

UN relief agencies warn of humanitarian disaster in Yugoslavia

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UN officials warned Thursday that a humanitarian disaster was looming in Yugoslavia as a result of the 10-week bombing campaign by NATO. "In the summer, it gets very warm and that's an ideal condition for epidemics," Stephan Vandam of the World Health Organization (WHO) told reporters. "With the winter and cold coming, then we're talking about respiratory problems and pneumonia."

Vandam was part of a 11-day trip by UN relief agencies to assess conditions throughout Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro, the first such trip since the bombing began March 24. Vandam said drugs, medical equipment and food were urgently needed throughout the country to prevent the spread of disease. In Serbia, he said, the bombing had destroyed health clinics, while other clinics were forced to operate irregularly due to electricity cuts, fuel shortages, staff reductions and lack of drugs.

Vandam noted in Kosovo, apart from the lack of medical supplies, there was also a shortage of Albanian doctors and nurses who have fled, been driven out or were arrested after the NATO bombing began on March 24. The WHO official said the local population also faced serious mental health risks. They "live in anxiety, they have been forced out of their homes, [they have] lost their jobs and then, there is the invisible enemy from the sky," he said, referring to NATO bombs.

The UN's undersecretary-general and emergency relief coordinator, Sergio Vieira de Mello, who led the mission, delivered a report to the UN Security Council Wednesday, saying Yugoslavia was in a "general state of calamity."

Mello painted a grim picture of conditions inside Kosovo, particularly for the thousands of "internally displaced persons" who left their homes but remained in the province. Mello said returning refugees would require "urgent assistance with reconstruction of destroyed and damaged shelter, water and sanitation, electricity, agricultural and livestock recovery, heating, rehabilitation

of schooling, health services, telecommunications, etc."

In keeping with the UN's role as a compliant tool of NATO, Mello placed the onus for this destruction on the Serbs and whitewashed the part played by NATO bombing. However, his report acknowledged the widespread destruction in the rest of Serbia, which was entirely the result of NATO air strikes.

Mello said the mission witnessed ample evidence of the heavy damage NATO has inflicted on an economy already debilitated as a result of sanctions and the breakup of Yugoslavia. The UN official said the country faced a "complex humanitarian crisis, affecting the entire population, but hitting hardest the most vulnerable members of society: children, women, the elderly, large segments of the population that depend on social safety nets, and, of course, refugees and the internally displaced."

Mello said the most pressing concerns common to all regions of Yugoslavia were:

- * civilian casualties as a result of NATO bombardments;

- * unemployment reaching crisis proportions, due to the destruction of industrial plants and enterprises and the collapse of the country's economy;

- * health and the environmental impact of the destruction of chemical and other plants producing hazardous materials contamination;

- * damage to infrastructure providing basic services—health, water supply, education, transport, telecommunications;

- * extensive damage to electricity-generating and distribution facilities and heating plants, presenting an acute problem, especially in the face of the coming winter;

- * serious impact on the educational system (schools and universities have been closed throughout the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia since 24 March);

* adverse effects on medium-term agricultural production, especially in view of the destruction of the largest fertilizer plant near Panzevo;

* a serious landmine problem in Kosovo and the threat posed by unexploded ordnance in the country as a whole;

* psychological problems among the population, based on anxiety as a result of unemployment coupled with the ever-present threats of air strikes.

Mello added that some of the most perilous conditions confronted the approximately 500,000 Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia, most of whom fled the Krajina region during the Croatian military's US-backed "Operation Storm" in 1995. These Serbs, who constitute the second largest refugee caseload in Europe, he said, have been living in "subhuman" conditions for four years and their plight was being worsened by the ongoing war.

In London on Wednesday, representatives from the humanitarian relief organization Save the Children, which also took part in the UN mission, presented their assessment of conditions. While highlighting the conditions in Kosovo, emergency specialist Sarah Upward acknowledged that unemployment in Serbia is "staggering, and that is likely to get worse." The bombing of petrochemical sites had left Serbian parents fearful about the release of chemicals that could harm their children, she said.

"In terms of children," Upward said, "Serbian schools haven't been operating for two months now. Children are basically sitting around, afraid to go out and [they] have no kind of normal life ... and their families are under a lot of stress from economic hardships."

According to Serbian trade unions, the destruction of factories has left more than 500,000 workers jobless and has eliminated incomes for another one and half million family members who depend on them.

The Yugoslav Red Cross said NATO bombing had resulted in the destruction of civilian districts in the towns of Aleksinac, Pristina, Novi Sad, Djakovica, Surdulica, Cacak, Valjevo, Cuprija, Nis and Prokuplje. This has created more than 1 million internally displaced persons.

The UN's findings on the conditions in Serbia were all but blacked out by the US news media. Typical of the press coverage was Thursday's *New York Times* article that chose to ignore the devastating impact of NATO bombing on Serb civilians and instead focused almost exclusively on Mello's comments about the violence carried out by Serb nationalists in Kosovo. The article, entitled, "UN finds proof evidence of 'Ethnic Cleansing' in Kosovo," also made no mention of the UN group's

findings that these attacks intensified between March 24 and April 10, that is, *after* the NATO bombing began.

One of the most chilling consequences of NATO's war against Yugoslavia, only touched upon in the UN mission's report, is the long-term ecological effect of the use of depleted uranium (DU) weapons and the deliberate targeting of chemical plants and oil refineries. "The effects of the bombing on Serbia's economy equate, in other words, to low-intensity chemical warfare. NATO might also be waging an undeclared, invisible nuclear war," wrote George Monbiot in the British *Guardian* newspaper last week.

Roger Coghill, managing director of Coghill Research Laboratories, which studies electromagnetic fields and radiation, suspects that the abnormally high radiation levels detected by Yugoslav authorities have been caused by DU weapons. Produced from stockpiled nuclear waste, DU weapons are cheaper to make and more powerful armor-piercing weapons than lead ammunition.

Coghill, who says that the US used DU rounds in Iraq and Bosnia, cited a study involving children born in these areas, as well as children of American GI's from the Gulf War. "We observed the same pattern in all of them: large bellies, like frogs and very small legs. In horror, we saw that the genetic damage was identical in all three cases," said Mr. Coghill.

Professor Radoge Lausevic, secretary of the Serbian Ecological Society and assistant professor at Belgrade University, said more than 1 million DU shells were left lying in the deserts of Iraq. "The war will end sooner or later. Our main concern is what happens afterwards, when the refugees will return to their homes and the air, land and water will be poisoned. If NATO's goal is providing for the safe return of the refugees, any use of DU, any target of chemical plants is exactly the opposite."

Coghill added that winds could carry radioactive uranium oxide particles miles beyond Yugoslavian borders, posing a threat to neighboring countries like Greece.



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