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Vieques Residents Alarmed by Depleted Uranium Reports

by Carmelo Ruiz-Marrero

Residents of the island-town of Vieques are alarmed and angered by the United States military's use of depleted uranium (DU) ammunition in a firing range located next to a civilian area.

Since 1941, Vieques has been used by the US Navy for target practice. During the last two years, Puerto Rican peace activists have engaged in a massive and unprecedented civil disobedience campaign to get the Navy to close its firing range there.

Vieques residents have followed with great concern the controversy raging in Europe over the use of DU in the 1999 NATO war against Yugoslavia. They remember very well the US Navy's statements to the effect that most ships and aeroplanes that were used in that war were tested in Vieques.

According to a study carried out by the Puerto Rico Health Department, the cancer rate in Vieques is 26.9 percent above Puerto Rico's average. The study, which covered the years 1990-94, says nothing about the possible causes of this unusually high cancer rate. But the Navy's opponents are certain that military activities on the island, including target practice with DU munitions, are to blame.

Doctor Rafael Rivera-Castaño, who lives in Vieques, believes that the PR Health Department cancer study's data are already somewhat dated, and that the current cancer rate in Vieques is even higher. "I estimate that the cancer rate here is now 52 percent over the Puerto Rico average," he said in an interview.

Members of the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques (CRDV) recently met with environmental justice activists from the United States and heard their experiences with DU.

"We listened in horror as scientists and community activists from the US told about this new type of weaponry that had been used extensively in the Gulf War. We had recently heard retired Admiral Diego Hernández say that the 'success' of the US forces in Iraq was due in great measure to their practising in Vieques," said CRDV spokesman Ismael Guadalupe.

"For years we have denounced the relationship between the military contamination and the exaggerated levels of cancer on Vieques. The heavy metals and other chemical components from explosives, dangerous to human health, combined with the radioactive uranium 238 projectiles, jeopardise the life of Viequenses today as well as future generations," said Nilda Medina, also of the CRDV.

"There is no way to guarantee that the next bomb or cannon shot will not impact one of the uranium shells, putting into the air radioactive particles that could be air transported to the civilian sector, to our children, to our old folks, to any one of us. We urge the authorities responsible for our health and security to block any future bombing that puts in danger the entire Vieques community," expressed Medina.

The Navy admitted that it had used DU ammunition in Vieques in a May 10, 1999 statement in response to a Freedom of Information Act request by the Military Toxics Project, a US-based organisation. In the communiqué, signed by B.L. Thompson, the Navy said that it fired DU rounds in Vieques once, in February 1999, and claims that it used only 263 airplane-fired, low-calibre rounds, and that it had been done by mistake.

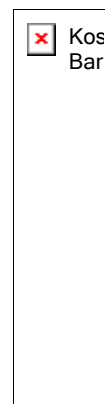
However, military scientist Doug Rokke, one of the world's leading authorities on DU, finds the last two claims unbelievable. "If they fired 263 DU rounds in Vieques, then it's going to snow in San Juan tomorrow," he said.

Background on Depleted Uranium Ammunition

For much more check out: [Discounted Casualties - The Human Cost of Depleted Uranium](#) provided by the Hiroshima, Japan newspaper - The Chugoku Shimbun.

Also the [Federation of American Scientists](#) has a [Depleted Uranium Ammunition page](#). And the [Military Toxics Project](#) has a campaign against [depleted uranium weapons](#).

(left) US Armor Piercing Incendiary [Depleted Uranium] 30mm Ammunition



During a recent visit to Puerto Rico and Vieques island Rokke said 263 rounds is "not even a burst of automatic gunfire. The A-10 Warthog attack plane, which fires DU ammunition, can fire three to four thousand rounds per minute." He added that it couldn't have possibly been a mistake, since the Pentagon keeps very strict inventory of all its ammunition.

DU consists mostly of uranium 238 (U238), a by-product of uranium enrichment, the process through which uranium 235 (U235) is separated from the uranium ore. Both isotopes are radioactive, but unlike U235, U238 is useless for nuclear bombs or nuclear power. It is simply radioactive waste and it will remain radioactive for 4.5 billion years. The US Nuclear Regulatory Commission estimated in 1991 that there must be one million pounds of this material in the United States.

The US government has decided to dispose of this radioactive waste by selling it as ammunition. DU is an ideal material for bullets, since it is 70 percent more dense than lead, and is extremely susceptible to friction. Violent impacts can make it reach temperatures in the thousands of degrees Fahrenheit in a fraction of a second. For these reasons, a DU bullet can pierce a tank's armour like a knife through butter and scorch the crew inside.

"These bullets are not coated or tipped with this material. They are pure, solid DU," informed Rokke.

When a DU round is fired, 60 percent of its mass ends up as microscopic aerosol particles in the air, which can be carried miles downwind, according to the Military Toxics Project. Although it is less radioactive than weapons-grade U235, the group claims that a single DU particle a thousandth of a millimetre in size lodged inside a human lung emits 800 times the amount of radiation considered safe by federal standards.

The use of DU ammunition constitutes "a crime against God and humanity", declared Rokke, who directed the Pentagon's Depleted Uranium Project and wrote its Cleanup and Handling Protocol for Depleted Uranium.

Based on his studies, he concluded that anyone who comes in contact with these munitions must get medical attention, not only those who have been fired at with them, but also those who have fired them, as well as anyone who has come near structures impacted by these bullets.

Rokke speaks from experience. He suffers from radiation poisoning since he visited the Persian Gulf area to study the effects of DU ordnance used by US forces in the 1991 war against Iraq. His urine contains 2000 times the amount of uranium considered normal.

In his view, DU is largely responsible for the unusual health problems that US veterans of the 1991 Gulf War have been suffering, known collectively as the 'Gulf War Syndrome'. The military denies that there is any such causal relationship.

"Vieques must be the place to stop the criminal actions of the US armed forces, which use the cloak of secrecy to claim that there's no danger in using depleted uranium ammunition and ignore veterans' calls for medical attention, and refuse to take on their responsibility to clean up and decontaminate," said Rokke.

Rokke also senses a pattern of environmental racism in the Pentagon's decision to test DU in Vieques and in the Japanese island of Okinawa. "The US Defence Department's policy is racist and discriminatory, contrary to the principle of environmental justice. We have the cases of Vieques and Okinawa, where DU ammunition has been experimented with. These are not isolated events, or errors or chance. These are planned actions to test and later use this highly polluting ammunition in Kosovo and the Persian Gulf."

The US Department of Defence claims that DU does not represent a significant hazard to human health. Its spokespersons refer to an April 1999 RAND Corporation study, which supports the military's position.

But the RAND report is biased and incomplete, says 'DoD Analysis: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly', a report written by Dan Fahey, a former naval officer and currently Director of Research at the Gulf War Resource Centre. Fahey's report, which was written for the US General Accounting Office, states that RAND made no reference at all to 62 relevant information sources.

According to Fahey, RAND ignored studies which demonstrate a clear relationship between DU and harm to human health, for example those carried out by the Armed Forces Radiobiology Research Institute.

US armed forces have already used these munitions extensively. During the 1991 Gulf War US troops fired an estimated 300 tons of it into civilian and military targets in Iraq.

According to Physicians for Social Responsibility, in the 1999 NATO war against Yugoslavia, US tanks fired 14,000 high-

calibre DU rounds, while planes fired 940,000 smaller calibre DU bullets. US armed forces are not the only ones to use DU ammunition. Authorised arms dealers sell them to 16 countries, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Taiwan.

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