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10 October 2011

*Dear Katy,*

Thank you for your letter of 22 September to Liam Fox regarding CHARM 3, the UK's current round of depleted uranium (DU) ammunition and its legal weapons review.

The conclusions of the original legal weapons review on CHARM 3 are extant, meeting favourably the criteria in Article 36 of Amended Protocol 1 of the Geneva Conventions: DU can be used within weapons; it is not prohibited under current or likely future international agreements. The application of military force, in this case the use of weapons subject to legal weapons review, is governed further by the four International Humanitarian Law (IHL) principles of distinction, proportionality, military necessity and humanity. This accepts the means or methods of warfare are not unlimited.

We are conscious some people are concerned there is a link between the use of DU ammunition and medical problems such as cancers and birth defects. This is an issue taken very seriously by the Government. However, it must be stressed that DU has not been shown to present the health or environmental risks suggested in some reports, on the internet and in other media.

There remains no reliable scientific or medical evidence to suggest DU is responsible for post conflict incidences of ill health in UK Armed Forces personnel or civilian populations. Environmental monitoring in areas where DU munitions have been used has confirmed the presence of DU at levels far too low to have any detectable health impact.

These assertions are consistent with the findings of many agencies and with the World Health Organisation statement that "for the general population, neither civilian nor military use of DU is likely to produce radiation doses significantly above normal background levels".

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Acknowledging DU is toxic (it is a heavy metal like lead) and weakly radioactive, the European Commission, through a group of independent scientific experts taking into account potential pathways and realistic scenarios of exposure, concluded that "exposure to depleted uranium could not result in a detectable effect on human health".

The environmental and long-term health effects of the use of DU munitions have been investigated by the World Health Organization, the United Nations Environmental Program, the International Atomic Energy Agency, NATO, Centres for Disease Control, the European Commission, and others including the Royal Society. None of these inquiries has documented long-term environmental or health effects attributable to use of these munitions. It is regrettable the conclusions of these studies are often ignored.

Depleted (less radioactive) uranium is a by-product of the uranium enrichment process to make nuclear fuels. Uranium itself is only weakly radioactive. It is among the 20 most abundant elements on earth and is present in the air, water, plants, every creature (including all of us) and a variety of minerals, most notably for the UK in granite. Its relative abundance is similar to that of silver or gold. It is more abundant than tin, mercury and lead. The half life of DU is a measure of its weak activity rather than its persistence as a risk to health and the environment.

DU is used in anti-armour munitions because of its density and unique penetrative properties. It is fired from guns mounted on either tanks or aircraft to defeat armoured targets. It is not used in bombs or missiles. DU has a number of civilian applications including for example counterweights in helicopters and other aircraft, shielding for radioactive sources in hospitals and some specialist yacht keels.

*Yours ever*

*Nick*

**NICK HARVEY MP**

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