Depleted Uranium Weapons

INTERNATIONAL COALITION TO BAN URANIUM WEAPONS (ICBUW)

Background

Depleted uranium (DU) is a by-product of the uranium enrichment process. It is used by a number of states in armour-piercing-incendiary ammunition fired by tanks, armoured fighting vehicles, and aircraft. The first major use of DU weapons was in the 1991 Gulf War, followed by the Balkans and other war areas up to the Ukraine one. Radioactive and chemically toxic, DU use creates hotspots of persistent contamination of soil and groundwater that present a hazard to communities long after conflict ends. DU may form part of complex health issues such as the Gulf War or Balkan "syndromes". ICBUW has compiled and published a collection of scientific articles reflecting on the effects of DU and the assessment of associated risks.

The refusal by some states to acknowledge the health risks from DU contrasts starkly with the protective measures provided to their military personnel, as well as their own domestic standards for radioactive waste management. ICBUW has updated a detailed file on "Depleted Uranium Weapons and Platforms Worldwide" that outlines the various types of DU weapons and the platforms that can deploy them. The list has recently been updated just in relation to the (controversial) issue of DU use in missiles and bombs.

Though there is not yet a legally binding treaty prohibiting the use, acquisition, possession, development, production, or transfer of DU weapons (as proposed in terms of ICBUW´s Draft Convention), their use can already be regarded as illegal under existing international law by applying, inter alia, the following arguments or standards:

- The principle of distinction (between civilians and combatants), and environmental protection obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL), including the principle of proportionality;
- The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (in line with the International Court of Justice´ Advisory Opinion on Climate Change 2025) as well as the protection against toxic substances under human rights and environmental law (EL); and
- The precautionary principle under IHL and EL, according to which scientific uncertainties do not relieve states from taking precautionary measures against environmental risks.

Current context

In 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a **resolution** on "Effects of the use of armaments and ammunition containing depleted uranium" (A/RES/79/49). The resolution—like previous ones—contains references to principles that are important for the DU issue, such as transparency, assistance and support, as well as the precautionary approach.

Meanwhile, there is growing national jurisprudence (especially in **Italy**) to acknowledge compensation claims for negative health impacts of DU victims based on a corresponding causal link. This approach has been followed in Serbia by a **landmark court ruling** in Pančevo in 2025, and **in Vršac in 2026,** thanks to the long and engaged work of a legal team around lawyer Dr. Srdan Aleksic, supported by ICBUW. Military DU victims from other European countries like Romania have started fighting for their rights in contact and **extensive exchange with ICBUW.** Altogether, more use should be made of informal but easily accessible UN schemes such as the special procedures run in the frame of the ***Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights***.

The ongoing war in Ukraine still emphasizes the urgency of the problem. In view of DU-capable Russian tanks and DU ammunition deliveries by the United Kingdom and the United States, there seems to be no doubt that uranium weapons have been used in battlefield (**see latest reports on Russian DU drone**)—with all their damaging effects. Against this background, ICBUW regrets the statement by Ukraine contained in the 2024 **UN Secretary-General's report on the issue**, which downplays the risks of DU weaponry, while resolution 79/49 was supported by a great majority of states (152 in favour, four against, 30 abstentions). Unfortunately, some Western (Nordic) states **moved from support to abstention** on the resolution (as Germany did years ago). The existence of the Ukraine—caused by Russian aggression—war should not lead to undermining existing legal standards of humanitarian disarmament such as the Mine Ban Treaty, which suffered withdrawal by 6 states, including Ukraine, Poland and Finland. ICBUW, in November 2025, has affiliated to a **Joint Civil Society Statement on the issue**.

The health and environmental consequences of DU use have to be viewed in the context of growing concerns over the polluting legacy of armed conflict. The International Law Commission (ILC) has adopted "**Draft principles on protection of the environment in relation to armed conflict**," of which Principle 26 is devoted to "toxic and hazardous remnants of war" and their removal, or rendering them harmless. Principle 14 stipulates the application of IHL to the environment, including the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions.

In general, it looks like the DU issue remains high on the political and media agenda, while ICBUW has intensified offering topic-related **film events** linked to discussion events. ICBUW's work, which is directed at reducing the human cost of weapons through banning uranium weapons, has led to the acknowledgement of the organization as a global focal point for the issue.



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Recommendations

During the First Committee, delegations should:

- Continue to raise concerns over the use and potential use of DU in past and current conflict areas and the need to support DU victims;
- Exchange on ways of further discrediting DU weaponry and exerting influence to not use or threaten to use DU linking the issue to environmental and human rights dimensions;
- Explain how they are implementing resolution 79/49 on "Effects of the use of armaments and ammunition containing depleted uranium;" and
- Give full support to the resolution on the topic under discussion.

Beyond the First Committee, states should:

- Disclose and exchange targeting coordinates of any use of DU weapons to facilitate clearance and civilian exposure studies;
- Contribute technical and financial assistance to states affected by DU contamination and support DU victims, e.g. through establishing a voluntary international fund, and an international system of help and consultancy; and
- Work towards a universal ban on DU weapons directed at their elimination on the basis of ICBUW's Draft Convention.

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