

COMMENTARY:

The Pentagon's Dirty Bombers: Depleted Uranium in the USA

by Dave Lindorff

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“...What the Army is now asking for is a permit to leave in place – in Hawaii – the DU left over from years of test firing of M101 mortar “spotting rounds,” each round containing close to half a pound of depleted uranium (DU).

The Nuclear Regulator Commission will be holding hearings tomorrow and Wednesday in Hawaii on an application by the US Army for a permit to have depleted uranium at its Pohakuloa Training Area, a vast stretch of flat land in what’s called the “saddle” between the sacred mountains of Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea on Hawaii’s Big Island, and at the Schofield Barracks on the island of Oahu. In fact, what the Army is asking for is a permit to leave in place the DU left over from years of test firing of M101 mortar “spotting rounds,” that each contained close to half a pound of depleted uranium (DU). The Army, which originally denied that any DU weapons had been used at either location, now says that as many as 2000 rounds of M101 DU mortars might have been fired at Pohakuloa alone.

But that’s only a small part of the story.

The Army is actually seeking a master permit from the NRC to cover all the sites where it has fired DU weapons, including penetrator shells that, unlike the M101, are designed to hit targets and burn on impact, turning the DU in the warhead into a fine dust of uranium oxide.



Depleted uranium M101 "spotter round" for Davy Crockett Mortar

Uranium particles, whether pure uranium or in an oxidized form, are alpha emitters, and can be highly carcinogenic and mutagenic if ingested or inhaled, since they can lodge in one part of the body—the kidney or lung or gonad, for example—and then irradiate surrounding cells with large, destructive alpha particles (actually helium atoms), until some gene is compromised and a cell become malignant.

Among the sites identified by the NRC as being contaminated with DU are:

- Ft. Hood, TX
- Ft. Benning, GA
- Ft. Campbell, KY
- Ft. Knox, KY
- Ft. Lewis, WA
- Ft. Riley, KS
- Aberdeen Proving Grounds, MD
- Ft. Dix, NJ
- Makua Military Reservation, HI

Other locations identified as having DU weapons contamination are:

China Lake Air Warfare Center, CA
Eglin AFB, Florida,
Nellis AFB, NV
Davis-Monthan AFB
Kirkland AFB, NM
White Sands Missile Range, NM
Ethan Allen Firing Range, VT
New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology

An application for a 99-year permit to test DU weapons at the NM Inst. Of Mining and Technology claimed that that site's test area was "so contaminated with DU...as to preclude any other use"!

DU weapons have also been used by the Navy at Vieques Island off Puerto Rico (the Navy claimed it was a "mistake").

The Pentagon continues a long history of claiming that DU is not dangerous, although this official stance is belied by the warnings it has given to its troops (though not to civilians in battle zones), to stay well clear of tanks and other equipment destroyed by US tanks, which used DU weapons as the ordnance of choice in both the Gulf War and the current Iraq War. During both wars, DU ammunition was used by Army and Marine tanks, by the Bradley Fighting Vehicle, the A-10 ground support jet, the Marine Harrier jet, and specially equipped F16 fighter jets. The Navy also switched from DU ammunition to tungsten ammunition in its Phalanx anti-missile ship defense system because of health and environmental concerns with the DU ammo.

The Pentagon denies that it uses depleted uranium in bombs, missiles and cruise missile warheads, but military personnel have reported their use in all three delivery systems, and reports exist of DU bunker-buster bombs, DU-tipped penetrator warheads on Tomahawk cruise missiles and on some air-to-ground missiles.

It's a good bet that all US munitions containing DU have been widely tested at various US military bases and testing grounds.

The bottom line is that at the same time that US government is continuing to warn about the danger of terrorists acquiring the materials to make a “dirty” bomb that could spread radioactive material in the US, the US military has for years been doing exactly that, and continues to do so, with no intention to clean up its messes, many of which are allowing depleted uranium to percolate into ground water or flow down streams to more populated areas.

Of course, it could have been worse. The M101 mortar that litters Pohakuloa was actually designed as a range-finder for the Davy Crocket mortar, which back in the late 1950s and the 1960s was designed to allow infantry troops to fire a small “tactical” nuclear mortar shell at targets just five miles distant. Some 700 of these “little nukes”, that had a power of “just” several kilotons or less, were made and actually made their way into the arsenals of troops in Europe and elsewhere during the Cold War. Fortunately there are no reports of any of them having been fired off at any of the military's firing ranges.

Then again, the Pentagon doesn't exactly have a sterling record about telling the truth where nuclear weapons and DU weapons are concerned.

Nor is the NRC to be relied on to protect the American public. As an administrative judge wrote in a ruling on a case involving DU contamination at Jefferson Proving Ground in Indiana, the NRC exhibited a “more than casual attitude with regard to decommissioning of sites on which radioactive materials remain as a potential threat to public health and safety and to the environment.”

In another case, involving cleanup of the ShieldAlloy Metallurgical Corp.'s site in Newfield, NJ, where DU weapons were made, a judge said, “at the very least, the (NRC) staff has countenanced...a situation that will leave the citizens in the area surrounding the activity site in doubt for close to two decades regarding what measures will ultimately be taken for their protection.”

About the author: Philadelphia journalist Dave Lindorff is a 34-year veteran, an award-winning journalist, a former *New York Times* contributor, a graduate of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, a two-time Journalism Fulbright Scholar, and the co-author, with **Barbara Olshansky**, of a well-regarded book on impeachment, ***The Case for Impeachment***. His work is available at www.thiscantbehappening.net.



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