REPUBLIC OF SERBIA: REPLY TO THE REQUEST BY THE OFFICE FOR DISARMAMENT AFFAIRS
CONTAINED IN ITS NOTE NO. ODA/2024-00035/AMMOUR OF 8 FEBRUARY 2024 REFERRING TO
RESOLUTION 77/49 EFFECTS OF THE USE OF ARMAMENTS AND AMMUNITIONS CONTAINING
DEPLETED URANIUM

In 1999, NATO used depleted uranium (DU) in its attacks on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The 30mm projectiles, containing 273g of DU, were used on 112 locations in Kosovo and Metohija and on 7 locations in southern Serbia in the municipalities of Vranje, Bujanovac and Preševo, as well as in Montenegro on the Luštica peninsula. Relevant military and civilian institutions monitored the status of radioactivity during the war.

After the war, mixed teams, consisting of the members of the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear military branch and the experts of the Vinča Institute for Nuclear Science, were established and tasked with determining the level of the radioactive contamination of the soil. The value of 200 Bq/kg of the total content of uranium (natural and depleted in isotope 235U) was adopted as the allowed level of contamination in the surface level of the soil. In addition to the radioactive material, other risk factors, such as toxic substances, stress, bad living conditions (collective and/or inadequate accommodation and shelters), meals, contagious diseases etc. were also taken into consideration.

International Presences in Kosovo and Metohija and DU

The exposure to DU became a problem for the international presences upon arrival and deployment in the contaminated areas. UNEP conducted the most extensive research and came to 3 important conclusions in its report: there is no widely-spread contamination, except 10 – 15 m from places of direct hits; no water contamination; and no health risk except for those in possession of projectile parts next to the body for a long time.

The Italian and German contingents were deployed in the most intensely targeted areas. The Medical Service of the Italian Armed Forces submitted a report on the number and frequency of malignancies that had affected their members in the Balkans (Bosnia and Kosovo). A Commission established for that purpose considered 30 cases in the period 1995 – 2000, 21 relevant to deployments in the Balkans. It concluded that it was necessary to monitor the health of the deployed systematically before and after deployment (up to 5 years). As early as April 2001, the number of the diseased rose from 21 to 28, while 8 of them died. All of them had served in Bosnia. It was epidemiologically established that, although high, it was not statistically significant in comparison with the members of the Italian Armed Forces serving in Italy and considerably lower than expected.

Frequency of Congenital Abnormalities, Malignancies and Endocrine Diseases in Children Born after the Bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Excluding Kosovo and Metohija)
Research was conducted on a sample of children (1 752) born between 2000 and 2004. The control group consisted of 1 204 children born from 1995 to 1999, i.e. before the bombing. The annual incidence of the hereditary congenital abnormalities, established under the internationally adopted incidence evaluation and on the basis of the 2002 population census results, accounted for 1 per cent of monogenic diseases; 2 per cent of polygenic multifactorial conditions; and 0.6 per cent of chromosomopathy. The frequency of congenital abnormalities increased significantly after the bombing, while the data for endocrine and malignant diseases could not be statistically evidenced. In 2002, there was an increase in congenital hematological disorders; ventricular septal defects stood at 14.28 per cent; while congenital heart diseases occurred in 0.8 per cent of the newborn children. Chromosomal abnormalities accounted for 5.54 per cent of the congenital abnormalities in 2003 and for 4.46 per cent in 2004.

Monitoring the Health Conditions of the Members of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Engaged during the Bombing in Kosovo and Metohija

After the conflict, a Programme was established to monitor the health of the members of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia who had been in potentially contaminated areas. Three risk categories were established (I, II and III) and the persons with a high risk of exposure were the individuals who had been in the immediate vicinity to facilities/assets hit by DU projectiles; engaged in rescuing and the remedial treatment of the injured or in asset decontamination; sustained DU projectile injuries and had wounds or contaminated fragments in their bodies; and worked or stayed in contaminated terrains (possibility of resuspension).

The Programme lasted 5 years and more than 1 500 members of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were examined under the same protocol. Three fundamental problems were encountered: a relatively small group of examinees in relation to the number of the exposed; reorganization of many units and the demobilization of the reserve; and a short period of monitoring in view of the latency period.

Instead of a Conclusion: Proposals for Action

- Establish a national programme to monitor health conditions and the impact of the use of DU ammunition on the health of soldiers and policemen who were in the affected areas during and after the bombing;
- Formulate a long-term research programme and plan for multidisciplinary international studies;
- Continue the medical monitoring of the members of the Armed Forces of Serbia in the contaminated terrain and ensure priority and adequate treatment of those affected by possible diseases;
- Assess late effect radiation risks (malignant diseases and genetic disorders) for the population; and
- Monitor hereditary congenital abnormalities in line with the recommendations of the World Health Organization.