

Anti-War

BANNED TERMS: An Interview with DU Expert Dr. Asaf Durakovic

by Brian Covert / Independent Journalist

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An exclusive interview with Dr. Asaf Durakovic, one of the world's leading experts on depleted uranium, how Japan now faces the DU danger in Iraq, the continuing threats on his life, and the "conspiracy of silence" the world over surrounding DU.



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Dr. Asaf Durakovic visited Japan last week to deliver a critical message to the Japanese people regarding their country's Self-Defense Forces now deployed in Iraq: Your soldiers will most likely be the next ones to suffer from the deadly effects of depleted uranium.

His words appeared to be well-received by the public in Japan, yet all but snubbed by Japanese politicians -- most of whom declined to attend Durakovic's special Diet briefing about depleted uranium upon his April 12 arrival in Tokyo.

During his three public appearances in Japan over the next few days, the former U.S. military doctor publicly discussed his latest explosive findings, recently reported in a series in the New York Daily News by journalist Juan Gonzalez. In that story, Durakovic confirmed that nine U.S. military police officers have tested positive for depleted uranium contamination after their return from service in Samawah, Iraq -- the first such independently confirmed cases of their kind in the current Iraq war.

The 63-year-old Durakovic risked anonymous death threats back home in the US to bring his message to Japan, a country that has deployed 550 members of its own Self-Defense Forces to Iraq, including to

Samawah, where the nine contaminated U.S. military officers had recently served.

Durakovic himself had served with US forces in the first Persian Gulf War, and he later oversaw testing of U.S. soldiers who had then returned from Iraq. He ran afoul of military authorities when he would not stop his testing of depleted uranium's effects on soldiers. In 1997, he was removed from the US government's DU-testing project and, he says, has been hounded ever since for trying to break through what he calls an international "conspiracy of silence" about DU's deadly legacy. In 1997, he founded the Canada-based Uranium Medical Research Centre to continue his controversial work in the field.

The doctor's visit to Japan this time coincided with that of U.S. vice president Dick Cheney, who praised Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi for maintaining the Japanese troops in Iraq and urged Japan to continue standing firm against terrorism.

Durakovic brought a quite different message to the Land of the Rising Sun. Independent journalist Brian Covert met up with Asaf Durakovic on the doctor's last day in Japan, April 14, and files this exclusive report:

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BRIAN COVERT: You came to Japan last November and you met, I understand, with Japanese Diet members at that time. ...What new news do you have for the Japanese people about depleted uranium this time?

ASAF DURAKOVIC: The very important new news is that the area [in Iraq] in which Japanese troops are deployed is heavily contaminated with depleted uranium.

BC: Can we draw a direct conclusion between the high levels of radiation and the actual contamination of the soldiers there?

AD: We can make assumptions that if people live in the highly contaminated areas, they will be contaminated themselves. Because the group of American soldiers that I've studied recently shows approximately 50 percent of troops have been contaminated -- and they are not the soldiers who are directly participating in the battles on the front.

The [nine U.S.] members of the 442nd military police unit were in Samawah after the battle took place, which means residual radioactivity that is left after the original battle is still present there. And those people were deployed there only after the battle was over.

In addition, two members of my team who [recently] went to Iraq to collect samples came back contaminated with depleted uranium, although they stayed only six days. Therefore, the logical conclusion would be that Japanese soldiers who are deployed will also be contaminated. And I wouldn't be very surprised if quite a large percent of Japanese troops shows evidence of urine contamination.

BC: What has been the Japanese government's reaction on that issue?

AD: I think they are trying to suppress it. There is not much publicity in the press -- and definitely not much interest in the Diet, because we had a presentation in Tokyo on the first day of my arrival, which was last Monday. And not many members of the Japanese parliament showed up for the briefing. Which means either their attention is diverted to the current [Japanese] hostage crisis or there is not much interest in disturbing the political stage by getting involved in depleted uranium issues.

I'm of the opinion the Japanese Diet is under some kind of international pressure not to make any dramatic moves to disturb the status quo that exists in Iraq today. Because we know that Spain is going to pull out

troops within the next three months; some other countries are not sending in any new troops. And the coalition seems to be on very shaky ground concerning the future of their deployment.

For that reason, I believe the Japanese parliament and Japanese politicians are under certain pressure by the heads of the coalition not to pull out -- and not to make any dramatic statements about the fact that Japanese soldiers do live and operate in the danger zone.

BC: When we say "international pressure," we are talking mostly about United States pressure, are we not?

AD: Well, we know who is head of that coalition. It is the United States and Britain.

BC: And speaking of the United States, quite by coincidence -- or was it by coincidence? -- vice president Cheney of the United States was here [in Japan] while you were here. I presume that you two didn't get together for tea or anything like that.

AD: If we did, it would be a very interesting meeting.

BC: What would you say to Cheney, if you had had the chance to meet him?

AD: I would say the same [kind of thing] as I said to president [Bill] Clinton, when I wrote him a letter: that this is an international conspiracy against bystanding victims of the war, which are civilians -- particularly children. In my letter to President Clinton several years ago, I said that it is a conspiracy against veterans of the United States, because nothing is being done to diminish exposure to toxic elements -- and especially to eliminate military personnel from the danger zones. In my opinion, it is contributing to the risks or the adverse health effects that will be sustained by anybody who is contaminated with uranium isotopes.

BC: And talking about the latest news, which is the story in the New York Daily News, by Mr. Juan Gonzalez: You were the one who tested those soldiers.

AD: That is my project, yes.

BC: And how did that come about? Why was the Pentagon not testing them instead?

AD: The Pentagon did test, according to their spokesman, Mr. [Michael] Kilpatrick, one thousand soldiers. And they found no evidence of depleted uranium, except in three cases. But what they did, they studied only soldiers who were wounded by the shrapnel. And we know very well the shrapnel wounds are not an important contributing factor in contamination with uranium isotopes. Not many people are wounded by DU shrapnel.

They did not select the proper population, and furthermore, they tested only total uranium, which was not elevated, even in my patients. They did not test different isotopes of uranium, which would provide an insight into the ratio of the isotopes, which determines what kind of uranium it is. So the Pentagon, their laboratory, measured only total concentration of uranium, which is of no importance.

I call it inferior science, inferior selection of the patient, and inferior methodology. Why inferior? The government of the US obviously has the capacity to do proper studies. But I think the truth is not meant to be reaching the public. So for that reason, I'm of the opinion that, again, it is an intentional misleading of the public about real exposure and real risks that troops who are deployed in those areas are exposed to.

BC: There has been some reaction, now that your results have come out in the press. There's a little bit of pressure now for the Pentagon to do something about that.

AD: Yes, it is very interesting. Since my studies began several years ago, it seems that the government always follows in my footsteps. They have never done anything ahead of me. Only when I publish something or present something, they are forced by the power of public media to do similar things.

I announced not long ago that my next step is to study plutonium in the population of the military and

civilian personnel exposed to uranium isotopes. And yesterday, a military spokeswoman said that the army admits that depleted uranium may contain some plutonium and some neptunium and americium. So in anticipation of my results, they're already preparing to put out the fires that may start after my results about plutonium are published. And I have to emphasize that plutonium is the most dangerous element known to man.

BC: Could you talk a little bit about why you were dismissed from that DU testing project back in 1997 and what you thought they were trying to cover up at that time?

AD: Well, when I started this work in 1991, after Gulf War I, I found that about 75 percent of the patients that were referred to me from the New Jersey veteran's hospital were contaminated with depleted uranium isotopes. When I started this work, I sent the samples of urine of those patients who showed the symptoms, which I associated with internal contamination of isotopes, to the military radiochemistry lab in Aberdeen, Maryland. And they were never analyzed.

Furthermore, they claimed they never received those urine samples. After pressure was placed on them, after a few months, they said they analyzed them but all of them were negative. But they would not release the results. I repeated the studies of the same soldiers, and I found that many of them were positive. So it was obvious the government lied.

After that time, I received an order by the director of the military hospital, the Veterans Administration hospital, in Wilmington [Delaware], where I was the chief of nuclear medicine. The order was to stop my work on uranium. I refused, because I was mandated by the government of the United States to do that work.

Since I did not want to stop the work, they put pressure on me. They got my access to the computer for the patient management [files]. They harassed me on a daily basis. And ultimately, they said to me if I don't stop the work, I'll be fired and nobody will ever hire me again.

I still refused, even after calls from the highest levels of the government. They even used my colleagues from the military to call me from different parts of the country to stop the work. Since I continued, they fired me in 1997. And I was the only doctor who was a specialist in nuclear medicine for the state of Delaware, working for the government.

So obviously, they had good reason to eliminate me from the health care system. But then, I started my own institute, which is the Uranium Medical Research Centre, and I dedicated my professional life to bringing the issues of radioactive warfare to the public attention. And I have never stopped since that time.

BC: When I was co-producing a radio program in California, one of our guests was Dr. Doug Rokke, the military DU expert.

AD: I know Doug Rokke.

BC: He did have a lot to say, and one of the things he mentioned was that there had been attempts on his life to get him to stop giving out this information about DU. Have you faced that kind of thing?

AD: Of course I did. My house was ransacked in Washington and my family was threatened by anonymous telephone calls. I had considerable personal problems and tensions. Even this trip to Japan this time was not without incident; I received some [threatening] telephone calls before I came here.

BC: Have you received any of these telephone calls since you've been here in Japan?

AD: No.

BC: Obviously a lot of Japanese people know you, but the mainstream media are not really going to cover this issue in any depth. If you could address the Japanese public openly, what would you want to tell them?

AD: I would say the Japanese are not any different from any other people of the world. Dutch troops refused to stay in Samawah because of the high radioactivity. American troops are pulling out of Samawah. Uranium isotopes contained in the dust do not discriminate among the different nationalities. So they don't need special permission to enter the bodies of Japanese soldiers. And my advice -- not only to Japanese people but to anyone who would be willing to serve in the contaminated areas -- is to think very carefully before they submit their own citizens to the risks of radioactive contamination.

BC: Is it also fair to say that a lot of the international humanitarian workers who are also in that area of Iraq will also be contaminated to some degree by DU?

AD: Of course. As I told you, three members of my team went to collect the samples in southern Iraq and two of them came back contaminated with depleted uranium. One of them is so sick that he is more in bed than out of it -- Tedd Weymann. He has intermittent fevers, which are incapacitating. He has lung problems, coughs. Problems with urination; he has blood in his urine. And he stayed there [in Iraq] for only six days.

BC: It's very rare to see the two words "depleted uranium" anywhere in the mass media these days.

AD: That is a banned term. It's fairly obvious that high political interests are in conflict with the truth about radioactive warfare. Because radioactive warfare is the introduction of a totally new and totally inhumane use of weapons -- weapons of indiscriminate effect.

BC: So it's fair to say that the news media around the world is also part of this "conspiracy of silence."

AD: There is no doubt about it. ...I'd like to add that I'm very honored and pleased to have a chance to be in this country that suffered enough because of nuclear weapons. And in my opinion, such tragedies should not be imposed on mankind of our time.

BC: What do you make of the continued US occupation of Iraq?

AD:If they want to keep some kind of artificial peace in Iraq, they would have to deploy one million troops, in my opinion, because every house is a bunker of resistance. And it's only going to get worse.

BC: It's beyond shortsightedness on the part of the US; it almost seems suicidal.

AD: It's at the border of ignorance of history. Because we know for a fact that, for instance, Afghanistan has never been conquered by any country because of guerrilla warfare. Afghanistan defeated the British empire. Afghanistan defeated the Soviet communist empire. And Afghanistan certainly defeated the current international intervention, because Mr. [Hamid] Karzai is just the governor of Kabul.

One guerrilla fighter, according to the military strategy books, can hold off *easily* 1,000 troops if he is strategically located in an area that permits him to do such a thing. In the mountains of Afghanistan, there is absolutely no chance that any international intervention will succeed. Iraq is a little bit of a different story because it's a flat country. The fact that resistance in Iraq is so efficient these days, regardless of unfavorable terrain, shows the determination of the people of Iraq not to tolerate any foreign occupation.

And shortsightedness of the governments who now -- for whatever reason -- decide to stay in Iraq is going to backfire, because Saddam is not in power anymore. And it's also obvious that Saddam's Baath party has no influence in Iraq. Now, there are spontaneous movements: Shi'ites and Sunnis are speaking the same language. They simply want the foreigners out of their country. And I think they should have their wish granted.

BC: Do you think that as more and more soldiers come back to the US contaminated with DU -- just like in the New York Daily News story -- this will change public opinion in the United States?

AD: At some point, it would. Because there are more and more people in the United States who, regardless of the silence of the media, are speaking loudly about risks that American troops are facing in Iraq. As you are well aware, the incidents in Somalia [against US troops] resulted in the pullout of Somalia. There will be

a critical point [regarding Iraq] where "risk versus benefit" will outweigh political quotations. And when risk becomes more dangerous than any benefits from their oil money, the American public will most likely demand a change in politics toward the occupation of Iraq. It is critical this year because of the election.

We are all aware from the polls that the popularity of the president of the United States is sagging day by day. As more body bags arrive in the United States, less support is evident in the general public about the continuing presence of American troops in Iraq. Every drop of oil that is brought from Iraq to America is stained with the blood of GIs.

BC: Will you and your team continue to test independently for depleted uranium?

AD: Absolutely. We have no desire to stop.

Brian Covert is an independent journalist based in Hyogo, Japan.

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Dr. Asaf Durakovic (right) being interviewed by the author.

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