



MINISTER OF STATE FOR
THE ARMED FORCES

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MSU/04/05/02/28/is

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Dear Ms Docksey

Thank you for the question you raised at the 'Is Government Listening' conference last month on the UK definition of thermobaric weapons. I undertook to get back to you with a detailed response and George Farebrother has kindly provided me with your e-mail address.

The term thermobaric was first used by the Russians who used a range of different devices in Afghanistan in the 1980s and against civilians in Chechnya in the 1990s for which they were widely condemned. These were fuel-air weapons that formed an aerosol cloud which then ignited to create a fireball; this created an overpressure and temperatures typically of 2500 – 3000 centigrade which caused both blast and burn injuries. So the weapon design intent was to produce an overpressure (enhanced blast) and enhanced heat.

While there is no internationally recognised definition for so-called "thermobaric" weapons, the term "thermobaric" implies the enhancement of both pressure and heat. These are actually common traits of many (if not all) blast explosives. For example, the local temperature of a TNT blast can easily reach 3000 degrees centigrade. Similarly, the fireball temperatures of some standard aluminised explosives can reach 5000 degrees centigrade. But neither is referred to as "thermobaric". The view of the Ministry of Defence is therefore to avoid using the term as a descriptor for weapons and explosives as it cannot be rigorously tested in such a manner as to distinguish any particular "thermobaric" system from all other "conventional" systems. Regrettably, this can create a perception that we are trying to hide something but I hope you will be assured that this is absolutely not the case.

By email to: Ms Lesley Docksey

Private Office



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