UNEP

Depleted Uranium in Kosovo

Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment

First published in Switzerland in 2001 by the United Nations Environment Programme.

United Nations Environment Programme
PO Box 30552
Nairobi
Kenya
Tel: +254 2 621234
Fax: +254 2 623927
E-mail: cpiinfo@unep.org
Web: http://www.unep.org

Production and Cover Design: Kim & Cie S.A.
Maps by UNEP-BALKANS; SSI; GRID Arendal
Front cover pictures: UNEP
Printed by: SRO-KUNDIG, Geneva
Printed on Chlorine-free paper

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Table of Contents

Appendixes

Foreword

This report presents the findings of the first-ever international assessment of the environmental impact of depleted uranium (DU) when used in a real conflict situation. It has been carried out as part of the post-conflict assessments conducted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in the Balkans.

The report builds on an earlier theoretical study by UNEP. In October 1999, as part of its assessment of the impact of the Kosovo conflict on the environment and human settlements, UNEP carried out a Desk Assessment study of the potential effects of the possible use of DU during the conflict. The study was limited by lack of information on the actual use of DU. In July 2000, however, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) provided UNEP with the information required, enabling a field mission to be planned and conducted. The information included a map indicating the location of 112 separate strikes by DU ammunition, and a table showing the number of DU rounds used and the coordinates of the targeted areas.

During the field mission to Kosovo, from 5 – 19 November 2000, soil, water and other samples were collected from eleven sites where DU had reportedly been used during the conflict. Five separate laboratories then analysed these samples.

When the laboratory phase was finalised in early March, the analyses of the samples showed only low levels of radioactivity. Furthermore, the results suggested that there was no immediate cause for concern regarding toxicity. However, major scientific uncertainties persist over the long-term environmental impacts of DU, especially regarding groundwater.

Due to these scientific uncertainties, UNEP calls for precaution. There is a very clear need for action to be undertaken on the clean-up and decontamination of the polluted sites; for awareness-raising aimed at the local population; and for future monitoring.

Just as the Desk Assessment conducted in October 1999 advised precaution, the recommendations of this report have also been guided by this approach, with the objective of protecting the environment and human health.

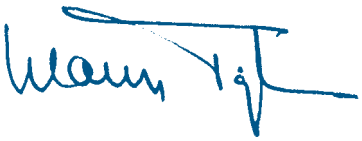
This difficult task was conducted effectively and efficiently, thanks to the close cooperation of several key partners, to whom I am very grateful. NATO provided information and excellent cooperation. The NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) ensured the basic safety and security of mission staff, and provided other important logistical support. The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) contributed expertise to the team and assisted with field logistics. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has been our partner in the initial desk assessment and the field mission, and has assisted with the laboratory analysis. The World Health Organization (WHO) is conducting a parallel desk assessment on the health impacts, and the together two reports should provide comprehensive information on the issues

surrounding DU. Several governments, including those of Finland, Italy and the United States, have provided in-kind contributions, and I am especially grateful to the Government of Switzerland, which has provided generous financial support for this assessment.

Above all, my gratitude is expressed to the team of dedicated experts that conducted this historic mission under the able and professional leadership of Pekka Haavisto. The team undertook demanding scientific field investigations at short notice to ensure of completion of the work before the onset of winter in Kosovo. The laboratory work was conducted at an astonishing pace so that results could be made available in record time to a public concerned about the potential risks of DU.

Throughout the exercise, special efforts have been made to ensure the objectivity and scientific credibility of the analysis, by drawing on an international team of experts and by using a range of different laboratories for the sample analysis. It is hoped that the data we have collected in the field will advance further analysis of this topic in related fields, such as the impacts of DU on human health.

UNEP now recommends, following its precautionary approach and to reduce uncertainties about the environmental impacts of DU in the longer term, that ways and means be explored for undertaking similar missions in other Balkan regions where DU was used in earlier conflicts.



Klaus Toepfer
United Nations Under-Secretary-General
Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme

Introduction

"Perhaps the most endangered natural resource in times of war is truth", stated the introduction of the joint UNEP/UNCHS Balkans Task Force (BTF) report published in October 1999. For the safety of the local population and international workers in post-conflict situations it is essential to obtain truthful and correct information regarding the environmental situation and any possible connected health risks.

Depleted uranium (DU) was one the issues that confronted us during the environmental assessment work in the summer of 1999. As part of the BTF process, a special international group of experts – the 'Depleted Uranium Desk Assessment Group' – was established to assess the potential effects on human health and the environment arising from the possible use of DU. At the time the Group conducted its assessment, information on the use of depleted uranium during the Kosovo conflict was not available to the United Nations. The Group did, however, conduct a field mission in August 1999, during which it visited areas in and around the towns of Pristina, Klina and Pec that might have been struck by DU ordnance. The field mission did not find any evidence or indication of depleted uranium at the locations visited. In preparing precautionary recommendations, the Group concluded that it would not be meaningful to conduct further field searches for possible DU contamination without confirmation that DU had indeed been used in Kosovo and without data on the corresponding targeted areas.

Following a request made to NATO by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan, in October 1999, NATO confirmed in February 2000 the use of DU during the Kosovo conflict and provided the United Nations with information consisting of a general map indicating the areas targeted and the total number of DU rounds fired. This information was not considered sufficient to justify a further field mission because of the absence of detailed site coordinates.