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Successful meeting in Athens, July 8, 2009

War crimes in Gaza - the data on depleted uranium

- Homepage - News - News Articles -

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On July 8, 2009 a successful meeting of NGOs and Press took place in Athens on "*War crimes in Gaza - the data on depleted uranium*".

Maria Arvaniti Sotiropoulou, President of the Greek Affiliate of IPPNW, explained why the meeting had been organized. She presented a brief review of DU weapons. IPPNW Greece was the first NGO to publicize the issue (1991) and in 2001 informed the press before NATO did about the use of these weapons in Yugoslavia. In the same year they obliged the Greek government to admit that the Greek army not only possessed the weapons but had already used them in exercises held by the Greek Navy. She reminded the audience of IPPNW Greece's action of Dec 2008 in response to Greece's vote of abstention in the UN General Assembly on the same issue. She also referred to the role of IPPNW from the meeting in Prato (1981) in the peace efforts in Palestine and the close collaboration between the Palestinian and Israel affiliates including their collaboration in the seminar organized in Athens in 1999. Finally she drew attention to the press release on the use of white phosphorus that IPPNW published during the recent brutal bombing in Gaza.

Jean Marie Matagne, president of ACDN, outlined ACDN's case for concluding that GBU-39s weapons - whose use in Gaza was revealed in the Israeli press - contain DU. He also described ACDN's appeal to IAE and UN that they should investigate the issue.

Mr John Moussalas, general secretary of the Greek section of "Medecins du Monde" described his experience of the hospitals in Gaza, the suffering of the people during the attack and the rise in mortality from chronic disease caused by the embargo. He had been among the people on the "Arion" boat that Israeli troops had forced to stop transporting humanitarian assistance to the people in Gaza. He also said that the aid that Greek people had donated to the Palestinian people had been transported through Israel and six months later had still not arrived in Palestine.

Mrs Aiki Marangopoulou, president of the Marangopoulos Human Rights Foundation (professor of law) reminded the audience of her NGOs action in the International Court of Justice in the Hague against NATO for the use of DU weapons in Yugoslavia.

Mr Panos Trigazis President of the Observatory of International Organizations proposed that all the NGOs present should sign an appeal to Greek MPs asking them to vote for a ban on DU weapons following the recent example of Belgian MPs. **His motion was accepted.**

Wayne Hall

Karen Lee of Hellenic American Democratic Association: comment on Wednesday's function

In addition to a few impressions from last night, I want to say a quick thank you, as did the organizers of last night's program, to Wayne Hall for introducing Jean-Marie Matagne to Greek anti-nuke activists and pushing for some good use of his visit to Greece.

The main content of Matagne's talk is in the material Wayne sent earlier to this group, i.e. the preliminary report from ACDN. The evidence shows that DU burnt in a bomb or shell attack, produces micro and nano particles that enter the atmosphere and fall back to earth, contaminating soil and presenting a longterm environmental health risk. The health effects are not just in the preliminary 'kill' stats but can present themselves as cancers, birth defects, etc years after exposure.

One additional point Matagne made, regards the decision to publish the report now, or to wait for a later, full investigation. He noted that such an investigation could take weeks (at best), months, or even years. Meanwhile the use of DU, in whatever conflict, can go on undiscouraged. Thus his rationale for exposing the possible Gaza use now.

This was supported in a brief presentation by Aiki Marangopoulou of the Marangopoulos Human Rights Foundation, who was a real firebrand. She said in essence: We filed after the 1st Gulf War and much of that information came from US soldiers themselves. To date, it has NOT been taken up by any court. Had it been acted on then, we might have prevented/outlawed DU use in the Balkan bombing. Had THAT been acted on, it might have prevented use in Iraq. And Afghanistan. And, possibly, in Gaza.

The IPPNW president, Maria Sotiropoulou, in giving background, noted that the Greek office in its early years had a Palestinian medical student in its membership, and has supported the "free Palestine" movement ever since. In the 1980s, there was a very optimistic outlook, which has dwindled as the conflict goes on unresolved. However, she was careful to separate the two issues to the extent possible. DU in any context is a concern in and of itself.

Doctors of the World talked briefly about what their representatives, just returned from Gaza, witnessed in terms of humanitarian problems. The curtailment of medical supplies entering the strip, the destruction of hospitals during the winter attack, and the population density contribute a high rate of casualties (immediate and longterm) and a severely reduced capacity to treat them.

During the Q/A period, two lines of reaction emerged.

1. That anti-war and human rights activists need to press internationally for 'crimes against humanity' against Israel, both for the use of white phosphorus in a densely populated area (which seems to be undisputed) and for thorough investigation into the possible use of DU munitions. Israel, unlike the US, is signatory to the ICC.

2. Panos Trigazis, who contributed to the HELADA nuke presentation in April, noted two important political points. First, that Israeli peace and human rights groups have been active in these interconnected issues for decades and need to be supported. Second, that a bill could be introduced in the Greek parliament, similar to the one passed earlier this year in Belgium, totally banning the possession and use of DU munitions in the country. This would prevent further exposure of Greek troops/sailors to DU. (There were exposures and resulting health problems after Greeks were stationed in the Balkans.)

In all, the program was very well put together. There was solid information on the interplay of commercial and military applications. There was less anti-Israeli sentiment than I had feared, and more focus on the interrelation of interests that promote nuclear anything and prevent legal/political reaction to it.

The US took some deserved hits for having so widely used DU in several areas of the world (and providing DU munitions to its NATO partners), but France was also in the spotlight, being the most nuclear country in the world (ergo source of DU). And there was a contingent of ADFE members who joined us in a meeting last fall re US elections.

In many ways, this seemed to be a 'reunion' of anti-nuke and human rights activists who are just now regaining their voice after a long hiatus. Hopefully, here in Greece and elsewhere, such programs can stimulate a renewed effort for a nuclear-free world.

