

As Washington escalates air war

US-NATO jets bomb Kosovan civilians

The Editorial Board
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One day after President Clinton told US congressional leaders that the NATO air war was being ratcheted up to the "next level," the implications for the civilian population throughout Yugoslavia were seen in the bombing of two convoys of ethnic Albanians in western Kosovo. Yugoslav sources report 75 killed and 31 wounded.

In broad daylight, NATO jets struck a line of hundreds of tractors and other vehicles bearing several thousand Kosovars, mainly women, children and elderly people, who were being escorted by Serb military forces on the road to Djakovic. A total of three strikes were launched over a two-hour period. A second civilian convoy was hit near the village of Zrse.

In the face of Yugoslav television footage of bombed-out tractors and dead and wounded civilians, US and NATO spokesmen responded with absurd and conflicting claims, all unsubstantiated: that the incident had been staged by Serb authorities, that the civilians had been hit by Serb jets, that NATO planes had bombed military vehicles after which Serb soldiers fired on the civilians.

Such lies have become commonplace. Last week American and NATO officials initially claimed that Yugoslav TV footage of bomb wreckage in residential centers of the Kosovan capital Pristina had been orchestrated by the Serbs. Subsequently they retracted these allegations and admitted that the damage had been caused by NATO missiles.

Meanwhile, the death toll from Monday's bombing of a passenger train in southern Serbia has risen from 10 to 27, and some passengers remain unaccounted for. Yugoslav authorities say 200 civilians have been killed by NATO air strikes in the past two days alone.

The response of Washington and NATO to every bomb attack that kills or maims civilians reveals the

extraordinary cynicism that underlies the war. There is a curious double standard: only the most criminal explanations are offered for the actions of the Serbs, while every death resulting from NATO's actions is given the most innocent of explanations.

It is entirely legitimate to reject the contention of the Serb authorities that they bear no responsibility for the human consequences of their policies, but it is the height of hypocrisy for the US and its allies to deny any responsibility for the massive suffering caused by their own policies.

Even if one were to accept the claims of those directing the war on Yugoslavia--which we do not--that they are motivated by humanitarian considerations, certain facts cannot be disputed: first, that the bombing campaign provided the setting for the expulsion of ethnic Albanians from their homes and villages, and, second, that large-scale bombing of a relatively small geographical area inevitably places the civilian population in immense danger.

It is simply impossible to reconcile the humanitarian pretenses of the US and NATO with the military tactics which they are pursuing. As the Kosovars are learning, to be "saved" by American imperialism is a perilous fate. Indeed, it is now being acknowledged that should the refugees find their way back to Kosovo, they will return to a land whose farms, factories, schools, hospitals, utilities, water supply--in sum, all of the elements of modern civilization--have been utterly ravaged by NATO bombs and missiles.

The devastation, human and material, that is being visited on Kosovo as a result of the US-NATO war recalls the mordant phrase that summed up US military tactics in Vietnam: "We had to burn the village to save it."

The mounting toll of civilian dead and wounded

throughout Yugoslavia will rise far more rapidly as NATO escalates its air war. Since Saturday the US has announced the dispatch of 382 more war planes. On Tuesday Britain said it was sending an additional 1,800 troops to Macedonia and France said it was dispatching 700 more soldiers.

A US Army combat task force with Apache helicopters, missile and rocket batteries, tanks and armored troop carriers, accompanied by several thousand soldiers, will soon establish a staging area in Albania for cross-border operations against Yugoslav forces. On Tuesday Pentagon officials disclosed that US General Wesley Clark, NATO's supreme commander, had requested 48 Apache helicopters, double the number previously reported.

Following the White House briefing for congressmen, Senator Robert Kerrey said, referring to the Army task force, "We've already made a commitment to ground forces."

The very conduct of the war has a momentum that propels it toward ever more barbaric measures. Those who are pushing for a campaign of carpet bombing combined with a ground invasion--virtually the entire media and a large section of the American political establishment--generally admit that Washington made massive miscalculations in launching the bombing, but conclude that the consequences of the initial mistakes must be dealt with by expanding the conflict into an all-out invasion.

Among the broad mass of the American people, despite a skillful and massively financed campaign of war propaganda, there is deep disquiet about the events in the Balkans. Their concerns, however, can find no expression within the political establishment and its media adjuncts, whose actions are characterized by a combination of irresponsibility, recklessness and criminality.



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