

Foreign Minister
The Hon Mr Bob Carr
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

June 19, 2012

Dear Minister,



Upcoming United Nations First Committee vote on depleted uranium weapons

I am writing to urge the Australian Government to vote 'Yes' at the United Nations First Committee in October 2012 when a resolution will be moved regarding greater transparency by users of depleted uranium weapons.

The resolution will be similar to the resolution 65/55 "**Effects of the use of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium**" moved on December 8, 2010 in which 148 nations voted in favour, four against, and Australian abstained. This resolution is attached for your information.

In light of the information and scientific data available on the toxic and radioactive legacy of weapons containing depleted uranium (DU), and in light of Australia's human rights obligations I look forward to Australia lodging a 'yes' vote when this issue is raised again in October 2012.

There is growing international concern about the use of DU in weapons, and the harm to military and civilian personnel exposed to its toxicity and radioactivity.

UN General Assembly resolutions passed in 2007 (*A/C.1/62/L.18/Rev.1*) and 2008 (*A/C.1/63/L.26*) accepted that conventional uranium weapons have the potential to harm human health and the environment. Scientific data concludes that this potential has been realised.

DU ignites on impact, burning at high temperatures and dispersing a fine radioactive and chemically toxic dust which can pass through gas masks making it virtually impossible to protect troops in the combat area and even more difficult to protect civilians wherever it is used. Civilians remain living in affected areas so are subjected to long-term exposure. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has found that DU munitions have the potential to contaminate soils and groundwater and have called for a precautionary approach to their use.

About one-third of the 800,000 veterans of the 1991 Gulf War now claim disability benefits for mystery illnesses, 'Gulf War syndrome'. DU exposure has been suggested as one of the risk factors for this.

There was a sharp increase in cancers and child deformities in Iraq after 1991 and 2003. There have been numerous reports from Iraqi physicians of surges in cancers and birth malformations in areas where DU is thought to have been used. The use of DU weapons can also have a profound psychological impact on civilians.

I have witnessed first-hand the impact of depleted uranium on human health when living and working in Iraq, the greatest victims being women, children and the unborn; as well as entire communities struggling to utilise land for agriculture in a toxic eco-system.

A key component of the 2010 resolution and the upcoming 2012 resolution is related to the issue of transparency from users, inviting Member States that have used armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium in armed conflicts to “provide the relevant authorities of affected States, upon request, with information, as detailed as possible, about the location of the areas of use and the amounts used, with the objective of facilitating the assessment of such areas.”

The conflicts in Iraq and the Balkans showed that the use of uranium weapons is not restricted to armoured targets. Because uranium rounds feature as part of the ‘standard combat mix’ of weapons platforms, the likelihood that they will be used in conflict is significantly increased. This has led to the use of uranium munitions against civilian infrastructure, such as buildings and broadcast equipment. The contamination of these sites markedly increases the likelihood of civilian exposure, as there will be considerable pressure to reuse key assets or re-build on geographically significant locations.

Another result of the diversification of target types is that it is increasingly difficult to identify, mark and fence-off potentially hazardous sites. The number of contaminated sites may be in the 10s or 100s or may reach the 1000s during a protracted conflict and the volume of uranium released into the environment and the risk it presents will vary widely, depending on the munitions involved. This uncertainty means that the swift release of uranium weapon firing coordinates is crucial in order to avoid significant, and avoidable, civilian exposures; exposures that may come from inhalation of uranium dust, contaminated food or water or the collection of scrap, metal or souvenirs. The staff of NGOs working in the field may also be at risk of exposure.

Article 4 of Chemical Weapons Convention Protocol V set a norm for the recording, retention and transmission of data relating to Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) by parties to armed conflicts. While the Protocol’s definition of ERW related to weapons that had failed to operate as intended or that had been dumped – which may exclude uranium weapon contamination - the principle of transparency remains valid.

It is imperative that users of uranium weapons, where they have not already done so, immediately reveal the firing coordinates of uranium weapon strikes to both national authorities and the United Nations. This is of particular importance in Iraq, where a lack of data is hampering meaningful research into the weapons’ impact.

DU use presents a clear risk to human health and the environment. This risk is increased through the use of the weapons in civilian areas and against civilian objects, and is further compounded by the inability of affected states to effectively manage contamination.

In 2007, Belgium became the first state in the world to impose a national ban on all aspects of DU munitions. Costa Rica followed in 2011, and Ireland is considering a similar ban. New Zealand will consider a ban next month.

I urge the Australian Government to apply the precautionary principle in relation to the upcoming First Committee vote until definitive research can prove that those exposed to DU in combat areas are not adversely affected by its radiation and toxicity.

As a renowned environmentalist I know you will be concerned about the impact DU weapons have on entire regional eco-systems essentially becoming the “Agent Orange” of the 21st century.

Australia has an opportunity to join with 148 other nations including, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Norway and New Zealand, and apply the precautionary principle and support greater transparency by sending "Yes" vote to the First Committee scheduled for October 2012.

In the meantime I request an opportunity to meet with you and your departmental representative to discuss this urgent matter and provide further information and evidence for the "Yes" vote case.

To arrange a meeting I can be contacted by email on donnamulhearn@yahoo.com.au or by phone on 0422 749319.

I write also on behalf of the Australian Campaign to Ban Uranium Weapons, launched in 2011, which is made up of ordinary Australia concerned about this issue and seeking the Australian Government to take action in line with its human rights obligations.

I look forward to your response.

Yours Sincerely

Donna Mulhearn

Co-ordinator, Australian Campaign to Ban Uranium Weapons

acbuw.org