By Carol Dudek

From worldcantwait.net | Original Article

On Tuesday, Oct. 14, Columbia University's School of Public Health hosted a presentation by two prominent researchers who have been documenting the shocking increase of birth defects and cancers in newborns in Iraq after bombardments by the US and its coalition.

Dr Mozhgan Savabieasfahani of the University of Michigan's School of Public Health is an environmental toxicologist. She has written two dozen articles and a book, *Pollution and Reproductive Damage*
. Dr Muhsin Al-Sabbak is the Chief of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Basra Maternity Hospital.

Dr Al-Sabbak opened the discussion with slides of newborns who had devastating birth defects: the infants bore hydrocephalus, severe cleft palate, webbed neck, no toes or fingers, no rear skull and the brain outside the head, bright red skin that looked burnt, no kidneys. One child had two penises and scrotums and bowels outside the abdomen, and another child's entire body was covered with cracked, open skin. The doctor explained that many babies have multiple abnormalities: "If there is one birth defect, you look for another." Physicians are not permitted by law to tell mothers they have a severely deformed fetus, nor are they allowed to terminate the pregnancies.

Basra experienced two major uprisings and a massacre in 1999 and in 2003 the heaviest fighting of the invasion took place on its outskirts. The GAO reports that between 2002-05 the US fired six billion bullets in Iraq, an average of 300,000 bullets for every person killed. The UN Environmental Project estimated 1000 to 2000 metric tons of depleted uranium were burned up as nanoparticles in the air, inhaled by everyone nearby.

Basra Maternity Hospital has 400 beds, and births number between 10,000 and 12,000. Between 1994-95 the birth defect rate was 1.37 per 1000 births. By 2003 there were 23 per 1000 births, and, in 2009 the birth defects soared to 48 birth defects for every 1000 children born. The effects of metal contamination is greater on pregnant women and children, and even

low amounts of toxicity have compound, multiple and cumulative results. There is a multigenerational effect. Daughters with birth abnormalities have given birth to infants with abnormalities. Researchers took samples from the hair and nails of adults in the affected cities to document the presence of lead, titanium, mercury and other metals. They are able to study prenatal lead exposure in the teeth by using laser technology.

Exposure to toxic metals and chemicals comes from three main sources: fired explosives, hundreds of military base junkyards and open air burn pits. The burn pits in Basra and Fallujah cover ten acres and burn 24 hours a day, seven days a week – appliances, animals, plastic, medicine, electronics, tires, explosives, asbestos installations, body parts and batteries. The pits were closed in 2010 and KBR and Halliburton, contractors of the burn pits, recently lost in a court of appeals which found that they were not entitled to immunity. The Institute of Medicine monitored one base in Baghdad and reported the metals caused cancer, respiratory and liver toxicity and morbidity. Children in Hawijah, close to Fallujah, show high levels of titanium, magnesium, cadmium, lead and arsenic.

Doctors Savabieasfahani and Al-Sabbak spoke in Princeton last week and will be touring throughout October. The European Union Parliament in 2012 published their paper, "Metal Contamination and the Epidemic of Congenital Birth Defects in Iraqi Cities." As Dr. Savabieasfahani says, war always sees birth defects and cancers – witness Vietnam and Korea. She insists that public health researchers must pay attention and look closely to prevent contamination in the future. The information is not broadly published given the media's selectivity. Most people in the US don't know what is happening. For another example, if we look at Gaza with 2000 killed in the latest Israeli attack, it's quite likely many of the 10,000 injured will surely die. The infrastructure is destroyed and there is no way to properly treat the wounded.

The Center for Constitutional Rights, Iraq Veterans Against the War and the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq filed an FOIA request to seek the coordinates of the depleted uranium weapons used in Iraq. The Dept. of Veterans Affairs now maintains a registry of veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who suffer side effects of contamination.