



Peace Movement Aotearoa

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Act now: Depleted Uranium (Prohibition) Bill

Update, 25 June 2012

The first reading of the Depleted Uranium (Prohibition) Bill did not after all take place on 13 June 2012 in part because of the urgent debate on the ACC, and it is now looking as though the first reading may instead be this coming Wednesday, 27 June.

If you have received a reply to your initial letter requesting support for the Bill at first reading from any MP that includes “There is currently no conclusive evidence that depleted uranium poses a significant threat to health or the environment” or similar points, please note that the International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons has published an open letter to MPs covering that and related points - the letter is available at <http://www.bandepleteduranium.org/en/open-letter-to-members-of-the-new-zealand-parliame> It would be great if you could take the time to write again to those MPs using some or all of the points in the open letter.

If you have not yet had a chance to contact National and United Future MPs asking them to support the Bill at first reading, it would be great if you could so today or tomorrow (see information and contact details below). Thank you.

12 June 2012

This urgent action alert has information about the Depleted Uranium (Prohibition) Bill. There are four sections below: 1) about the Depleted Uranium (Prohibition) Bill, 2) why this issue is important, 3) who you should contact about this, and 4) where you can find more information.

The crucial action at this time is to get sufficient support for the first reading of the Bill so it can be referred to Select Committee for consideration. The two parties that have not yet indicated they will vote in favour of the Bill being referred to Select committee are United Future and National. It would be extremely helpful if you can phone or email Peter Dunne, and if you are in a National held electorate, the MP for that electorate, and ask them to support the Bill at its first reading.

The formatted version of this alert is available at <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/dubill.htm> and any further updates on the first reading of the Bill will be added to that page.

1) About the Depleted Uranium (Prohibition) Bill

The Depleted Uranium (Prohibition) Bill is a private Member’s Bill, introduced to parliament by Phil Twyford on 9 September 2010. The aim of the Bill is to ban the possession, use, sale,

manufacture, testing and transit of uranium in all conventional munitions and armour within New Zealand and by agents of the New Zealand government.

The Bill applies the precautionary principle, banning the use of depleted uranium (DU) weapons until definitive research can prove that those exposed to DU in combat areas are not adversely affected by its radiation and toxicity. Links to the text of the Bill and the Bill Digest are available on the Depleted Uranium (Prohibition) Bill web page at <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/dubill.htm>

2) Why this issue is important

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

DU is a waste product of the nuclear industry. DU is a chemically toxic and radioactive compound, which is used in armour piercing munitions because of its very high density. It is 1.7 times denser than lead, and punches through the steel armour of tanks and other vehicles when fired at high velocity. The part of the munition that is made of DU is called a 'penetrator', a long metal dart that can weigh more than four kilograms in the largest examples. It is usually an alloy of DU and a small amount of another metal such as titanium and molybdenum.

In addition to armour piercing munitions, DU is used as armour in US M1A1 and M1A2 battle tanks, and in small amounts in some types of landmines (M86 PDM and ADAM). ADAM antipersonnel landmines were used in Kuwait during the 1991 Gulf War, and both M86 PDM and ADAM landmines are still in US stockpiles.

DU weapons are not nuclear weapons, because DU weapons rely on a high velocity impact to do damage to a target rather than a critical nuclear detonation.

DU ammunition was used on a large scale by the US and Britain in the Gulf War in 1991, then in Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo, and again in Iraq by the US and the Britain in 2003. It is suspected that the US also used DU in Afghanistan in 2001, although both the US and British governments have denied using it there. However, leaked transport documents suggest that US forces in Afghanistan had DU weapons, and the continued use of A10 Warthog 'tank-buster' aircraft indicates that DU may be being used there.

DU ignites on impact, burning at a very high temperature and dispersing a fine radioactive and chemically toxic dust which can pass through gas masks, so it is virtually impossible to protect troops in the battlefield - and even more difficult to protect civilians wherever it is used. In addition, 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.

Although DU is only weakly radioactive, the nature of that radioactivity and how it can affect living tissue and blood cells is potentially very damaging to human health. Research by the US Armed Forces Radiobiology Research Institute has found that alpha particles radiating from dust can damage DNA in vulnerable tissue leading to cancer, birth defects and other health effects.

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.

The NZ Defence Force (NZDF) does not use depleted uranium weapons. In 2009, the then Defence Force Chief Jerry Mataparae told the Foreign Affairs Select Committee that the NZDF would prefer its allies did not use DU weapons.

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 legislation prohibiting DU munitions and armour would have strong symbolic value, and follow on from the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act 1987, as well as New Zealand's leading roles in the the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions - also weapons of "indiscriminate" effect that do not distinguish civilian from military targets.

National bans on DU munitions and armour are helping to build political will towards the objective of an international convention to prohibit their production and use. The large majority in the European Parliament supporting a DU weapons moratorium indicates a significant level of international support on this issue.

3) Who you should contact about this

The crucial action at this time is to get sufficient support for the first reading of the Bill so it can be referred to Select Committee for consideration. The two parties that have not yet indicated they will vote in favour of the Bill being referred to Select committee are United Future and National.

It would be extremely helpful if you can phone or email Peter Dunne, and if you are in a National held electorate, the MP for that electorate, and ask them to support the Bill at its first reading.

Contact details: all MPs, tel 04 817 9999 and ask to be put through to the MP's office; electorate office details will be in your local phone book; email contact details are at <http://www.parliament.nz/NR/ronlyres/5858C8A5-ACDF-4B35-8D7A-3ABB7B19ACDB/223132/listofmembers0106122.pdf>

Peter Dunne, United Future, email peter.dunne@parliament.govt.nz - you can phone his parliamentary office as above, and / or one of his two electorate offices: Hutt office, tel 04 560 4773; Johnsonville office, tel 04 478 0076. Please request that your message asking Peter Dunne to support the Bill going to Select Committee to be passed on to him.

4) Where you can find more information

The text of the Bill, the Bill Digest, and a range of briefing papers from the Depleted Uranium Education Team and others, as well as links to other web sites, are available at <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/dubill.htm>

There are three particularly useful pages on the International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons site: a concise guide to uranium weapons at <http://www.bandepleteduranium.org/en/overview> frequently asked questions about depleted uranium at <http://www.bandepleteduranium.org/en/faq> and a short introduction to the legal status of uranium weapons at <http://www.bandepleteduranium.org/en/legal-status>