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Insidious Violence

The gift that keeps on giving: depleted uranium

To plunder, to slaughter, to steal, these things they misname empire; and where they make a wilderness, they call it peace.¹

The situation

When a 4-year old British girl goes missing in Portugal, it is on the news for months. Her parents were supported by celebrities all over. When a 5-year old Iraqi boy is doused with petrol, set ablaze and disfigured beyond recognition, no one hears about it. When many children are victims with abnormalities caused by depleted uranium (DU) it is not newsworthy.

A slow and silent violence is gripping a small Iraqi town called Fallujah – 43 miles west of Baghdad – where the best medical advice given to young women is: 'Do not have babies!' due to widespread birth defects.²

The US army destroyed the town with some unusual munitions – not unlike the Agent Orange and napalm used in Vietnam; phosphorus bombs used in Gaza, and depleted uranium used in the First Gulf War. Fallujah was deemed to be the nerve centre of the insurgency and orders were given to stop it at 'any cost'. This took many forms: torture (Abu Ghraib and other camps); use of an iron fist against the civilian population; and the flattening of Fallujah as an 'example' to the rest of Iraq.

The crime against Fallujah did not end when the bullets stopped firing or the bombs stopped falling. Fallujah was bombed more than any other Iraqi town

in 2004 in revenge for the killing of four US private security personnel. Its defiance resulted in collective punishment leading to a massacre. The assault on Fallujah was one of the most horrific war crimes of our time – meant to be made an example of by 'exemplary' or 'collective' punishment – and illegal according to the laws of war.³

Another war continues daily in Fallujah. The populace is gripped by a silent killer. An average of three babies are born daily with severe deformities. Many are stillborn, others live a few hours, and most who survive live for only a few months because of their severe abnormalities. Children are born with two or three heads, and/or with six fingers or curved spines. The cemetery is made up of 'baby' graves. Those who live to their first birthday require intensive specialist care for the rest of their lives – as they are left to the vagaries of a poorly manned and rudimentally equipped Iraqi health system.⁴

Doctors began documenting this rise in birth defects. – about 15 times the pre-invasion occurrence of early-life cancers and brain and nervous-system abnormalities. The United Nations was petitioned to investigate this situation which was clearly related to the U.S. invasion and occupation. The doctors said that young women in Fallujah 'are terrified of having children because of the increasing number of babies born grotesquely deformed, with no heads, two heads, a single eye in their foreheads, scaly bodies or missing limbs.'⁵



Causes of this nightmare?

Following intense fighting in Fallujah in 2004, local people suspected that white phosphorus and depleted uranium (DU) were used. DU, a dense metal used in armour-piercing shells, is both radioactive and toxic and has links to lung cancer and kidney failure.⁶

DU is a benign sounding name for uranium-238, the trace element left behind when fissionable material is extracted from uranium-235 for nuclear reactors and weapons. It has a half-life of more than 4 billion years. This waste was a nuisance. Approximately a billion tons of radioactive material was piled at plutonium processing plants across the USA. In the 1980's weapons designers found a use for the tailings: bullets and bombs. Being denser than lead, uranium is perfect for armour penetrating weapons that can destroy tanks, armoured personnel carriers and bunkers. On impact, DU oxidizes into microscopic fragments that float

through the air for decades and when inhaled sticks to the lungs, causing tumours, haemorrhages, damage to immune systems, and leukaemia.⁷ Its density and ability to ignite on impact makes it highly valued. Its capacity to kill for many years after being dropped makes it a slow and silent killer. Scientists speak of a destruction which may never end.⁸ Where there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, they came with the invasion. Infant mortality and cancer, it is reported, have exceeded those reported by survivors of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Over 40 sites across Iraq are contaminated with high levels of radiation and dioxins – leaving environmental ruin in large parts of the country.⁹ Some areas make up around 25% of the contaminated sites and appear to coincide with communities seeing increased rates of cancer and birth defects since 2005.

The general health of Baghdad is poor given there is no sewerage system with lots of stagnant household waste that creates sickness and directly affects genetics. It is known that a lot of depleted uranium was used there.¹⁰ When a tank has been destroyed and moved, a clear radiation trail is found. Such sites take a while to decontaminate. Of prime concern are scrap sites and wastelands of rusting cars which provide unchecked access to both children and people scavenging.¹¹

Not only 2003, but also 1990

Since 1990 Gulf War, the incidence of leukaemia in Iraq has increased by over 600% but the sanctions of the time, including forced isolation, made detection and treatment of cancers very difficult. The Pentagon shrugged off concerns as conspiracy theories perpetrated by peace activists, environmentalists and Iraqi propagandists.¹²

'We have brought torture, cluster

bombs, depleted uranium, innumerable acts of random murder, misery, degradation and death to the Iraqi people and call it 'bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East'. 'How many people do you have to kill before you qualify to be described as a mass murderer and a war criminal?'¹³

Deniability

For decades, it was claimed there was 'no proof' that Agent Orange, the defoliant containing dioxin, caused harm to American soldiers, and the Vietnamese, 3 million of whom, and/or their offspring, still suffer the consequences of their exposure to it. For 17 years, it was claimed there was 'no proof' that the toxic brew stirred up by Gulf War I – DU, insect repellent, anti-nerve gas medication, smoke from burning oil wells – was responsible for returning troops' horrific symptoms known as Gulf War Syndrome. After years of study, stonewalling and damage control, proof happened.¹⁴

In a new study, 'Cancer, Infant Mortality and Birth Sex-Ratio in Fallujah, Iraq 2005–2009', Dr Chris Busby, one of the authors of the report,¹⁵ showed that the people of Fallujah are experiencing higher rates of cancer, leukemia, infant mortality, and sexual mutations than recorded among survivors in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the years following the incineration of those cities by US atomic bomb strikes in 1945. The research is the first systematic scientific substantiation of a body of evidence showing a sharp increase in infant mortality, birth defects, and cancer in Fallujah.^{16, 17}

The prevalence of these conditions in Fallujah are many times greater than in nearby nations. It proves that a high proportion of the weaponry used in the assault contained depleted uranium, a radioactive substance used in shells to increase their effectiveness.¹⁸

Yet, the Pentagon's response to this report is to assert that there is no proof of any proliferation of deformities

or other maladies associated with US military actions. Even the Iraqi authorities tried to scuttle the survey alleging that it was conducted by terrorists and anyone answering or administering the questionnaire could be arrested.¹⁹

Who pays?

Some suggest that Iraq should now repay the \$48 billion the United States has spent 'rebuilding' and 'delivering democracy'. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait 1990 no one thought that Kuwait should be responsible for the damage. No one questioned Iraq's responsibility for the loss and damage it caused. Ought not the invader, not the invaded, be morally and legally obliged to pay for restoration.²⁰

The people of Iraq deserve justice. The people of Fallujah deserve justice and to have their story told. And as Donna Mulhearn, an Australian peace activist says, 'The babies of Fallujah deserve justice and the women of Fallujah deserve hope.' Donna Mulhearn was present in Fallujah in April 2004 as the US attacked the city and witnessed the massacre of civilians there. She, too, was exposed to uranium. The story of the Fallujah women is her story.

What can we do?

As we now have an international treaty banning cluster munitions we can strive to work together to ban depleted uranium weapons.²¹ It will be the beginning of striving for justice for Fallujah, the acknowledgement of the peoples' suffering often overlooked by governments and corporate media, and avoidance of similar tragedies elsewhere.

Fallujah continues to suffer the ghastly consequences of the US military onslaught in 2004 – and the US and its allies are looking away. And as self-serving former leaders go into comfortable retirement the people of Iraq ask who will be held accountable and if there will be justice?

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website www.erc.org.au



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