

Report on impact of war in Yugoslavia

Potential environmental catastrophe in Balkans

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Amid the world media reports about alleged crimes against humanity and the torture and murder of innocent civilians in Kosovo, one crime has gone largely unmentioned.

Between March 24 and June 8, 1999, at least 23 petrochemical plants, oil refineries and fuel storage depots in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were bombed, as were at least another 121 major industrial plants containing various chemicals and substances dangerous to human health. Thousands of tonnes of highly toxic chemicals were uncontrollably released into the air, soil and water in a densely populated country covering an area of just 102,173 square kilometres (about the size of the US state of Kentucky or just larger than the Australian island state of Tasmania).

The plants were deliberately and criminally targeted for destruction in the planning rooms of NATO high command. They were subjected to multiple bombing and missile attacks designed to completely demolish them. The long-term public health and environmental effects in Yugoslavia and throughout the Balkans region are potentially catastrophic.

A preliminary report on the environmental impact of the war in Yugoslavia was prepared by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC). Released on June 28, the report was prepared under contract from the European Commission's DG-XI and presented to the EU Council of Ministers.

The REC is a non-profit, non-government organisation based in Hungary, with regional offices and experts throughout the Balkans. Among financial contributors to its operations are the governments of United States, Germany, France, United Kingdom and

Croatia. The report entitled, "Assessment of the Environmental Impact of Military Activity During the Yugoslav Conflict," cannot therefore be dismissed as Serbian propaganda.

It is a cautious document, emphasising the difficulty in defining the dimensions of long-term ecological effects because of inadequate scientific monitoring facilities and resources in the region. While the report refrains from describing the results of the NATO air campaign as a "large scale ecological catastrophe," its contents suggest that such a conclusion can reasonably be drawn.

An accompanying press release lists the following environmental problems that "may pose immediate health dangers":

- * Extensive damage to the waters of Yugoslavia, which will impact on agriculture and fishing.

- * An interrupted planting season in Yugoslavia and border regions, which will mean a poor harvest and potential food shortages.

- * Damage to the electrical power infrastructure of Yugoslavia, which will mean heating shortages in the coming winter.

- * Damage to the water and waste-water systems in Albania and Macedonia, which may cause long-term problems for the infrastructure of those two countries.

- * Air and water pollution, including potentially hazardous pollution from depleted uranium weapons, which will have as-yet-unknown impacts on the water table, and hence food chain of the entire region.

The region worst affected by pollution is the industrial complex of Pancevo, home to some 150,000 people, 15 kilometres north-east of Belgrade. Three plants were bombed on the night of April 18: the

Pancevo Nitrogen Processing Plant (fertiliser), the Pancevo Oil Refinery and the Pancevo Petrochemical Plant. All three are situated within an eight square kilometre region and within hundreds of metres of residential buildings.

The report states: “Present in the plants are ethylene-dichloride, ethylene, chlorine, chlorine-hydrogen, propylene and vinyl chloride monomers. These fluids have been released into the atmosphere, water and soil due to bomb damage and now pose a serious threat to human health in general and to ecological systems locally and in the broader Balkan region. The soil at the Petrochemical Complex was soaked with ethylene-dichloride.

“All chemicals that had been released in water were found to be present in the surface waters, as well as the compounds resulting from their reactions. A large number of people have been poisoned, injured and/or evacuated. According to Yugoslav estimates, some 70,000 people have been endangered locally”(Section 3.1, page 2).

According to the report, 1,000 tonnes of ethylene-dichloride, close to 1,000 tonnes of a 33 percent hydrogen-chloride solution and 3,000 tonnes of sodium hydroxide were released into the Danube River, as were 100 tonnes of ammonia, and tens of tonnes of chlorine, along with undetermined quantities of mercury. Ethylene-dichloride, considered a probable carcinogen, is known to cause damage to the kidney and liver.

More than 1,000 tonnes of vinyl chloride monomer (VCM) were released when the Petrochemical Complex was destroyed. A VCM concentration of 10,600 times above safe levels was recorded a few kilometres away from the plant. A massive cloud of pollution produced by the burning of VCMs—containing phosgene, chlorine, chlorine oxides, ammonia, petroleum and petroleum products—merged with the clouds of smoke from a burning fertiliser warehouse.



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