Human Rights Watch says NATO killed over 500 civilians in air war against Yugoslavia

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A report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) charges the NATO alliance with violating international human rights law during its 78-day war against Serbia last year. The report is the first independent investigation into the number of civilians killed by NATO air strikes on the former Yugoslavia from March through June last year.

The New York-based organisation notes that official US and Yugoslav estimates of civilian deaths and injuries vary widely. US officials, including Secretary of Defence William Cohen and NATO Commander General Wesley Clark, testified before Congress that there were only 20 to 30 incidents of "collateral damage" in the entire war—less than one-third the number documented by HRW.

The HRW report point outs that such "seemingly cavalier" statements regarding the civilian death toll contrast with NATO's designation of its air war against Serbia as a "humanitarian intervention." The organisation further declares that a striking feature of the Yugoslav war "is almost a complete lack of any public accountability by any of the national NATO members for missions undertaken in the NATO alliance's name".

HRW estimates that up to 527 Yugoslavian civilians were killed in the attacks. It has been able to verify 90 occasions in which non-combatants were known to have died as a result of NATO bombing. Twelve incidents alone accounted for between 303 and 352 civilian deaths.

The report does not deal with the widespread damage to civilian property and the country's infrastructure, nor the legality of the war itself. HRW publicly supported NATO's declaration of war against Yugoslavia.

Nonetheless, the report provides a devastating picture of the brutality unleashed by the Western powers against a small, largely defenceless country and the half-truths and lies through which they sought to mislead public opinion. It concludes that in several instances NATO strikes were aimed at terrorising the Yugoslav people.

The NATO bombardment began on March 24, 1999. Of the 13 countries actively involved, air strikes were conducted by the US, Britain, France, Canada, and Spain. The United States and Britain deployed many long-range cruise missiles and were responsible for dropping cluster bombs, which caused some of the worst civilian deaths during the war.

By the end of the three-month offensive, NATO aircraft had made a total of 37,465 sorties. Their bombs hit factories, kindergartens, oil refinery plants, private homes, hospitals, electricity and water supply systems and other public service facilities, such as trains, buses and motorways.

HRW bases its report on a 21-day bomb damage assessment mission in Serbia (including Vojvodina) and Montenegro conducted in August 1999. The inspection took in 91 cities, towns, and villages. The team also began investigations inside Kosovo from June 12, the day NATO entered the province.

In total, 55 of the verified incidents of civilian deaths occurred in Serbia and 32 in Kosovo. Almost half (43) “resulted from attacks during daylight hours, when civilians could have been expected to be on the roads and bridges or in public buildings which may have been targeted".

One of the first instances of multiple civilian deaths was the April 12 bombing of a passenger train as it crossed a bridge near Grdenicka, in southern Serbia. At least 14 people died in the attack when a US Airforce bomber made two separate attacks on the train. General Wesley Clark initially claimed that the pilot had been targeting the bridge, when the train unexpectedly came into view—too late to prevent the missiles being fired. Videotape evidence, produced by NATO at the time to support this claim, was later proven to have been doctored.

Two days later, during daylight hours on April 14, 73 Kosovar Albanians died as their refugee convoy travelling along the Djakovica-Decane highway in Kosovo was repeatedly bombed over a two-hour period by NATO aircraft. NATO spokesmen claimed initially that they had hit a military target and suggested that Serb forces were responsible for any civilian deaths. The following day NATO changed its story, claiming that one plane had "apparently" dropped a bomb on a civilian vehicle that had

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been travelling with a military convoy.

On April 16, NATO spokesman Jamie Shea stated categorically that in "one case and one only, we have proof of civilian loss of life. Otherwise, we are sure that we targeted military vehicles." Only when this lie began unravelling did NATO admit on April 19 that a dozen of its aircraft had been involved in numerous attacks on the two convoys, dropping a total of nine bombs.

NATO never produced any evidence supporting their original claim that the convoys were composed of military vehicles. Later still, NATO admitted that a voice recording it had made public of a pilot apparently involved in the bombing—stating that the vehicles attacked were "of a military type"—in fact had no connection with the incident.

HRW also cite the April 23 bombing of the state Serb Radio and Television headquarters as one of "the worst incidents of civilian deaths, and certainly the worst in Belgrade". Sixteen civilian technicians and workers were killed and 16 were wounded in the attack. HRW states, "the purpose of the attack again seems to have been more psychological harassment of the civilian population than to obtain direct military effect".

This policy was publicly unveiled during a summit of NATO leaders in Washington just hours before the broadcasting facility was struck. The meeting agreed to intensify the bombing campaign and expanded the list of potential targets to include news media and other sites considered to be of a "strategic nature". At the same time, the use of "smart" bombs was cut back and cities were to be subjected to round-the-clock bombing by heavy aircraft.

On May 7 cluster bombs fell on Nis, killing 14 civilians and injuring 28. The bombs fell near the Medical Centre in southeast Nis, in the town centre near the Nis University Rector's Office, including the area of the central city market place, on the bus station near the Nis Fortress and the 12 February Health Centre, and near a car dealership and the Nis Express parking lot.

NATO attributed the Nis deaths to a faulty cluster bomb container. A senior US Department of Defence official interviewed by HRW claimed that following public criticism of this incident, a secret US executive order was made for US forces to cease the use of cluster bombs. HRW state that whilst it appears American forces did stop using the weapons, British forces "continued to drop cluster bombs (official chronologies show their use on May 17, May 31, June 3, and June 4)".

HRW confirmed the use of cluster bombs by the United States and Britain in seven incidents throughout Yugoslavia (another five being possible, but unconfirmed). Up to 150 civilians died as a result. Given the deadly consequences of their deployment, their use can legitimately be considered to constitute murderous intent.

Less than one week later, on May 13, as many as 87 displaced Kosovar civilians were killed and 60 wounded when 10 bombs were dropped during the night on a refugee camp near the village of Korisa in Kosovo. HRW were unable to confirm the use of cluster bombs on this occasion.

NATO at first denied that it had been involved in any military activity in the vicinity and then claimed that accounts of refugee deaths were a “Serb invention”. Finally, in an official statement, NATO acknowledged the attack, but insisted it had been directed against the Yugoslav army. It claimed that Serbian forces had deliberately used the refugees as a “human shield”. HRW report that there is no evidence to prove this.

Other instances recorded in the report include an attack on the Lab river bridge, near Pristina, in which a bus was hit, killing 39 people and injuring 13, and the May 20 bombing of the State Security offices. Some four civilians were killed at the "Dragisa Misovic" Clinical and Hospital Centre and many others wounded, including newborn babies and women in labour.

The HRW report divides the 90 incidents it has recorded into "legitimate" and "non-legitimate" instances of civilian deaths. It states, for example, that in nine incidents—the bombing of Serbian state broadcasting, the new Belgrade heating plant and seven bridges—civilian deaths were the result of an attack on "non-military targets".

HRW asserts that under the terms of the Geneva Convention—which states that in times of war a distinction must be made between the civilian population and combatants, and that all possible precautions should be taken to protect the former—these deaths are "illegitimate". The group has referred NATO's bombing of Belgrade to the war crimes tribunal at The Hague.

The HRW report is the latest in a growing list of studies documenting NATO crimes and misinformation in connection with its war against Yugoslavia. These have thoroughly exposed the humanitarian pretences of the war, whose real aim was to secure imperialist domination over the strategically vital Balkans region.

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