

Milosevic indictment provides pretext for invasion

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The indictment of Slobodan Milosevic by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) is a political measure taken in behalf of the NATO powers that are waging war on the Yugoslav people. Its purpose is, first, to legitimize the present bombing campaign and provide a justification for its escalation, and, second, lay the propaganda and legal foundation for an invasion of Kosovo in the south and Belgrade in the north, the arrest and imprisonment of the Milosevic leadership, and the installation of a puppet regime subservient to the US and its European allies.

The ICTY was set up in the Hague in 1993 at the behest of the NATO powers to serve as an instrument for coercing and intimidating political forces in Yugoslavia who were resisting the carve-up of the country. Its essential role is to provide the predatory policies of the imperialist powers with the cover of “international law.”

The announcement of the indictment was immediately hailed by President Clinton and British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook as a vindication of the bombing campaign that has already cost thousands of civilian lives and is creating conditions of untold human misery, which will last for years to come.

Cook declared that the indictment meant there would be “no compromise” with the present Yugoslav government and NATO would step up its military campaign. He went on to place the onus directly on the Yugoslav people, saying, “Today's indictment is a further compelling reason why the people of Yugoslavia should reject Milosevic and his evil policies.” The implication is that the population itself would be considered complicit in Milosevic's alleged war crimes should it fail to rise up and topple the regime in Belgrade.

The indictment is the latest propaganda salvo in a war that has depended from the outset on a massive and concerted effort to deceive, confuse and manipulate the public. It is aimed primarily at American and European

public opinion, where there are signs of growing concern and opposition to the targeting of civilians and the rudiments of modern civilization in Yugoslavia—oil supplies, electricity, water, roads, bridges, hospitals, etc. NATO's hope is that the branding of Milosevic as a war criminal will quell popular revulsion over the barbarity of its attack.

The implicit argument is: “This is a criminal government, comparable to Nazi Germany, which is supported by a criminal people—the Serbs.” Virtually any measures are therefore justifiable in NATO's “humanitarian” war.

On the same day as the tribunal's announcement, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on a closed-door briefing given by NATO Commander-in-Chief Wesley Clark to the alliance's 19 ambassadors. The US general said NATO governments would have to brace themselves for a sharp escalation of the bombing and a rising toll of civilian casualties.

Britain's *Times* newspaper reported that the US was considering launching a ground war in Kosovo if no peace agreement emerges in the next three weeks. Quoting unidentified NATO sources, the *Times* said Clinton was considering sending 90,000 US combat troops.

The indictment of Milosevic is calculated to sabotage attempts to broker a diplomatic settlement. From the beginning of the conflict, the US and Britain have demanded nothing short of total surrender and sought to block any moves toward a peace deal.

The indictment

Without any substantiation, the ICTY attributes the entire responsibility for the exodus of 740,000 Kosovo Albanians to the Milosevic regime. There is not even a suggestion that NATO might share responsibility for the refugee crisis—this despite the well-known fact that the mass flight of ethnic Albanians only began after NATO

launched its air war on March 24.

Nor is there any more than a passing reference to the activities of the NATO-backed Kosovo Liberation Army, which carried out attacks on Serb targets—civilian as well as military—in advance of the NATO war, and has continued to wage war within Kosovo since March 24. Thus the supposedly neutral war crimes tribunal ignores the existence of a civil war in Kosovo and accepts entirely and uncritically the premises put forward by the NATO powers to justify their attack.

Moreover, the tribunal is only able to come up with the names of “over 340 persons” whom it claims were killed by Serb forces in Kosovo between January 1, 1999 and the present. The death of hundreds of civilians is a tragedy, and criminal acts may well be involved. But these deaths take place within the context of a civil war, exacerbated by foreign military intervention.

One further point: NATO bombs in just two months have caused many times the number of civilian deaths attributed to the Serbs.

Washington's double standard

The hypocrisy that underlies the indictment is summed up by the fact that the United States has explicitly and repeatedly rejected the jurisdiction of international courts and tribunals. The most notorious case is the American mining of Managua harbor in 1984. When the international court in the Hague ruled in favor of Nicaragua and demanded the removal of the mines, the US refused and declared it was not bound by the court's decisions.

Just ten months ago the US scuttled a United Nations conference in Rome called to sanction the establishment of a permanent international court on genocide, aggression and other war crimes. The US refused to support the proposal unless the court explicitly exempted American military forces from its jurisdiction. The US was the only major power to vote against the conference resolution.

There are, moreover, many governments that could be cited for precisely the type of crimes against ethnic minorities for which Yugoslavia has been indicted, including Sri Lanka for its war against the Tamils, and Turkey for its bloody suppression of the Kurds. By any objective standard they are no less guilty of “ethnic cleansing” than Yugoslavia. What distinguishes them from Yugoslavia is the fact that they have the support of the US and the other major NATO powers.

What are war crimes?

In indicting Milosevic and the Serbs, the Hague tribunal makes no attempt to explain the criteria it employs for defining war crimes. Apparently they do not include the systematic destruction of the economic and social infrastructure of a small and virtually defenseless country.

That this is the process now unfolding in Yugoslavia is admitted even by some representatives of the political and media establishment in the US. Thus on Wednesday *Washington Post* columnist Jim Hoagland wrote: “Militarily, this week's bombing of Serbia's civilian water pumps and electricity grid fits the ‘now or never’ pattern. This is serious state terrorism.”

On Thursday, former President Jimmy Carter in a *New York Times* op-ed piece outlined the modus operandi by which the United States sets up targeted nations for military attack: “The approach the United States has taken recently has been to devise a solution that best suits its own purposes, recruit at least tacit support in whichever forum it can best influence, provide the dominant military force, present an ultimatum to recalcitrant parties and then take punitive action against the entire nation to force compliance.”

Carter goes on to characterize the “punitive action” against Yugoslavia as an attack “on the entire nation” in which “our destruction of civilian life has now become senseless and excessively brutal.”

To Carter's description of the US role in the current war one needs to add Washington's calculated instigation of civil war in Kosovo through its support for the KLA. If this course of action—planning a war of aggression, destabilizing the targeted country, handing it ultimatums it cannot accept, bombing its civilian infrastructure when it refuses to comply—does not constitute a war crime, then the term has no objective meaning.

Indeed, in the hands of the imperialist powers and their institutions, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the term “war crimes” is one more propaganda weapon for manipulating and duping public opinion.



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