

Fallout of Serbia Bombing ‘Continues to Kill’

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Ten years after the NATO bombing of Serbia, concern is rising over a rise in the number of reported cases of cancer.

Some 15 tons of ammunition fortified with depleted uranium was dropped by way of more than 50,000 bombs and missiles in the 11 weeks of bombing of Serbia in 1999. The targets of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing were 116 locations, mostly in southern part of Serbia and the Kosovo region.

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Depleted uranium (DU) is placed at the tip of bombs for piercing the armor of tanks and heavy military vehicles. Although weakened in the production process, the uranium remains highly toxic.

Experts disagree on the impact of depleted uranium on health. Some say that the aerosol produced on impact and combustion of DU ammunition can cause cancer and affect the kidneys, brain, liver, and heart. But some studies have found no significant impact on health or the environment.

The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) sent a mission only in 2000, which focused on 11 spots in Kosovo and concluded that there was “no detectable widespread contamination of the ground surface by DU. A number of contamination points were identified by the mission but most of these were found to be only slightly contaminated.”

A report by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2001 came to a similar conclusion. However, British expert Keith Bavestock who was a part of the WHO team told Belgrade daily Politika that “not all data available to the WHO was included in the report.” This, he said, “does not mean that the report is false; it is incomplete.”

Local doctors have their own reports.

Nebojsa Srblijak, a physician from the Kosovan town Mitrovica, which still has a large Serb population, has spoken of a tenfold rise in leukemia cases. “Leukemia among children in Kosovo was at the rate of one per thousand before 1999,” he told media representatives. “Since 1999, it rose to 1 percent.”

Dr. Srblijak who is cooperating with an oncology clinic in the Kosovan capital Pristina, said that Albanian doctors too had told him there was “a significant rise” in the number of cancer patients since 1999. In the whole of Kosovo the cancer rate before 1999 was 10 among 300,000 people, and “today it stands at 20 among 60,000,” he said.

“It’s one tumor each day we’re discovering now,” radiologist Vlastimir Cvetkovic told IPS. “Prior to 1999 it was one in three months. And this is not just due to better diagnostics, as our working conditions were and remain modest. Besides, it’s now younger and younger people, and children we’re having as patients.”

An alarming rise in cancer cases has been recorded also in neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina, where DU was used by NATO against Bosnian Serb forces earlier in 1995. According to official figures, more than 300 people from the Sarajevo neighborhoods Hadzici and Han Pijesak in eastern Bosnia died of cancer from 1996 until 2000. Hadzici was inhabited and held by Bosnian Serbs during the war. It later came under the jurisdiction of the central Muslim-Croat government in Sarajevo.

“It’s a pretty high number,” local doctor Slavica Jovanovic told IPS. “But this seems to be a subject no one is willing to tackle. People from Hadzici have resettled elsewhere, and at the level of Bosnia-Herzegovina there’s no will to go into it.”

DU-related health problems have been reported among Italian soldiers who served as peacekeepers in Bosnia and in Kosovo. Several have died of cancer, and their families are now in a battle to prove that working and living next to DU-contaminated areas had proved fatal.

For Serbian authorities, DU problems seem as far away as Kosovo now, despite the fact that some 100,000 Serbs still live there, most of them near the divided town Mitrovica.

“Some 4,000 veterans have been under constant scrutiny as they were up to 50 meters from the point of impact of DU ammunition,” Milan Misovic, head of the Working Medicine Department of the Military Medical Academy, told Serbian media. “So far, there is no increase in cancer among them. However, some changes can be expected in the next 10 to 15 years.”

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