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War crimes that may never see justice (20 years from NATO bombing of FR Yugoslavia)

by Nikola Milošević? - Sunday, March 24, 2019

<https://inspiratron.org/blog/2019/03/24/war-crimes-using-depleted-uranium/>

On this day (24th March) it has been exactly 20 years from the day that US led NATO started bombing campaign in FR Yugoslavia, bombing Serbia, its region of Kosovo and Montenegro (that all were parts of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). There are many things that has to be unpacked looking at this conflict, but I would like to focus on one thing with this post. In the past I have been writing about [my personal experiences](#) and [how NATO breached international law and how it all started a practice that resulted in many other breaches of international law, pointless invasions by NATO and US and the rise of Islamic state, other Islamic terrorist organisations as well as growth of immigration and immigration crisis in Europe](#). There are even more to unpack there probably, but what I would like to focus now are war crimes and breaches of methods of wars. So let me not go into morality of intervention, even though I would like to later discuss how what was at the time called "Humanitarian intervention" actually in a long term is killing the same population it was saving and many more.

Means of bombing

It is important to review first what is bombed and with what weapons. The bombing campaign lasted for 78 days between 24th March 1999 and 10th of June 1999. About 1000 Yugoslav soldiers and policemen were killed and more than 3000 civilians were killed by NATO bombs (even though NATO was claiming they are targeting military targets, I would like to emphasize the ratio 3:1 in civilian compared to military and police deaths). 12.500 people were injured by bombs. About 6000 civilians were injured during the bombing and 2700 children among them. 88 children died. During the bombing more than 25.000 residential buildings were destroyed, 470 kilometers of roads and 595 kilometers of rails were damaged or destroyed. Additionally, 14 airfields, 19 hospitals, 20 health centers, 18 kindergartens, 69 schools, 176 cultural heritage buildings, 82 bridges were targeted. During the bombing, there were 2300 air strikes on 995 objects around the county. About 1150 war crafts were deployed by NATO, who launched around 420.000 projectiles of the total mass of 22.000 tons. However, for this text, the important things that were targeted were pharma factory "Zdravlje" in Leskovac (29th March), the oil refinery in Pancevo (4th April at 4am, 12th April again) and Novi Sad (12th April), heating plant in Belgrade (4th April), Gas station in Gnjilane (4th April), gas depots (in Bogutovac, Sombor, Smederevo), substations in various places, oil industry buildings and refineries (5th April in Sombor), various industrial plants (car industry in Kradujevac, chemical industry in Pancevo, nitrogen plant in Pancevo, sugar plant, metal plant in Kursumlija, several defense industry factories etc.), water plants, and mines [[source](#)]. At times NATO used cluster bombs ([About 2,000 cluster bombs containing 380,000 sub-munitions were dropped on Yugoslavia, 531 by UK's Royal Air Force](#)). Cluster bombs became illegal to stockpile, use or transfer by an international treaty called [Convention on Cluster Munition](#) that was signed in 2010 by 108 countries. Unfortunately, the USA, Russia, China, and Brazil are not among countries that were willing to sign this treaty. Another weapon that was used especially on strikes on Kosovo and southern Serbia was depleted uranium. 10-15 tons of depleted uranium ammunition was dropped in Serbia [[source](#)]. Even though this is depleted uranium, higher than normal radiation was recorded on places where it was dropped. After the war, there were a number of efforts to clean the areas from the remaining ammunition parts. United Nation Human Rights Commission already in 1996 and 1997 passed motions listing depleted uranium ammunition among weapons of mass destruction requesting countries to curb the production and the spread of such weapons. The chief prosecutor for the [International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia](#) led a committee of staff lawyers to investigate possible treaty prohibitions against the use of DU in weapons. Their findings were that:

There is no specific treaty ban on the use of DU projectiles. There is a developing scientific debate and concern expressed regarding the impact of the use of such projectiles and it is possible that, in future, there will be a consensus view in international legal circles that use of such projectiles violate general principles of the law applicable to use of weapons in armed conflict. No such consensus exists at present

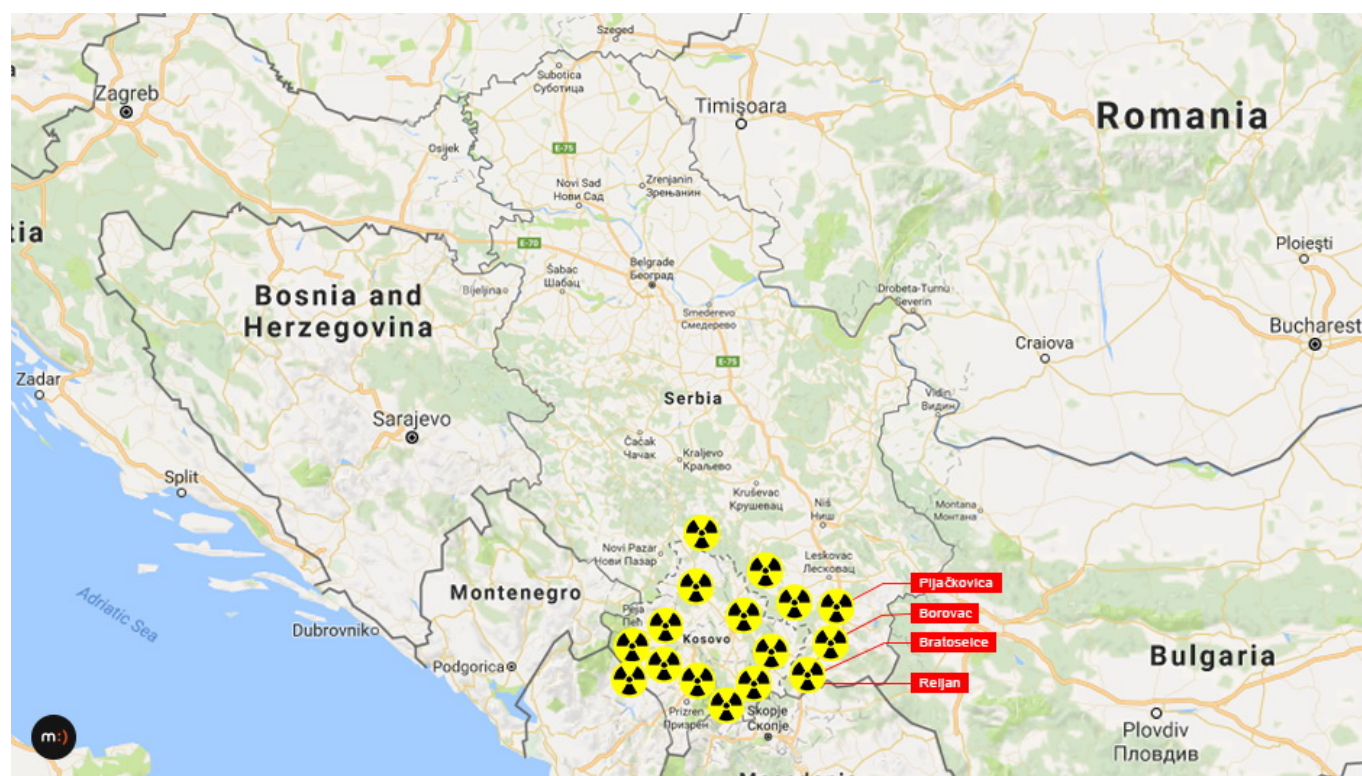
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Unfortunately, the UN Human Rights Commission's motions are not binding to countries and do not mean much. However, there are still requests for banning this type of weapon coming from both academia and non-governmental sector. There is an International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons, a coalition of over 155 NGOs asking for ban of such weapons and even states have been trying to advocate for the ban on depleted uranium weapons. European parliament repeatedly was passing resolutions requesting bans on this kind of weapons (even though UK was using it, but that may be as well one of the hidden reasons to leave EU). UK and France are the only two EU countries rejecting the ban. As these countries are also members of UN security council, in addition to the US, the legality of these weapons are maintained (though may not be the morality). In 2007, France, Britain, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic voted against a United Nations General Assembly resolution to hold a debate in 2009 about the effects of the use of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium. All other European countries voted in favor or abstained.

In December 2012, 155 states supported a United Nations' General Assembly resolution that recalled that, because of the ongoing uncertainties over the long-term environmental impacts of depleted uranium identified by the United Nations Environment Programme, states should adopt a precautionary approach to its use.

As it is stated, there are still uncertainties about environmental damage depleted uranium causes. However, for years in Serbia it has been associated with increasing trend of cancer and leukemia in population.



Location in Serbia and Kosovo where NATO used bombs with depleted uranium

It is needless to say that bombing pharma, chemical, electrical or oil factories result in enormous pollution. The pollution caused by these substances can become a cause of cancer and other illnesses many years later.

Recently, in Serbia was formed a Commission for investigating the consequences of NATO bombing (National Assembly formed this commission). The Commission with the Institute for public health "Milan Jovanovic Batut" are currently still working on a study, however, a couple of weeks ago they have come out with initial results stating that statistically significant increase in tumor illnesses can be seen in children. The most common tumors in children from 0-4 years of age are neuroectodermal, in children aged 5-9 are blood cancers, 10-14 brain tumors and 15-18 year old suffer mainly from solid tumors. They stated that initially, they examined children, as they are less exposed

to other factors (such as smoking and similar). They stated that because of this distribution they believe that those generations were exposed to toxins that caused that increase and that its likelihood of the toxin being from the pollution or radiation caused by bombing is very high. Unfortunately, the study is not finished, nor public as of this day, so everything written here is based on a press conference that was held a couple of weeks ago and could not be checked.

Similar studies were done even before. After the war, Military Medical Academy (which is the best medical institution in the country) was doing a study of how much soldiers who were exposed to depleted uranium ammunition had higher risk of certain diseases. They were following about 2000 soldiers and their children (1752 children), as a control group was taken children born earlier (between 1995-1999). There was a finding that children born during the bombing had more often anomalies - some endocrine and metabolic condition. However, the study was stopped pretty much immediately after these findings, the official explanation was the study did not have big enough sample for statistical analysis. Unofficial explanation was that the new government stopped that study (unfortunately this types of studies get politicized quite often).

There have been also quite extensive debate in Italy whether the soldiers who were deployed in Kosovo and Bosnia where depleted uranium was used suffer from higher risks of getting cancer. Panel of scientists claimed it is the case [[source](#), [source2](#)], while some studies deny this [[source](#)].

There were experts groups doing investigations on Kosovo on locations depleted uranium was used (112 locations) from various UN and other national and international organizations. Practically all experts measured increased radiation levels and recommended evacuation of population and cattle from these areas [[source](#)].

Several international reportages were made such as:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USYnPI_mUng

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KrQvS40hds>

Even the following documentary:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0L6mGh-u76A>

So after these all, it is clear that there is a strong suspicion that the effects of the NATO bombing can be seen in various health anomalies and conditions in population. Whether the effects were from the depleted uranium or pollution from the plants is still not totally clear, however, there are reasonable suspicions that depleted uranium is dangerous.

Not allowing justice

On the other hand, the use of cluster bombs on civilians (e.g. bombing of a marketplace in Nis and couple of bombing of refugee columns, train, buses, bridges with people) can be clearly considered war crimes, breach of war methods. As it was said before, there was obstruction of the research of these topics from the west-leaning government in order not to offend their partners in other countries. Researchers trying to perform a study were reported that they were visited by the personnel of NATO mission in Serbia or Bosnia and were asked what they are doing. They reported different kinds of pressures not to publish these studies.

The wars in former Yugoslavia are long gone now. However, justice seemed to be only one-sided. Serbian leaders were brought in front of Justice at ICTY and in the special tribunal for war crimes in Belgrade. However, leaders and war criminals from other sides were rarely seeing justice. Especially, this is true for the NATO side in the conflict which did a number of crimes, while rejected even investigations to these war crimes. It is no surprise that the US decided to deny visas to ICC investigators investigating US war crimes in Afghanistan [\[source\]](#). Mike Pompeo said that he will consider economic sanctions to the tribunal and arresting the investigators working on these issues.

If justice is not served, the conflict will remain unresolved. And there are victims still suffering and waiting for their share of justice.

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