

Media Advisory

Mideast Weapons Deserve Scrutiny

Israel's cluster bombs and alleged phosphorus use have escaped attention

8/2/06

On July 24, Human Rights Watch **reported** that Israel was using cluster bombs "in populated areas of Lebanon," which it said "may violate the prohibition on indiscriminate attacks contained in international humanitarian law." But despite the extensive media coverage of the current conflict in the Middle East, almost no U.S. outlets are reporting on these findings.

The **Los Angeles Times** buried the news at the end of a July 25 report, which concluded that the "Israeli army said it was checking into the group's allegations, but added that the weapons were legal under international standards." On July 27, the **New York Times** reported that an Israeli general "acknowledged that Israel had used cluster munitions in the conflict." The **Times** described the alleged use of such weapons as "another matter that has drawn criticism."

Yet this reference was the first time the paper's readers heard of the matter—at least when it came to Israel's arsenal. On July 19, the **Times** did report that U.S. and Israeli officials claimed that Hezbollah had altered some of their rockets by "attaching cluster bombs as warheads, or filling an explosive shell with ball bearings that have devastating effect."

NBC Nightly News similarly (7/25/06) noted the lethality of Hezbollah's arsenal, with correspondent Martin Fletcher reporting that "the Katyusha is full of these tiny ball bearings that are aimed to kill and hurt as many people as possible." **Washington Post** columnist Charles Krauthammer (7/28/06) contrasted the ball-bearing packed Katyushas that "are meant to kill and maim" with Israel's "precision-guided munitions" as evidence that "Hezbollah is deliberately trying to create civilian casualties on both sides while Israel is deliberately trying to minimize civilian casualties, also on both sides."

Weapons loaded with ball bearings would seem designed to be anti-personnel weapons, and their use has been condemned by human rights organizations because of their wide and imprecise blast range (Human Rights Watch, **7/18/06**). But cluster bombs, which likewise have a wide and imprecise blast range, pose an even deadlier threat to civilians, as they can spread hundreds of "bomblets" that become "de facto antipersonnel landmines" (Human Rights Watch, **3/03**). Amnesty International called the use of cluster bombs by the U.S. in civilian areas of Iraq "a grave violation of international humanitarian law" (**4/2/03**).

Other reports have raised the strong possibility that cluster bombs may have been used in Gaza (**Agence France Presse**, 7/25/06). And some doctors and Lebanese officials believe that injuries in Lebanon indicate the use of incendiary weapons such as white phosphorus (**Inter Press Service**, 7/28/06; **Agence France Presse**, 7/30/06). White phosphorus causes severe and deep burns to the skin and cannot be extinguished with water; the **New York Times** once called it (3/22/95) one of "the worst chemical weapons" in existence. Israel's use of such weapons would not be without precedent; Human Rights Watch reported in 1996 (**5/96**) that there was "compelling" evidence that Israel used phosphorus weapons against civilians in its 1982 and 1983 attacks on Southern Lebanon. (The U.S. has admitted to using white phosphorus as a weapon in Iraq; see **Extra!**, **3-4/06**.)

Few outlets have even addressed Israel's possible use of white phosphorus, but when it is reported the results are not particularly enlightening. On July 24, **CNN** asked its military analyst Gen. James "Spider" Marks about white phosphorus; though he seemed to know very little about its possible use in Lebanon, he nonetheless declared that it probably wasn't being used: "I don't know anything about Israeli targeting methods and specifically whether they're using white phosphorus or not.... But it's not used against civilians. So I can't comment on whether they're targeting civilians and I would be surprised--in fact, I

would deny that they even were, frankly." **CNN** host Anderson Cooper gave his guest some help by reiterating the Israeli position: "What they certainly are saying is, 'Look, we're point blank not targeting civilians, we're targeting Hezbollah positions.' They say Hezbollah very knowingly, you know, has their infrastructure, has their mobile rockets, launching from residential neighborhoods, and that's why we're seeing the civilian damage to the extent that we have."

The next night, a **CNN** report assured that "Israel says all its weapons and ammunition comply with international law," a point underscored by a former Justice Department official who declared use of white phosphorus legal. The same source, on the other hand, determined that Hezbollah's rockets loaded with ball bearings were "primarily a terror weapon of no particular military utility. That would make this even more legally questionable."

These legal opinions are not shared by all experts. An official with the U.N. body that enforces the Chemical Weapons Convention told the **BBC (BBC News Online, 11/16/05)** that if white phosphorus were used to camouflage movement, it would be legal. However, if it is "specifically intended to be used as a weapon," that would be prohibited. (See **Extra!, 3-4/06.**) While Israel denies such intentions, the reports coming in of civilians severely burned by phosphorus raise serious questions that can't simply be dismissed with Israeli assurances. As Human Rights Watch reported (7/30/06), its researchers in Lebanon "have documented dozens of cases in which Israeli forces have carried out indiscriminate attacks against civilians while in their homes or traveling on roads to flee the fighting."

Anyone reading the coverage of the Israeli invasion and bombing of Lebanon is keenly aware of the weapons in Hezbollah's arsenal. (See the chart "Hezbollah Firepower" in **USA Today's** July 28 edition, for example.) As noted by Frida Berrigan and William Hartung (**Foreign Policy in Focus, 7/26/06**):

Much has been made in the U.S. media of the Syrian- and Iranian-origin weaponry used by Hezbollah in the escalating violence in Israel and Lebanon. There has been no parallel discussion of the origin of Israel's weaponry, the vast bulk of which is from the United States.

When roughly 800 have been killed in Lebanon—mostly civilians—and the civilian death toll in Israel stands at 19, media coverage that focuses on assurances by Israeli officials and pro-war pundits that Israel does not intentionally target civilians gives a false sense of reality. U.S. news outlets need to explain the consequences of Israel's cluster bombs and other weapons—along with Hezbollah's ball bearings.