

Red Cross reports economic devastation

Humanitarian disaster in Yugoslavia

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In the wake of the US-NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, the people of Serbia are confronting a “dramatically awful” humanitarian crisis—far bigger than that in Kosovo—according to a senior Red Cross official. People have no jobs, often no water and electricity, and face a desperate situation in the coming winter.

Speaking after returning from a visit to the war-torn Balkans, Jim Carlton, the secretary-general of the Australian Red Cross, said NATO's air war had devastated the basic industry and economy of Yugoslavia, creating widespread unemployment. The suffering added to an already serious refugee situation, with more than 500,000 people previously driven out of other parts of the Balkans.

Carlton travelled last month to Belgrade and several cities that were targeted by NATO, including Novi Sad and Nis. He also visited Kosovo and refugee camps in Albania.

“The destruction in Novi Sad was phenomenal,” he told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I saw the bridges that had been blown up, the oil refinery that was reduced to scrap and the hospitals and schools where bombs went astray.

“It was eerie. The oil refinery must have been hit by at least 100 sorties. It was just blackened and twisted metal—there was nothing left standing. After the first weeks of the bombing, NATO shifted to economic targets. Most sources of employment have been wiped out—that is the main problem now.

“The humanitarian assistance that the Red Cross can get into Serbia is minuscule compared to the need. Economic reconstruction is required.

“After some years of economic sanctions, the economy was already in a parlous state. Now it is kaput. Many places have no electricity and no water. Many roads are affected. It took us three hours to drive from Belgrade to Novi Sad—a trip that normally takes an hour—because of diversions.

“They face a massive rebuilding task and in the

meantime they face high levels of unemployment, which will make it difficult for people to cope.”

Carlton left little doubt that the NATO bombing of refineries, factories and other workplaces was calculated. He described the missile attacks as “incredibly accurate”. He gave one example—the defence building in Belgrade opposite the Red Cross office. Several missiles had struck it. The exterior had been left intact but inside was only a blackened shell.

In addition to the economic damage, Yugoslavia was attempting to cope with half a million refugees from elsewhere in the Balkans. The worst affected victims were the Serbs who had fled the Krajina, now part of Croatia, in 1995. Carlton visited what is called a “collective centre” for them in Novi Sad.

“About 60 Krajina refugees were housed under pitiful conditions in a village hall. They were sleeping in bunk beds with no privacy. There was a little toilet block out the back in the mud, with two loos and a shower block. The cooking facilities were hopelessly inadequate. It reminded me of a visit to Cambodian refugees on the Thai border in 1979.

“Their physical conditions and psychological state were profoundly distressing, and their fate was impossible to imagine in the difficult economic plight of the country. Their relief allocation from the Yugoslav government was just one deutschemark per person a day—that is about 90 cents Australian.”

Carlton and the International Red Cross are concerned that the Western media will continue to ignore the fate of the Serbian people and refugees for political reasons. He provided the *WSWS* with a copy of an article he had written for the *Melbourne Age* on the situation in Serbia, a contribution that the newspaper chose not to publish.

Part of the article read as follows: “On Monday I visited Novi Sad, the most prosperous city of Serbia. It is a handsome city, with strong Hungarian influences on its culture, and containing a sizeable Hungarian minority.

Australia will have seen television images of the destruction of the three bridges across the Danube at Novi Sad, and the burning of its oil refinery. They will also have seen pictures of the destruction of a school and two apartment buildings by a missile that went astray. Miraculously no one was killed in the incident.

“I saw all these sites. With the loss of the bridges, not only transport but also water supplies were cut off for one third of the city. I saw the uncovered ferries crowded with up to 100 people huddling together in the rain crossing the swift-flowing and broad expanse of the Danube, and another 100 waiting in the rain on either side. I wondered what their plight would be in the freezing Serbian winter.

“It is estimated that at least a quarter of Yugoslavia's electricity supplies will be out for the winter, in a country that relies heavily on electricity for domestic heating. Electricity shortages and the destruction of a substantial proportion of the oil refining capacity, together with other industrial plant, have already expanded the number of unemployed, with little hope of early recovery.

“These observations apply not only to Novi Sad, but to the whole of Serbia, and to a great extent the smaller component of the Federal Republic, Montenegro. In the eyes of a humanitarian organisation like the Red Cross, the victims of these appalling circumstances are mostly ordinary people hoping to go about their lives in peace and security, and with virtually no direct influence over the political process.”

Carlton cannot be accused of being pro-Serbian, let alone left-wing. He is a former senior official of Australia's ruling Liberal Party and served as a shadow minister before the election of the current Howard government. His comments reflect the anxieties of the International Red Cross, which is appealing for funds to address the emergency situation.

Red Cross workers remained in Yugoslavia throughout the NATO bombing, despite fears for their security following the arrest of two Australian CARE workers on charges of spying. Among the Red Cross field workers are nurses, logisticians, refugee camp managers and water and sanitation engineers. Their presence shows that aid work continued during the war, notwithstanding CARE's claims that the arrests had made it impossible for such work to be maintained.

Other agencies, notably the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have expressed alarm about the human catastrophe in Serbia. The UNHCR estimates that some 100,000 Serbian and Roma (Gypsy) refugees have fled Kosovo and sought safety in Serbia and Montenegro

since the end of NATO's 77-day bombing campaign. They are in “urgent need of assistance,” according to an UNHCR media release. “If emergency aid is not immediately provided to these people, 40 to 50 percent of whom are children under 16 years of age, UNHCR believes their situation could turn desperate when winter comes.”

It estimates that there are 530,000 refugees previously expelled from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, 40,000 of whom are still living in overcrowded and dilapidated collective centres.

The UNHCR suggests that Serbian authorities are putting considerable pressure on refugees to return to Kosovo, citing Serbian press reports that school directors have been instructed not to enrol Kosovar pupils and that the Kosovar refugees are being denied pensions and fuel rations.

At the same time, according to UNHCR staff, the situation facing non-Albanian minorities remaining in Kosovo is “becoming critical”. Homes are being burned on a daily basis, entire Serb and Roma communities have been forced to seek evacuation and protection from NATO occupying troops, and up to 10,000 Serbian refugees from Prizren are sheltering in the Strpce area.

While most Western media reports focus on the return of Albanian refugees to Kosovo and on accounts of alleged mass graves and Serbian war crimes, little coverage is being given to the plight of NATO's war victims in the remainder of the country. This censorship is designed to justify NATO's two-month onslaught and to suggest that the Serbian people simply deserve whatever treatment is meted out to them.

Yet the conclusion is inescapable: under the pretext of averting a humanitarian disaster, the US-NATO bombardment has created one. Indeed, it has exacerbated an immense tragedy that already existed because of the earlier conflicts triggered by the major powers in Croatia and Bosnia.



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