

# The Belgian political landscape regarding the ban on uranium weapons

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At the end of 2003 the Belgian Coalition 'Stop uranium weapons' was founded in Gent.

Soon after the foundation **a letter writing campaign was launched demanding information from the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Public Health about Belgian involvement regarding Kosovo and the use of uranium weapons.** (Because Belgian soldiers were on NATO mission in Kosovo from 1992 to 2000)

Responding to our letter writing campaign the Minister of Defence wrote: "Belgium doesn't possess these munitions, didn't deploy them and is at this moment not planning to buy these munitions. Thus, today Belgium has no arguments to try to prohibit the use of this kind of munitions."

Four of the main political parties in Flanders support the idea of a treaty to ban uranium weapons

Before the Belgian elections, which took place in June 2004, **a letter went to the presidents of all the Belgian political parties asking for their viewpoints on uranium weapons.**

All the political parties who replied wrote that they condemn the use of uranium weapons.

**Belgian/International action days to Ban Uranium Weapons took place in Brussels in 2004 and 2005 :**

to raise public awareness and to present our demands to Belgian politicians:

The Belgian Coalition asked **several parliamentary questions to the Minister of Defence and Minister of Foreign Affairs**, which deal with the following issues:

- the export of DU waste material by the US to Belgium from 1998 to 2003'
- 'target practice at the firing-range of Helchteren in Belgium and the possible use of uranium ammunitions'
- transportation of conventional weapons containing DU via Belgian airports to armed conflict areas

## **Parliamentary initiatives against DU weapons:**

A short update on the current situation:

Background to the law proposals to ban uranium weapons by Belgian law:

On **3<sup>rd</sup> January 1933 a law** was passed in Belgium, which banned the possession and trade in certain types of weapons. When the Belgian parliament decided that a new type of weapon system should be banned, the **weapons system is added to the list of weapons contained in the law of 1933**. The law (with amendments) banned various weapons including anti-personnel mines, booby trap mines, daggers, and certain kinds of guns.

A number of the law proposals mentioned below deal with uranium weapons and cluster munitions. A separate law proposal was approved in early 2006, making Belgium the first country in the world to ban cluster munitions. As such, the current law proposals deal only with uranium weapons.

In **June 2006, the weapon law of 1933 was replaced with a new weapon law**. As such, the current law proposals to outlaw uranium weapons will have to be reformulated to amend the 2006 law.

### Senate

On **10<sup>th</sup> June 2005, the Belgian Senators Sabine de Bethune and Erika Thijs** (both CD&V, Dutch speaking Christian Democrats), wrote **a law proposal (3-1261/1)** that would amend the law of 1933 to include the banning of cluster munitions, anti-handling mechanisms and "**projectiles that contain depleted uranium**".

The bill was originally to have been put on the agenda of the Senate Commission on Foreign Affairs and Defence of the Senate on the 5th of July 2005, but has been delayed.

The two Senators tried to get **a hearing in the Belgian Senate** .

But they **did not have a large enough majority** to get the issue on the agenda of the Commission.

Because the authors of the de Bethune-Thijs law proposal limits the definition of uranium weapons to "DU projectiles" only, **the Belgian Coalition Stop Uranium Weapons submitted an amendment to all members of the Senate Commission on Foreign Affairs and Defence**.

On the **24<sup>th</sup> October 2005 Senator Lionel Vandenberghe** (SPIRIT, Dutch speaking progressive liberals), **fully adopted this amendment (3-1261/2)** which contains the justification formulated by the Coalition that aims to also include the DU in armour-plating found on tanks and in landmines as well as weapons containing other compounds of industrially manufactured uranium.

On **March 1<sup>st</sup> 2006, Senator Sabine de Bethune** introduced a new law proposal that **deals exclusively with uranium weapons** thereby **adopting the amendment of Senator Lionel Vandenberghe**. This new law proposal in the Senate was co-signed by Vandenberghe and by Senator Erika Thijs.

## Chamber of representatives

In the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, on **28<sup>th</sup> October 2005 Joseph Arens** (CDH, French speaking Christian Humanist Democrats), introduced a **law proposal** (doc 53 2053/001) that seeks **to ban cluster munitions and munitions that contain DU**.

After **distributing the 'Uraniumwapens dossier'** - a comprehensive compilation of all problems involved with the use of uranium weapons - **to all effective members of the House Commission on Defence**, the Belgian Coalition was happily surprised that on **11<sup>th</sup> January 2006** another **legal proposal** was submitted to the Chamber of Representatives by **Dirk Van der Maelen** (SP.A, Dutch speaking social democrats) which **deals exclusively with the issue of uranium weapons**. The SP.A is part of the federal government.

Dirk Van der Maelen fully incorporated the information provided by the Belgian Coalition into his bill.

**Van der Maelen's law proposal is the most complete proposal up to now. Contrary to the law proposals of Arens and de Bethune, it stipulates a period in which Belgium must dismantle any uranium weapons arsenals.**

**On 21<sup>th</sup> of June 2006** we felt very happy after the **meeting in Brussels of the Commission on Defence of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives**.

The Minister of Defence André Flahaut took part in the meeting.

Representatives Josy Arens and Dirk Van der Maelen could defend their law proposals and the need to ban uranium weapons by Belgian Law.

Van der Maelen mentioned the important role that the International and Belgian Coalition play in the struggle to help ban uranium weapons. He defended his law proposal by reading to the commission members a text called '20 reasons why Belgium should ban uranium weapons'. This text was also compiled by the Belgian Coalition (and approved by Henk van der Keur from Laka Stichting).

The arguments of the two parliamentarians convinced the president of the Commission to organise **a hearing in the Parliament**. The hearing is scheduled **for this autumn**.

Experts from different disciplines will be invited. The DVD 'Unknown Terror of DU – Iraqi Children Now' will be shown to the participants of the hearing.

Other members of the commission suggested inviting NATO and experts of the Ministry of Defence, as well as experts from the arms industry.

The new law proposals (based on amendments to the 2006 weapon law) will be ready by the time of the hearing.

Representative Arens stated during the Commission of Defence meeting: **'Belgium needs to play a pioneering role in the campaign for a worldwide ban on uranium weapons'**.

He also insisted that when one applies the Precautionary principal, irrefutable scientific evidence for links between ill health and DU exposure is not needed to implement a ban. And that is what we as the Belgian Coalition, as peace activist and human rights activists, hope to see very soon.

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Ria Verjauw  
Belgian Coalition 'Stop Uranium Weapons'  
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Non-governmental organisations co-operating within the Belgian Coalition 'Stop Uranium Weapons' are:

Voor Moeder Aarde ; ACV-Brussel ; Netwerk-Vlaanderen ; Greenpeace ; Artsen voor Vrede ; Intal/Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld ; Forum voor Vredesactie ; Vakbondsmensen In Verzet tegen Oorlog ; Mouvement Chrétien pour la Paix ; Stop United States of Aggression ; Pax Christi Leuven ; Pax Christi Vlaanderen ; Association Médicale pour la Prévention de la Guerre Nucléaire ; Vrede ; Groupe Liégeois pour l'Economie Distributive ; Vrouwen in het Zwart ; Bond beter Leefmilieu ; Jeugdbond voor Natuur en Milieu ; Vlaams Overleg Duurzame Ontwikkeling ; Oxfam-Solidariteit ; Coördination Nationale d'Action pour la Paix et la Démocratie ; Comité de Surveillance de l'OTAN; Links Ecologisch Front.

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Demands of the Belgian Coalition to the Belgian politicians are:

- that Belgium will, by no means including third parties be involved in the financing, the design, the production, the purchase, the testing, the transport, the storage and the use of weapons that contain uranium\*  
\*'depleted' and uranium 'contaminated with fission products from the nuclear industry'
  - that Belgium works on an international level in order to prohibit the financing, the design, the production, the purchase, the testing, the transport, and the storage of uranium weapons
  - that Belgium urges NATO to map the regions targeted with uranium weapons and the spots where these weapons are stored. These regions must be made public
  - that the Belgian government deploys no military and humanitarian missions to uranium-contaminated sites unless the members of these missions are protected against contamination
  - that Belgium plays a pioneering role in establishing a total ban on uranium weapons, as it did in the course of the campaign against landmines
  - that Belgium bears a part of the costs of decontamination, including the costs for medical assistance
  - that Belgium takes the initiative for the foundation of an aid-fund compensating the affected populations.
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