this is precisely the kind of fundamental research that has not taken place. The reasons for this include a lack of transparency from users, a lack of donor interest, and the complexity of scientific research in insecure post-conflict settings.

States wishing to implement 2016’s resolution should focus on research that identifies and studies exposed populations, on developing post-conflict DU clearance obligations and, in
the interim, support the European Parliament’s proposed precautionary moratorium on DU use.\(^\text{12}\)

**Recommendations**

**During First Committee, delegations should:**
- Raise concerns over the potential use of DU in operations against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in their national and regional statements; and
- Discuss how they are implementing, or planning to implement, A/RES/71/70 *Effects of the use of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium*, 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;
- Review how the lack of obligations for the postconflict management of DU contamination could be best addressed, within or beyond the United Nations;
- Help strengthen the global norm against their use by introducing domestic ban legislation as Belgium and Costa Rica have done; and
- Impose an immediate moratorium on the use of DU weapons.

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10. Field assessments by UN agencies, including UNEP and the IAEA have typically been limited to studying a fraction of the sites affected by DU. The reasons include a lack of transparency over targeting data from users, cross contamination with mines and ERW, and security constraints. Given the range of environmental and social factors influencing the risks from sites, extrapolating data from small numbers of locations is unreliable.
12. European Parliament resolution on (depleted) uranium weapons and their effect on human health and the environment—towards a global ban on the use of such weapons, P6_TA(2008)0233, 2008,