

Iraqis blame U.S. depleted uranium for surge in cancer

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CAIRO, July 23 (RIA Novosti) - Iraq's environment minister blamed Monday the use of depleted uranium weapons by U.S. forces during the 2003 Operation Shock and Awe for the current surge in cancer cases across the country.

As a result of "at least 350 sites in Iraq being contaminated during bombing" with depleted uranium (DU) weapons, Nermin Othman said, the nation is facing about 140,000 cases of cancer, with 7,000 to 8,000 new ones registered each year.

Speaking at a ministerial meeting of the Arab League, she also complained that many chemical plants and oil facilities had been destroyed during the two military campaigns since the 1990s, but the ecological consequences remain unclear.

"Our ministry is fledgling, and we need international support; notably, we need laboratories to better monitor air and water contamination," she said.

The first major UN research on the consequences of the use of DU on the battlefield was conducted in 2003 in the wake of NATO operations in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Montenegro. The UN Environment Program (UNEP) said in its report after the research that DU poses little threat if spent munitions are cleared from the ground.

"Health risks primarily depend on the awareness of people coming into contact with DU," UNEP writes in its 2004 brochure "Depleted Uranium Awareness."

No major clean-up or public awareness campaigns have been reported in Iraq.

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