The NI Interview

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Asaf Durakovic
Felicity Arbuthnot meets a respected scientist fighting on behalf of American Gulf War veterans.

Professor Asaf Durakovic snaps to his feet as I enter the room. He towers grey-haired with the permanent tan of a fit, outdoor enthusiast and has the military bearing and formal courtesy of another age. When he speaks it's with the confidence of an experienced scientist, which is what he is – a world-renowned expert on radiation and nuclear medicine. He is currently Clinical Professor of Radiology and Nuclear Medicine at Georgetown University in Washington. And he has written more than a hundred books and academic papers on all aspects of radiation.

But it's not his academic work Dr Durakovic wants to talk about. No, he has something more pressing on his mind and he is visibly angry.

He tells me he has patients who are dying from the effects of radioactive depleted uranium (DU) to which they were exposed in the 1990 Gulf War. He is angry that US troops and their allies were unaware of the potentially deadly fallout – from their own weapons. And he is outraged that the entire population of the Middle East was put at risk. But more than that, he is furious at the lack of response from President Clinton to his demands that the health concerns of Gulf War veterans be investigated – and alarmed that depleted uranium weapons are still being tested in Scotland and throughout the US.



Photo Courtesy of FELICITY ABUTHNOT

The Gulf War was a testing ground for new weapons systems, including the use of depleted uranium. This waste from the nuclear industry has replaced titanium as the hard armourpiercing plating for missiles, shells and bullets. For arms manufacturers it has the great advantage of being cheap – since the nuclear industry needs to dispose of it anyway. On impact an exploding weapon leaves a plume of radioactive dust to travel where the wind blows. The dust (which remains radioactive for 4,500 million years) is inhaled and absorbed into the gastro-intestinal tract. It also penetrates the soil and eventually passes into vegetables, fruits, plants and livestock.

Dr Durakovic served as Chief of Professional Clinical Services of the 531 Medical Detachment during the Desert Shield phase of the Gulf War. Yet at the time he knew nothing of the DUcoated US weapons. Later, 24 soldiers were referred to him for examination. 'They had been based in Saudi Arabia from January to August 1991, working with damaged tanks hit by DU armour-piercing shells from "friendly fire". Soldiers trained in these tanks, lived near them, ate lunch in them and cooled themselves in them.'

In March of that same year a Battle Damage Assessment Team arrived from Washington. 'They were suited up in full radio-protective clothing,' Durakovic recalls. 'The tanks were so

contaminated they were painted with the atomic symbol and removed from human contact.'

After tests Dr Durakovic found decay products of DU in 14 of the 24 patients. 'I only discovered indirectly in September 1991 that depleted uranium had been used on the battlefield. I was horrified. When scientists conduct experiments using this material, we dress like astronauts. Our soldiers had no protection. And this attack could have potentially exposed the entire population of the Gulf region. Soil samples from Iraq show radiation levels more than 17 times the acceptable level.'

Dr Durakovic began to campaign on behalf of his patients but soon ran into a brick wall. Noone wanted to listen to his story. The records and lab samples of his patients were repeatedly lost. The two doctors who did the tests were fired. His car was sabotaged on two occasions and he began to receive anonymous threats.

Was there a reason officials didn't want information on DU victims of the Gulf War to become public? According to Dr Durakovic there are two main reasons – and they both involve money. By the year 2000 the bill to clean up waste uranium from the US nuclear industry would have amounted to more than \$200 billion. So a lot of cash could be saved if the uranium was recycled in the arms industry. And of course there is the issue of compensation. The US Government would have to pay out billions if it could be conclusively proven that DU-coated weapons were causing illness in returned American troops.

But money seems a petty concern when we are talking about changes to the human gene pool. 'Deformities among children born to Gulf War vets are well-documented as is the rising incidence of birth malformations in Iraq,' Dr Durakovic stresses. 'What will happen in future generations? I have seen the effects of radiation worldwide. The consequences of DU are immeasurable.'

In February 1997 an exasperated Durakovic wrote to President Clinton on behalf of Gulf War veterans asking for an inquiry into DU contamination. Two months later he was fired from his job as Chief of Nuclear Medicine at the Department of Nuclear Medicine at the Veteran's Administration Authority in Wilmington, Delaware. Two of Durakovic's original 24 patients are now dead and 12 more are seriously ill. He warns that as many as 80,000 US soldiers may have been contaminated with DU.

And it's not too late for Washington to act, says Durakovic. There are precedents. 'In Spain in 1968 there was an accident involving an American fighter plane contaminating tomato crops with radioactive plutonium. The area was decontaminated and the US paid compensation. In Tulla, Greenland, when an incident involving uranium occurred, the same action was taken. Wherever DU weapons have been used or tested, the Government must do the same thing. Otherwise cancer, necrosis and genetic deformity will be the price.'

This is the same message he gave to the Sub-Committee on Government Reform at the US House of Representatives in June 1997. To date he has received no replies. Nonetheless, Dr Durakovic believes DU weapons will be outlawed eventually. 'There is no choice,' he says. 'The threat to the human race is too great.'

Felicity Arbuthnot is a freelance journalist based in London.

http://www.newint.org/features/1998/09/05/interview/

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