

Depleted uranium munitions

Comments of the International Committee of the Red Cross¹

For some time the ICRC has been closely following the debate on munitions containing depleted uranium. Questions such as the possible effects on health of depleted uranium, precautions to be taken by ICRC staff and by the local population and the application of basic norms of international humanitarian law to such munitions have received particular attention.

Possible effects on health of the use of depleted uranium munitions

The ICRC has examined numerous peer-reviewed scientific studies which address questions related to possible exposure scenarios and possible health effects of depleted uranium on combatants and civilians. The ICRC has also taken note of the findings of the post-conflict environmental assessment mission on depleted uranium recently undertaken in Kosovo by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).²

In May 2000 the ICRC invited personnel working for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in western Kosovo to provide urine samples which were subsequently analysed to determine the concentration of uranium. Since uranium is naturally present in the environment, a small amount of uranium is expected to be found in urine. Results of the 32 personnel who agreed to provide urine specimens revealed normal levels of uranium, and thus do not give any evidence of increased uranium exposure among this group.

Currently available scientific information provides evidence that the increase in levels of uranium is marginal in areas where depleted uranium munitions have been used, except at the points of impact of depleted uranium penetrators. Nevertheless, the ICRC welcomes the additional studies which are being carried out by various international organizations, in particular field studies in Kosovo and other regions where munitions containing depleted uranium have been used. Hopefully, these studies will

¹ See also <www.icrc.org> "International humanitarian law issues/Weapons".

² UNEP, *Depleted Uranium in Kosovo — Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment*, 2001. Available at <www.unep.ch/balkans/du/reports/report.html>.

not only concentrate on international staff, but will also include the local population and in particular children.

Advice to ICRC staff and the local population

Given the nature of its work in conflict zones, the ICRC takes the security and health of its personnel very seriously. Security and Health units at ICRC headquarters in Geneva strive specifically to ensure the best possible safety and health conditions for ICRC field staff. Personnel working in areas where depleted uranium munitions may have been used are briefed about depleted uranium, both orally and in writing. A briefing paper advises staff to avoid sites where depleted uranium munitions may have been used and to refrain from collecting any form of military debris. Staff are also encouraged to share these instructions with others, including the resident population. Along with the obligatory medical check-ups given to all ICRC personnel before and after a mission, both expatriate and local staff have access to medical advice and support at all times.

As part of its programme to warn the population about the dangers of unexploded ordnance and landmines left in Kosovo, ICRC instructors have also been advised on how to respond to questions about depleted uranium during public sessions.

According to the recently published UNEP report, the points of concentrated contamination of depleted uranium are localized. The ICRC welcomes the recommendations presented in that report and hopes that they will be implemented by the relevant authorities as rapidly as possible. This would not only ensure optimal protection for the civilian population from possible depleted uranium exposure, but would also allow the population to regain access to previously contaminated agricultural land and houses. Finally, the ICRC notes with interest that the UNEP report encourages further scientific work to reduce the scientific uncertainties which remain in assessments of the environmental impact of depleted uranium.

Legality under international humanitarian law of munitions containing depleted uranium

According to international humanitarian law — an explicit formulation appears in Article 36 of Protocol I additional to the Geneva Conventions, which is binding on 157 States — States are required to ensure that any new

weapon, means or method of warfare does not contravene existing rules of international law. These rules prohibit weapons, means or methods of warfare of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering, which have indiscriminate effects or which cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment. The ICRC strongly urges all States which study, develop, acquire or adopt munitions containing depleted uranium to carry out such legal reviews if they have not already done so, and would welcome an exchange of views and information on these reviews. Within alliances or groups of States, it seems particularly important that appropriate legal review mechanisms should be established on weapons, means or methods of warfare which may be used by such alliances or groups of States or that an exchange of information on national legal reviews should take place.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

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