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Our Reference: ACP-DU

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Dear Secretary General,

Thank you for your 29 May letter sent to the Prime Minister concerning depleted uranium (DU) ammunition. I am the desk officer for conventional weapons policy and international humanitarian law at the UK Ministry of Defence, responding to you on behalf of the Right Honourable David Cameron.

We are aware some people are concerned there may be a link between the use of DU ammunition and medical problems such as cancers and birth defects. This is an issue taken very seriously by the Government. However, there is no reliable scientific or medical evidence to suggest DU is responsible for post conflict incidences of ill health either in civilian populations or UK Armed Forces personnel. DU has not been shown to present the health or environmental risks suggested in some reports, on the internet and in other media.

Our own environmental monitoring, and that carried out by the UN Environment Programme, in areas where DU munitions have been used has confirmed the presence of DU at levels far too low to have any detectable health impact. This is consistent with the findings of many agencies and with the World Health Organisation (WHO) statement, that, "for the general population, neither civilian nor military use of DU is likely to produce radiation doses significantly above normal background levels". The European Commission, through a group of independent scientific experts taking into account potential mechanisms, pathways and realistic scenarios of exposure, concluded that "exposure to depleted uranium could not result in a detectable effect on human health".

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports that DU does not pose a long-term radiological hazard to the general population. Potential annual radiation doses arising from exposure to DU residues are very low and of little radiological concern. Annual potential radiation doses in the areas where residues do exist are of the order of a few microSieverts, well below the annual doses received by the population from sources of natural radiation in the environment and far below the reference level recommended by the IAEA as a criterion to help establish whether remedial actions are necessary.

The IAEA and WHO go further:

- Based on credible scientific evidence, there is no proven link between DU exposure and increases in human cancers or other significant health or environmental impacts;
- The most definitive study of DU exposure is of Gulf War veterans who have embedded DU shrapnel in their bodies that cannot be removed; none has developed any health abnormalities due to uranium chemical toxicity or radio toxicity; and,
- An assessment by WHO excluded any link between exposure to DU and the onset of congenital abnormalities.

The WHO and the Iraqi Ministry of Health are working on a pilot assessment of congenital birth defects in six Iraqi Governorates. Many factors will need to be considered as possible causes; poorly regulated agricultural and industrial practices and other socio-economic factors may be most significant.

<http://www.emro.who.int/irq/iraq-infocus/faq-congenital-birth-defect-study.html>

The study, due to report this summer, is not looking for a link between prevalence of birth defects and the use of ammunition. It will be for the Government of Iraq to assess the results of the study and determine any course of action.

Through the Department for International Development, the UK has invested significantly in capacity building in Iraq. Information on their many projects may be found through the following link:

<http://projects.dfid.gov.uk/Default.aspx>

Previous UN General Assembly resolutions have advocated a precautionary approach with support for further action by the Secretary-General and UN member states based on the potential harmful effects of the use of DU munitions on human health and the environment. The UK Government does not recognise this presupposed potential risk. The UK does not support UN resolutions that presuppose DU is harmful. Even so, you may be reassured to know we have provided appropriate details to inform studies and the work of the UN, in response to requests that states with DU provide information about its use.

DU is used in anti-armour munitions because of its density and unique penetrative properties. It is fired from guns mounted on either tanks or aircraft to defeat armoured targets. It is not used in explosive natures, bombs or missiles. DU has been used in a number of civilian applications including counterweights in helicopters and other aircraft, shielding for radioactive sources in hospitals and some specialist yacht keels.

The UK policy is that DU can be used within weapons; it is not prohibited under current or likely future international agreements. It is capable of being used lawfully by UK Armed Forces personnel in an international armed conflict. Given the challenging situations in which we expect our Service personnel to operate, it would be wrong to deny them legitimate and effective capabilities that can help them achieve their objectives as quickly and as safely as possible.

I hope this information is useful to you.

Yours sincerely,
