

What does the bombing of Kosovar refugees say about NATO's "humanitarian" war?

The Editorial Board
16 April 1999

US and NATO officials acknowledged Thursday that American war planes had, the previous day, bombed a convoy of ethnic Albanian refugees in southwestern Kosovo. They continued, however, to deny that NATO planes had struck a second convoy of refugees and insisted that the killing of defenseless civilians was a "regrettable" accident.

Between 64 and 75 Albanian Kosovars were killed and scores more wounded when NATO jets, operating in broad daylight, made a series of attacks over a two-hour period on convoys near Djakovic and Meja. Thursday's partial admission by NATO and US officials followed a series of denials that they had any responsibility for the carnage.

The acknowledgments of NATO's role in the bombings were of a perfunctory character, and combined with declarations that such horrors were "inevitable," that NATO was bending over backwards to avoid civilian casualties and that the real culprit was Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. US and NATO officials continued to suggest that the Kosovars and even the pilots were victims of a scheme to use refugees as "human shields," and that the second convoy was attacked by Serb warplanes.

US President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair declared that the loss of life from Wednesday's bomb assaults would in no way deter NATO from escalating the air war throughout Yugoslavia.

Both the atrocities themselves and the reaction of Western officials to the TV footage of dead and wounded refugees--for the most part women, children and elderly people seen lying next to tractors and civilian automobiles--discredit the claims that the US-NATO war is being conducted for humanitarian purposes.

With Wednesday's bombing, US and allied officials have been caught red-handed in a series of lies. This is the third time in the past week that those waging the war have issued false statements to cover up their responsibility for large-scale civilian casualties, only to retract them when the physical evidence made their denials untenable.

Last week Western officials initially denied that NATO missiles were responsible for the destruction of a housing block in central Pristina, and tried to claim that the Serbs had somehow orchestrated the TV images of smashed homes. This

was followed by Monday's strike on a passenger train in southern Serbia, for which NATO likewise initially denied any responsibility.

The series of fabrications that followed Wednesday's bombing of the refugees was even more shameless. When reports of the incidents first emerged, US General Wesley Clark, the NATO supreme commander, told the Bloomberg news service he had reliable information that Serb soldiers accompanying one of the convoys had attacked the Kosovars after a NATO jet bombed a military vehicle.

In Bonn, German Defense Minister Rudolf Scharping declared, "Everything points to it being Serbian artillery which opened fire on the refugees and that they then presented it as a NATO mistake."

Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon repeated Clark's story at a press briefing Wednesday afternoon and was asked to specify the evidence cited by Clark for his version of events. Some hours later Bacon admitted that the evidence did not exist.

Later on Wednesday Bacon announced he had reports from United Nations officials in Albania that Serb helicopters and jets had bombed one of the convoys. Bacon said UN officials had gleaned these reports from refugees who had crossed over into Albania following the alleged Serb attack. That evening, however, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said her organization had received no such report.

By Thursday morning the melange of denials and lies had collapsed and NATO was forced to issue a terse statement saying, "It appears that one of [NATO's] aircraft mistakenly dropped a bomb on a civilian vehicle in a convoy yesterday."

The claim that the bombing was an innocent mistake is difficult to square with the facts. The convoys of tractors and cars were large. One of them consisted of many thousands of Kosovars. Their vehicles were loaded with mattresses, bundles of clothing and other accouterments of civilians in flight. The attacks took place in early afternoon daylight and the planes were reportedly flying at low altitudes.

Survivors interviewed after the attacks denied that the convoys were being used as camouflage for military vehicles, saying Serb soldiers in the vicinity made no attempt to insert their vehicles into the line of refugees. One survivor told a *Washington Post* reporter that the Serb military vehicles sped

away as soon as the planes were heard overhead.

NATO has acknowledged that an American pilot flying an F-16 dropped a laser bomb on one of the convoys, and has issued a transcript of his tape-recorded debriefing. The pilot, who has not been identified, describes spotting 60 vehicles plus three "uniform shaped dark green vehicles." The presence of these "dark green vehicles" is the only evidence he cites of the military nature of the convoy.

This, however, was sufficient "proof" for him to fire into the lead vehicles and pass on the target coordinates to another pilot, who followed up with a second strike.

Whatever his precise motivation, the pilot's description of the attack is a damning refutation of NATO's repeated assurances that it is taking great pains to avoid hitting civilian targets. No NATO or allied official has suggested that the pilot's decision to bomb the convoy violated the terms of engagement established for the air war. It must therefore be concluded that NATO pilots have enormous latitude to launch their bombs and missiles, and that tens of thousands of ordinary civilians are at risk.

As for the allegations that the second convoy, which was struck in the vicinity of Meja, was bombed by Serb helicopters or jets, such claims contradict previous assertions that three weeks of NATO attacks have neutralized Serb air defenses in Kosovo.

On Thursday afternoon Clinton delivered a lengthy policy speech on the war at a meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in San Francisco. He expressed the real attitude of US and NATO leaders toward the ordinary people in Yugoslavia whose lives are being shattered or terminated--Serb and Albanian alike--by failing to even mention the previous day's tragedy in his address. Nor did he bother to note the German proposal for a temporary halt in the bombing in return for an initial pullback of Serb forces from Kosovo. Instead he attempted to justify an escalation of the war on supposed humanitarian grounds.

In his response to a question from the audience on Wednesday's bombings he barely made a pretense of remorse, stressing that such "mistakes" were "inevitable," and making clear that far greater civilian casualties were in the offing. Shedding his "I feel your pain" posture, Clinton said matter-of-factly, "You cannot have this kind of conflict without some errors like this occurring. This is not a business of perfection."

He went further, suggesting the US intended to set a precedent in Yugoslavia for the future use of its military power, with the inevitable "collateral damage," in other parts of the world. "If anyone thinks that this is a reason for changing our mission," he declared, "then the United States will never be able to bring military power to bear again."

Two basic conclusions emerge from the events of the past several days. First, the repeated resort to unsubstantiated allegations and outright fabrications by all of the Western governments involved in the war exposes the cynicism and

hypocrisy of the entire enterprise. Why should any thinking person accept as good coin any claims made by those who have time and again been caught spreading lies?

Second, the basic lie is the claim that the war is being waged for humanitarian purposes. The way in which the war was launched--after issuing an ultimatum to the Serb government that it could not accept, and without any consideration of the catastrophic consequences for the Albanian Kosovars--and the way in which the war is being conducted--with ever-escalating attacks on the socioeconomic foundations of the country--reflect a cynical disregard for the people.

What might seem a puzzling contradiction--the frequent Western statements of concern for the ethnic Albanians "trapped" inside Kosovo, and the brutal bombing of these very people--may not be so mysterious after all. The Americans and their European accomplices have good reason to create an atmosphere of terror in Kosovo, and thereby encourage even more sections of the Albanian population to flee the province.

As the *New York Times* military analyst noted on Thursday: "Indeed, Pentagon and NATO officials have even mused that the complete expulsion of Albanians from Kosovo would give the alliance a big military advantage.

"There would be Serb troops primarily left, and we would be able to attack them with more precision and more concentration,' a Pentagon spokesman, Kenneth H. Bacon, said recently."

Even if one were to assume that the bombing of passenger trains and refugee columns were not premeditated acts, that would not lessen the responsibility of NATO and the allied governments for the human misery and social destruction they are causing. When you start a war, you must assume responsibility for its consequences.

The very methods of this war reveal its reactionary essence. To tell the truth about the war is not to defend the chauvinist policies of Milosevic, or lend support to Serb nationalism. It is to state that this is a war of aggression being carried out by capitalist great powers, the real aims of which are being concealed from the masses.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wswp.org/contact