



Warning of uranium contamination risks to NGO staff, Coalition forces, foreign contract personnel and civilians in Iraq

February 6, 2004 – Recently completed laboratory analyses show two members of Uranium Medical Research Centre's (UMRC) field investigation team are contaminated with Depleted Uranium (DU). The two field staff, one from Canada and the other, Beirut, toured Iraq for thirteen days in October 2003; five months after the cessation of Operation Iraqi Freedom's aerial bombing and ground force campaign. Using mass spectrometry, UMRC's partner laboratory in Germany measured DU in both team members' urine samples.

The UMRC team surveyed US and British controlled combat areas and bomb-sites in southern Iraq, including Baghdad, An Nasiriyah, As Suweiriah and Al Basra (details can be found at UMRC.net, [Abu Khasib to Al Ah'qaf: Field Investigation Report](#)). The conditions responsible for the team's DU contamination are considered to be inhalation of resuspended ultra-fine soil and dust particles saturated with uranium and airborne uranium oxides and metallic particulate. Uranium was used in anti-tank penetrators, suppression ordnance and bunker-defeat warheads deployed during the 26 days of Operation Iraqi Freedom by both US and UK forces. The contamination of UMRC's team members occurring over a two-week period, many months after the main conflict, represents a risk to civilians, non-governmental organisations' staff, Coalition armed forces and foreign contractors and diplomatic staff.

In 1997, UMRC was the first study group to detect DU in the urine of Canadian, British and US troops who served in Gulf War I. The urinary excretion of battlefield uranium was identified six years following exposure. In January 2004, the US Department of Veterans Affairs admitted it had detected DU in the urine of US forces who are not retaining DU shrapnel, in 2000, eight years after Desert Storm. In 2001 and again in 2002, UMRC measured high concentrations of artificial uranium containing the synthetic isotope, ²³⁶U, in Afghan civilians exposed to the detonation plumes of bombs deployed during Operation Enduring Freedom.

In November 2003, the British Ministry of Defence (MOD) released a formal statement to the Guardian disclaiming UMRC's Operation Telic findings of high levels of radioactivity in British-led battlefields. The MOD stated unequivocally that battlefield uranium residues remain stable inside defeated Iraqi tanks and cannot be made biologically available to humans. Since then, the MOD has found unusually high concentrations of uranium excreted in the urine of its 1st Armoured Division troops who served in Basra (September 2003, UK DU Oversight Board Meeting minutes, Gulf Veterans Illnesses Unit, UK Ministry of Defence). The MOD's recent findings in its troops now deployed back to Germany, coupled with the contamination of UMRC's staff demonstrate the need to initiate immediate solutions to protect exposed civilians and foreign personnel in Iraq.

Preliminary results of UMRC's laboratory analysis of field samples of civilian urine, soils and water samples indicate uranium contamination in several Iraqi cities and battlefields. Details of UMRC's findings from US and British controlled battlefields and bombsites will be released later this month (February 2004). UMRC has offered its assistance to the United Nation's Environment Program (UNEP) to guide UNEP's post-conflict study team to radiologically contaminated bombsites and battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan. UMRC urges UNEP to undertake immediate studies and lead the implementation of a radiation protection program for Iraqi and Afghan civilians as well as a supervised environmental clean-up program, as early as possible.

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