TV Not Concerned by Cluster Bombs, DU: "That's just the way life is in Iraq"

Media have been quick to declare the U.S. war against Iraq a success, but in-depth investigative reporting about the war's likely health and environmental consequences has been scarce.

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Two important issues getting shortchanged in the press are the U.S.'s controversial use of cluster bombs and depleted uranium weapons.

According to a May 5 search of the Nexis database, there have been no in-depth reports about cluster bombs on ABC, CBS or NBC's nightly news programs since the start of the war. There have been, however, a few passing mentions of cluster bombs-- enough so that viewers may be aware of their existence. Not so with depleted uranium. Since the beginning of the year, the words "depleted uranium" have not been uttered once on ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News or NBC Nightly News, according to Nexis.

Depleted uranium is a dense metal used in various U.S. and British munitions as ballast and to cut through tank armor. The U.S. military insists it is not a major health threat, but many link it to Gulf War Syndrome and to increased cancers and birth defects in Iraq. As explained in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer (11/12/02)-- one of the few mainstream outlets to seriously investigate the issue-- DU is radioactive and remains so for billions of years. What's more, when a DU weapon hits its target, "an extremely fine ceramic uranium dust" is created "that can be spread by the wind, inhaled and absorbed into the human body and absorbed by plants and animals, becoming part of the food chain." According to the London newspaper the Guardian (4/25/03), it's unclear exactly how much DU was used in the most recent Iraq war, but some experts estimate 1,000 to 2,000 tons-- roughly three to six times the amount of DU dropped in the 1991 Gulf War.

Cluster bombs are another widely criticized weapon favored by the U.S. As a recent Time magazine article (5/12/03) explained, cluster bombs "split in midair and rain as many as hundreds of grenade-like bomblets," some of which "remain, like leftover land mines, as a deadly postwar risk to civilians." According to Human Rights Watch (3/03), a minimum of 14 to 16 percent of cluster bomblets become "de facto antipersonnel landmines"; the group has called for "a global moratorium" on their use. Amnesty International has called the U.S.'s use of cluster bombs in civilian areas of Iraq "a grave violation of international humanitarian law" (4/2/03).

When cluster bombs have come up on the major network newscasts, little background information has been provided. ABC's World News Tonight reported (4/1/03) Iraqi officials' claim that nine children had been killed by cluster bombs, but did not elaborate. In another report (World News Tonight Saturday, 4/19/03), anchor Terry Moran introduced a segment by saying, "Four soldiers were hurt today when a little Iraqi girl handed them part of a cluster bomb," adding, bizarrely, "That's just the way life is in Iraq right now." Later, Moran noted that the little girl was injured, too.

The report Moran was introducing examined the dangers posed to civilians by the large amounts of military ordnance around the country, including both weapons stockpiles left behind by Saddam Hussein's regime and cluster bombs dropped by the U.S. and British. ABC focused on the efforts U.S. Marines were making to dispose of the weaponry, and concluded that "the Marines did not create this problem, but Iraqis are sure now looking to them for answers." True, U.S. Marines and soldiers did not create the problem of Iraqi ammunition stockpiles, but they-- or, more to the point, their commanders-- did create the problem of cluster bombs.

Apart from one passing mention (3/21/03), NBC Nightly News' only substantive reference to cluster bombs was when Pentagon correspondent Jim Miklaszewski reported (4/2/03) the use of "a new, more deadly cluster bomb, designed to take out entire columns of enemy armor and troops." But the report included no discussion of whether the bombs were being used near civilians, or what their long-term impact might be.

As for CBS's Evening News, it mentioned cluster bombs only once, almost inadvertently (4/16/03). The main source for the story was the Army's Gen. Buford Blount, who Dan Rather interviewed about the "enormous job" the U.S. military "has taken on in trying to get Iraq up and running again." At one point, apparently to illustrate the difficult requests the Army receives very day, the report featured a clip of an Iraqi doctor asking that the U.S. clean up cluster bombs. Rather let the substance of the comment pass without remark, ending the report by saying that the Blount "remains convinced that his soldiers have made good progress."

Interestingly, CBS aired what seemed to be an expanded version of Rather's report later that night, on the newsmagazine 60 Minutes II. Even in the longer story, the focus was on Blount and his struggles to "bring order out of chaos" in Baghdad, but Rather did pursue the question the doctor raised: "What about the cluster bomb problem?" Blount answered that "we didn't use..."
“What about the cluster bomb problem?” Blount answered that “we didn’t use that many of them, but there are evidently some areas where they— you know, they’ve got some— some areas,” and claimed that though the Air Force may have dropped more, he, as an Army officer, didn’t know where those would be.

The report then showed footage from Rather’s visit to a hospital where he met children gruesomely injured by cluster bombs, including one boy who lost both eyes and sustained a potentially fatal head wound. “All his mother can do is weep and try to ease his pain,” said Rather. Clearly, Rather was trying to convey the horrific damage inflicted by cluster bombs— something too few mainstream reporters have done— but his report stopped short of providing specifics about the extent of “the cluster bomb problem”. Was Blount telling the truth when he said “we didn’t use that many”? How many remain unexploded? Does their use violate international law?

Contrast TV’s lack of curiosity to the noteworthy May 12 Time magazine story cited above, in which reporter Michael Weisskopf highlighted the discrepancy between Pentagon claims— that “only 26 cluster bombs had landed in civilian areas, resulting in one casualty”— with the reality on the ground, where in Karbala alone, local clean-up crews “are harvesting about 1,000 cluster bombs a day.”

Human Rights Watch— which warned for months of the danger and possible illegality of using cluster bombs near populated areas— has likewise argued (4/25/03) that “U.S. claims that cluster munitions have not caused significant damage to civilians in Iraq are highly misleading.” The group has criticized the U.S. and Britain for failing to “come clean” about how many cluster bombs were dropped and where, so that civilians can be protected (4/29/03).

The repercussions of the U.S. and British use of cluster bombs and depleted uranium weapons will be felt in Iraq for a long time to come. It is essential that U.S. media push for a full accounting on these issues from the Pentagon.

ACTION: Please ask ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News and NBC Nightly news to seriously investigate the U.S.’s use of cluster bombs and depleted uranium in Iraq.

Von: On Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting Letterhead, 6 may 03

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