March 30, 2012

Margaret Chan, MD
Director General
World Health Organization
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Dear Dr. Chan:

We were pleased to learn that the WHO and the Iraq Ministry of Health will launch a pilot assessment in April of congenital birth defects in Iraq, which appear to have increased significantly in recent years, particularly in Baghdad and Fallujah.

IPPNW has been deeply concerned, even before the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, that toxic contamination from explosive weaponry and other military actions would result in immediate and post-conflict harm to the health of Iraqi citizens, combatants and non-combatants alike. These concerns were outlined in a series of reports produced by our British affiliate, Medact, before, during, and after the conflict. We enclose copies for your reference.

While there is a long, well documented history of public health impacts as a result of environmental contamination from previous armed conflicts, it will be up to your investigators to determine the facts on the ground in the six governates where they will conduct their research. Nevertheless, the decision to launch and fund such an investigation is already a recognition that birth defects in these areas have spiked, for reasons that must be determined and addressed.

We urge you, in particular, to ensure that an investigation into the possible health effects of exposure to depleted uranium and other highly toxic military materials are part of this team’s mandate. Depleted uranium weapons were used extensively in Iraq, as they have been in other recent conflicts, under untested assumption that they pose little or no danger to the health of civilian populations.

IPPNW has steadfastly refrained from making an assumption to the contrary, but we have called repeatedly for independent epidemiological studies into the health effects of DU, so that the facts can be determined. The WHO, in our view, is uniquely positioned to undertake this task.
The people of Iraq deserve an accurate and thorough evaluation of the extent of congenital birth defects and of the likely causes. If the WHO finds evidence that exposure to toxic contaminants produced during military operations is among those causes, such findings need to be made public so that appropriate action can be taken in both the medical and policy arenas.

Sincerely,

Vappu Taipale  Sergey Kolesnikov  Robert Mtonga
Co-President  Co-President  Co-President