

Weapons to die for

TEHRAN, Aug. 30 (MNA) -- Two images changed my life when I visited the Peace Museums in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 2000, on my first trip to Japan. I had worked as a geoscientist in two U.S. nuclear weapons labs -- Lawrence Berkeley National Lab and Lawrence Livermore National Lab -- but I never knew what a nuclear weapon really was, nor the horrific effects of radiation on the environment and biological systems. Now I know.

In the Hiroshima Museum, as a nuclear weapons lab whistleblower I wandered through the exhibits with TV cameras in my face, keeping it together by stuffing my emotions. I walked past the mangled lunch boxes and tricycles, thinking of the school children as I looked at the watches and clocks stopped at the moment the first thermonuclear weapon detonated on a human population.

Shadows of people vaporized on stones, and on the steps of a building where one had sat, waiting for the bank to open on that fateful morning. A diorama showed the reality of dying people walking through the streets of Hiroshima with skin dripping and hanging from their bodies. In another image a man stood looking down at his eyeball he held in his hand. When I looked up at a model of LITTLE BOY, the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, I lost it and broke down in sobs which did not stop until half an hour later, halfway through a press conference. The cameras continued to roll, capturing my horror and real feelings at the realization that scientists had made that "gadget" possible. I am a scientist, I worked in those laboratories of death. And I am a graduate of the University of California, which will forever be known as "the University that poisoned the world." The university managed those laboratories of death, unchallenged, for more than 60 years.

Three days later in the Nagasaki Peace Museum, I saw FAT MAN, the first plutonium atomic bomb which was dropped on Nagasaki. There were photos taken by a local photographer just hours after the bomb destroyed the city. People were standing on a bridge absolutely devastated, lying on the ground dying, patterns from their kimonos burned into their skin. And then I saw THE photo: a young mother standing with her kimono open, barebreasted, with a vacant stare, while she nursed her dying baby. Sobbing overwhelmed me once again, and it still brings tears to my eyes when I think of that image, which is burned into my brain by now. I am a mother, and in that moment I knew that mother could have been me, with the life of my baby taken from me, or any other mother around the world. Radiation respects no living thing. That is when I made the decision to spend the rest of my life doing research and educating the public about radiation. I never knew that I could make a difference. Now I know that, as a citizen scientist, empowering others is the best way of all.

I started by writing a Letter to the Editor, not expecting to have it published, but it was. And then I started writing articles about depleted uranium which I had learned about from a journalist, Akira Tashiro, whom I met in Hiroshima on that first trip to Japan. In 2002 he asked me to write the Foreword to his prize-winning book "Discounted Casualties: The Human Cost of Depleted Uranium". Then I was asked to be an expert witness in Japan for the International Criminal Tribunal for Afghanistan in 2003. Marion Fulk, a Manhattan Project scientist and Livermore nuclear weapons program researcher, prepared me with the best science in the world for my testimony. The testimony resulted in a very strong conviction on depleted uranium weapons, illegal under all laws, war conventions, U.S. Federal Code, and U.S. military law. In fact, during testimony, the exposure of the original 1943 Manhattan Project plan to develop DU as a radioactive poison gas weapon convinced the international panel of Judges to make two additional charges: It was a crime against the environment, and President George W. Bush was guilty of war crimes by knowingly exposing his own troops to illegal radioactive weaponry.

My motivation to expose the horrible truth about depleted uranium resulted in very unexpected successes. One of the most important actions was taking a bill, introduced and stuck in limbo in the Connecticut legislature, to New Orleans on a speaking tour in March 2005. I joined anti-war protestors and veterans marching through the streets of New Orleans on March 19. We ended up standing on the white marble steps of the antebellum Louisiana Supreme Court in the heart of the French Quarter. While I stood in the hot sun describing the horrors of depleted uranium weapons, a withered grinch of a security guard glared out at me from behind the locked doors of the Courthouse, while a police van across the street secretly videotaped our speeches. Bob Smith, a Vietnam veteran, came up afterwards and asked me for a copy of the Connecticut depleted uranium bill originally written and introduced by Pat Dillon. Dillon is an epidemiologist and was the Speaker of the House in Connecticut, a position she lost shortly after her bill was introduced.

Much to my complete shock, Bob Smith and Ward Reilly, two Vietnam era veterans, took it to the Louisiana legislature. They told two legislators willing to introduce the bill to "white out Connecticut and write in Louisiana." It was quickly passed unanimously by the legislature and signed into law by the governor within a few months. What I didn't know then was that the bill would set states rights against federal rights, and National Guardsmen against regular military personnel, busting the depleted uranium issue open on a national scale. Because state governments have legal jurisdiction over the National Guard, the state bill requiring mandatory testing for depleted uranium exposure did not cover regular military personnel. This angered the regular soldiers who were frustrated and angry over being "kicked to the curb" by the Pentagon and Veterans Administration. The state is legally entitled to force the Pentagon to pay the costs of implementing the bill, because the Pentagon is in violation of its own mandates, directives and orders, which require training, testing and treatment for soldiers handling depleted uranium.

In May of 2005, Congressman Jim McDermott, M.D. (D-WA), introduced a depleted uranium bill in Congress. Attached to the bill as a supporting document was an entire issue of President Bush's hometown newspaper in Crawford, Texas, The Lone Star Iconoclast, which Leon Smith, the editor, had dedicated to "What is DU?." On March 1, 2006, a second issue, "Have DU Will Travel," came out with extensive interviews with scientists. After covering Cindy Sheehan and Camp Casey last summer, the paper is now widely read in Washington, D.C. Recently, Leon Smith published a book called "The Vigil: 26 Days in Crawford, Texas" about Camp Casey.

Today, more than 15 states have introduced a depleted uranium bill, and Louisiana and Connecticut have passed theirs. It has created a nightmare for the federal government and put the Pentagon in permanent PR counterspin as well as exposed 15 years of official coverup under three Presidents and corruption in Congress. Our children, our sons and daughters, have been sent off to the battlefields of the Middle East and Central Asia to become uranium meat. The cost of their care has been dumped on the state medical facilities. Their families have been destroyed, not to mention their lives. It is time for citizens and state elected officials to pass depleted uranium bills which will help all soldiers by putting pressure on the federal government.

Each of us has a part to play by demonstrating at local facilities like Alliant (manufacturer of depleted uranium weapons), writing letters to local newspapers, contacting elected officials, counter-recruiting in schools, or just passing on the information so that others can become aware. Put a song in their hearts by sending "Johnny Got A Gun" to your local radio station or Indymedia site to play on the air. Depleted uranium is Washington's secret nuclear war.

Leuren Moret is an independent scientist and environmental commissioner in the City of Berkeley. She is featured in documentary films on depleted uranium: BEYOND TREASON (2005), BLOWIN' IN THE WIND (2005), BAGDAD RAP (2004). They can be purchased by contacting her at leurenmoret@yahoo.com. She also does speaking events.

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