Chair

Since 2007, First Committee has been discussing its resolution on the effects of weapons containing depleted uranium, and on each occasion since, this Committee has made modest steps towards improving the text.

However, while international debate on the civilian and environmental harm caused by conflict pollution has risen up the political agenda, we have still not made meaningful progress on this single munition constituent.

This is regrettable.

The International Atomic Energy Agency and World Health Organisation have highlighted the need for remedial measures to minimize civilian harm; as has the UN Environment Programme, which also called for a precautionary approach to the use of depleted uranium.

Human Rights Council Special Rapporteurs have highlighted the risks that vulnerable groups face from exposure to these toxic remnants of war, whose use has been rightly stigmatized by the majority of States, by national and regional parliaments, and by investment funds.

Beyond this room, the use of depleted uranium weapons is viewed as unacceptable.

And beyond this room, the legacy of the hundreds of thousands of kilograms of depleted uranium munitions that litter the soil in current and former conflict zones in the Balkans and Middle East has still not been properly addressed.

Absent clear post-conflict obligations to address contamination, we see little transparency over the use of depleted uranium, no identification of contaminated hotspots, no remediation or monitoring, and few efforts to make affected communities aware of the exposure risks that they face.

Meanwhile, new conflicts have erupted in countries like Iraq, where more than 400,000kg of depleted uranium was fired in 1991 and 2003; and in Syria, where depleted uranium was used by the international coalition, in spite of earlier assurances that it would not.

For both countries, the environmental health threats linked to their conflicts are continuing to mount. And for Iraq in particular, past conflict pollution issues such as depleted uranium remain unaddressed, largely because of the failure of the States that fired it to take responsibility for doing so.

This should be a lesson for the future.

Chair,
International standards view depleted uranium as radioactive waste; as such it is tightly regulated in peacetime in order to prevent human exposure. Those standards are based on the uncontested principle that we should prevent civilians, ordinary citizens, being exposed to radioactive materials, a principle that recognizes that there is no safe dose of radiation.

Comprehensive long-term studies into the health outcomes of populations exposed to depleted uranium in conflict areas have never taken place. Beyond the methodological and practical complexity of undertaking such studies in post-conflict settings, they have also been hampered by a lack of information, or have been willfully obstructed. But even without a smoking gun, all relevant international organizations are clear: prevent civilians from being exposed, and undertake remedial measures.

Yet during the debates in First Committee since 2007, those international radiation protection norms, and common sense, have been flatly rejected by certain States as they have sought to justify their ongoing use of the weapons.

States that have in place strict precautionary measures for their own military personnel to prevent exposure; States that will spend millions remediating their production facilities, storage sites and ranges. Why? Because their citizens have no more wish to live in contaminated environments than the civilians of Iraq, or Syria, or Kosovo.

We urge states to use this resolution as a starting point for the clarification and development of obligations for the post-conflict management of depleted uranium, and in so doing ensure that civilians enjoy the same standard of environmental human rights as their citizens.

Supported by

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