

# Statement on depleted uranium weapons to the United Nations General Assembly First Committee

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Delivered by Doug Weir, Coordinator, International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons



**Chair, thank you for the opportunity to deliver this statement on depleted uranium weapons, on behalf of the International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons, and five other organisations.**

**Chair, delegates,**

The last time First Committee considered this topic, Iraq – the country most heavily affected by the wartime use of depleted uranium weapons – called for assistance from the international community, and from UN agencies, in addressing the legacy of contamination from the 1991 and 2003 conflicts.

The resolution, tabled in 2014, and which was supported by 150 governments, encouraged member states to provide assistance to states affected by the use of the weapons, particularly in identifying and managing contamination.

The ongoing insecurity facing Iraq presents an enormous challenge to national efforts to address the material remnants of past wars – including depleted uranium. Nevertheless, the legacy of the weapons' use remains a matter of serious concern to many Iraqi citizens; and with good reason.

Since 2014, research by our Coalition to identify contaminated sites in Iraq has tripled the number of locations where depleted uranium is known to have been used. It is now known that more than 1,000 sites are affected.

Sadly, this data still represents less than half of the depleted uranium ammunition that the United States and United Kingdom have acknowledged firing in the 2003 conflict. However, it is our hope that the data we have collected will, when conditions allow, contribute towards work to minimise the threat that contamination still poses to communities.

Beyond exposing the distribution and severity of contamination in Iraq, our research also speaks to many of the problems associated with the weapons that this Committee, states, international organisations, and civil society have highlighted in recent years.

Firstly, the data reveal the extent to which United States' A-10 aircraft used the armour-piercing incendiary ammunition – which is justified militarily solely as an anti-armour weapon – against personnel, buildings, light vehicles, and other non-armoured targets, with instances of particularly intense use documented in and around densely populated areas. The use of depleted uranium against such targets contravenes the United States' own restrictions on the use of the weapons.

Secondly, the refusal of the United States to release detailed targeting data in a timely manner has hampered clearance efforts, and undoubtedly increased the likelihood that civilians would be exposed to depleted uranium.

The targeting data were not made available to the UN Environment Programme, or International Atomic Energy Agency, which also undermined the utility and credibility of their post-conflict assessments in Iraq. This policy of non-disclosure has placed civilians and demining personnel at unnecessary risk and is clearly unacceptable.

Finally the data serve to highlight the absence of any formal obligations to address depleted uranium contamination following conflicts, on either the users of these munitions, or affected states.

Recent work by the International Law Commission is helping to establish the principle that the toxic and hazardous remnants of war should be rendered safe following conflicts. Meanwhile, state practice following recent conflicts demonstrates that norms on data retention and sharing, as well as environmental assessment, remediation, and monitoring, are being established.

Formalising these emerging norms for depleted uranium weapons, either through an existing framework such as Protocol V of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, or through another means, is long overdue.

### **Chair, delegates,**

While clarifying and formalising post-conflict obligations would help to reduce the harm to civilians from the historical use of depleted uranium, it would address only some of the problems its future use would create.

The operational use of depleted uranium weapons in recent conflicts has been far removed from that envisaged during their development in the Cold War. Although a minority of states still continue to develop, stockpile, and seek to justify their use, recent experience suggests the weapons are relics that belong in a museum, not contaminating the soil of communities struggling to rebuild their lives after conflicts.

The widespread stigmatisation of the use of this chemically toxic and radioactive material; the refusal of states to follow their own guidelines to minimise risks to civilians; the cost, and complexity of clearance; and the simple fact that the weapons pose an unacceptable threat to civilians long after conflicts end; contribute to the already compelling case for a ban on the use of depleted uranium in conventional weapons.

### **Statement delivered on behalf of the International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons and the following organisations:**

Center For Constitutional Rights  
Iraqi Environment & Health Committee (AIA UK)  
Iraq Veterans Against the War  
Norwegian People's Aid  
Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq