

US-NATO jets bomb Serb auto plant

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Escalating the air war against commercial and civilian targets in Yugoslavia, US/NATO jets bombed a major industrial complex in two separate strikes late Thursday and early Friday. The attack destroyed key facilities of the Zavasta industrial complex in the town of Kragujevac, 55 miles south of Belgrade.

The complex includes Yugoslavia's only auto plant, which produces the Yugo. Not only was the factory in operation at the time of the attack, the workers had surrounded the plant in an attempt to protect it. The jets attacked anyway, injuring 124 people.

On Friday CNN broadcast scenes filmed by Yugoslav TV of smashed buildings and rubble where factories had stood. The Yugoslav press agency said facilities hit in the raid included a power plant that provided heat for hospitals and schools in Kragujevac.

Also on Thursday and Friday NATO forces bombed targets in eastern Belgrade and fuel depots and television relay facilities in other parts of Serbia. The Jugopetrol storage depot at Smederevo, 18 miles east of Belgrade, exploded and sent dense black smoke over nearby vineyards and fruit orchards. A Serbian television relay station near Jagodina, some 60 miles southeast of Belgrade, was also hit.

In Kosovo, bombing continues in the vicinity of Pristina, the capital of the province. The Yugoslav press agency reported three explosions southeast and southwest of the city.

NATO officials admitted Friday that its air strikes were responsible for massive damage to a residential section of Pristina earlier this week, including the death of 10 civilians. Yugoslav authorities had escorted foreign reporters to the scene and Western networks had relayed the images of devastation filmed by Yugoslav TV. Initially NATO spokesmen denied that US and European bombers had caused the carnage. They made the absurd charge that it had somehow been orchestrated by Serb authorities.

The Clinton administration is increasingly dropping the pretense of avoiding Serb civilian casualties. It has been emboldened by the lack, to date, of any widespread, organized opposition to the war from a stunned US public, which has virtually no knowledge of the historical issues that underlie the crisis and has been subjected to a mind-numbing media campaign to channel sympathy for the plight of the Kosovar refugees behind the war aims of American imperialism.

With Washington taking the lead, NATO is now focusing the bombing campaign on industrial and communications facilities in an attempt to wreck the economic infrastructure of Yugoslavia, terrorize and demoralize the population, and produce a level of suffering that will ultimately, it hopes, undermine internal support for the regime of Slobodan Milosevic.

At the same time preparations for the introduction of ground troops are being stepped up. The US reportedly has decided to double its deployment of Apache attack helicopters to Kosovo, which entails a doubling of support troops from 2,000 to 4,000. A US congressional delegation that accompanied Defense Secretary Cohen to Europe this week is planning to draft a resolution urging Congress, which reconvenes next week, to demand a shift in policy toward the launching of a ground war.

Just as the US scuttled Russian Prime Minister Primakov's diplomatic initiative in the first week of the air war, Washington on Friday torpedoed the attempt of acting Cypriot President Spyros Kyprianou to effect the release of the three captured American soldiers. The US and NATO not only refused to order a pause in the bombing during Kyprianou's talks in Belgrade, they intensified the air assault. At a press briefing prior to his departure from Belgrade Kyprianou bitterly denounced NATO for sabotaging his diplomatic effort.

The potential for the present war to spiral into a far wider conflagration was reflected both in developments

on the ground and in the increasingly tense state of relations between the US and Russia. On Friday an extended exchange of artillery fire erupted across the Kosovan-Albanian border between forces of the Kosovo Liberation Army and Serb troops. With US and NATO backing, the KLA has established an armed camp on the Albanian side.

In Moscow, Russian President Boris Yeltsin warned that a NATO invasion of Yugoslavia might force his government to intervene on the side of the Serbs. He spoke of the danger of an all-European, or even a world war.

The US and its NATO allies know full well that their war strategy will take a terrible toll in civilian lives and human suffering. That is why they have stepped up their bombing of Yugoslav broadcast facilities and launched a propaganda war to block the transmission of news reports from inside Yugoslavia. Silencing the state-run media would weaken the position of the Serb government and military and increase the level of fear and anxiety in the population. But an even more urgent consideration is preventing viewers in America and Europe, as well as the rest of the world, from seeing the results of the ostensibly humanitarian war.

Speaking in Paris on Thursday, General Jean-Pierre Kelche, chief of the French General Staff, railed against the "disinformation" given out by the official Yugoslav press and declared, "We are going to bust their transmitters and their relay stations."

Later on Thursday, Air Commodore David Wilby of Britain, a spokesman for NATO Supreme Commander General Wesley Clark, an American, reiterated Kelche's threat. "Serb radio and television," he said, "is an instrument of propaganda and repression. It has filled the airways with hate and with lies over the years, and especially now. It is therefore a legitimate target in this campaign."

Such statements ignore the pervasive bias of the American and Western media, which function as virtual propaganda arms of the Pentagon and the US State Department. They are aimed, moreover, at intimidating the Western media into dropping the rare reportage from inside Yugoslavia that provides a glimpse of the human and social impact of NATO air attacks.

The efforts of the US and NATO to silence the Yugoslav media must be taken as a warning of the barbarous conditions which those directing the war are

preparing to inflict on the civilian population.



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