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League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Tulsa
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RADIOLOGICAL WEAPONRY

August marked the 60th anniversary of the United States dropping nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. As we observe this tragic occasion, we are acutely aware that nuclear weapons continue to threaten our very existence.

In 1983, the League of Women Voters of the United States, following nationwide study and member consensus, adopted a position opposing proliferation and first use of nuclear and radiological weapons.

Today, largely unknown to the American public, the US military has used radiological weapons in combat since 1991, contaminating vast areas and raising serious health concerns for our troops and for indigenous populations.

What are these radiological weapons? Many US munitions, including the bunker-buster bombs produced at the McAlester, Oklahoma, Army Ammunition Plant, contain uranium waste, primarily U-238, a byproduct of enriching uranium for use in nuclear reactors and nuclear weapons. This waste, radioactive and chemically toxic, is misleadingly called “depleted” uranium – DU – but it is almost as highly concentrated as pure uranium.

According to the scientific community:

- DU has a radioactive half-life of 4.5 billion years. In military use, it self-sharpens as it strikes a hard target. It forms a fine aerosol, ignites and burns, becoming extremely dangerous for humans. The ceramic dust released by the DU can be inhaled and ingested in food and water, and can enter a wound. Particles smaller than a human blood cell tend to lodge in lungs, kidneys, bones or liver, remaining for years and doing extensive damage, even affecting DNA structure.

- The two Gulf wars have released possibly 2000 tons of DU, with devastating health effects on Gulf area residents and American soldiers. Leukemia, multiple malignancies and birth defects have been especially noted. In a Mississippi study group of 251 US soldiers, who had all had normal babies before the first Gulf War, 67 percent had postwar babies born with severe birth defects such as missing legs, arms, organs or eyes.
- DU doesn't go away. Seven years after military use of DU in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the UN found DU particles suspended in the air inside buildings and in drinking water. DU was found in the urine of Gulf War veterans and Iraqi civilians 8 years after exposure.

Dr. Doug Rokke, former director of the Depleted Uranium Project for the Department of Defense and 35-year Army veteran, has spoken passionately against the use of DU. Military authorities in both the US and NATO advise their soldiers to take precautions when handling DU munitions, but the Pentagon, which told embedded reporters covering the 2003 invasion of Iraq not to mention DU, denies that DU causes the acute health effects for which it is blamed.

US Rep. Jim McDermott of Washington, a medical doctor, has introduced the Depleted Uranium Munitions Study Act in Congress. It calls for medical and scientific studies on the health and environmental impacts of the US military's use of depleted uranium in combat zones, including Iraq. Rep. McDermott has said: "We pretended there was no problem with Agent Orange after Vietnam and later the Pentagon recanted, after untold suffering by veterans."

The League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Tulsa supports Rep. McDermott's bill. Federal law requires all transport of DU and DU munitions be identified as "radioactive" and "explosives"—this is critical for first responders and the public and must be enforced. On the state level, Louisiana has a statute requiring independent testing of its returning troops for DU contamination.

Such measures would seem to be a minimal effort to bring to light the truth about the dangers of Depleted Uranium.

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization working to encourage informed and active citizen participation in government. The LWV/MT is located at 3336 E. 32nd St., Tulsa, OK 74135. Tel: 747-7933.