

NATO Willfully Triggered an Environmental Catastrophe In Yugoslavia

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In this report, first published in 2000 (on GR in April 2004), Michel Chossudovsky provides conclusive documentary and photographic evidence that contrary to the statements of various international observers, the environmental catastrophe at the Pancevo petrochemical plant near Belgrade was neither the result of 'collateral damage' (that is, an accident of war) nor a case of criminal negligence (that is, resulting from criminal disregard of consequences).

Rather, the evidence is compelling. NATO willfully blew up with meticulous accuracy containers of toxic chemicals with the intention of creating an ecological nightmare

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At the outset of the War, NATO had reassured World opinion that "precise targeting" using sophisticated weaponry was intended to avoid "collateral damage" including environmental hazards:

- *"We do everything we possibly can to avoid unnecessary collateral damage. We take it very seriously, work very hard at doing that, spend a lot of time planning for the missions."*¹

At the Pancevo petrochemical complex located in the outskirts of Belgrade, however, exactly the opposite occurred. "State of the art" aerial surveillance and satellite thermal image detection were not only used to disable Yugoslavia's petrochemical industry; they were willfully applied to trigger an environmental disaster.

The air raids on the Pancevo complex started on April 4th 1999 and continued relentlessly until the 7th of June. The Pancevo complex also included an oil refinery facility (built with technical support from Texaco) and a Nitrogen Processing Plant producing fertilizer for Yugoslav agriculture. The petrochemical plant was bombed extensively (41 bombs and 7 missile attacks). The bombed areas were within less than two hundred meters from residential buildings.

At the beginning of the war, workers at the plant were actively involved in removing toxic materials from the site, emptying several large tanks and containers of chemicals precisely to avert the risks of "collateral damage". Little did they realize that NATO was watching

them through air-to-ground surveillance systems and satellite images. Using thermal detection, NATO military planners knew which of the containers had been emptied and which remained full.

How does this work?

All objects in the Pancevo plant –including the containers of toxic chemicals– emit infrared radiation. A thermal imager from a spy satellite or an aircraft can detect infrared radiation emitted from any object situated on the petrochemical plant and convert its readings into a high-resolution video or snap picture.

The thermal imager can detect temperature differentials as small as 0.1 degrees centigrade which enables NATO planners to easily “categorize” and distinguish between full and empty containers. NATO warplanes were equipped with various advanced imaging systems including infrared/electro-optical sensors. Thermal satellite images were relayed to the Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) in Vicenza, Italy where the bombing raids had been carefully scheduled. Other advanced surveillance systems were used including small unmanned predator (UAV) drones and high altitude U2 spy planes. In the words of a Pentagon spokesman, the U2 “snaps a picture from very high altitude, beams it back in what we call a reach-back, to the States where it is very quickly analyzed”. And from there, “the right targeting data” is relayed to the CAOC in Vincenza which then “passes [it] on to people in the cockpit”.²

NATO planners also had detailed information on the layout of the plant, which had been designed and built on contract with a US multinational engineering company Foster Wheeler (a firm specializing in the construction of petrochemical and polymer plants). NATO knew exactly where things were. In a cruel irony, US investment in Yugoslavia (financed with loans from the World Bank) was being bombed by Uncle Sam. Did the pilots sitting in the cockpit know that they were destroying a plant which was “Made in America”?

A large number of the containers had been emptied. By using thermal images, NATO was able to identify which of the tanks were still filled to the brim with toxic chemicals. Among these noxious liquids were containers of ethylene-dichloride (EDC), ethylene, chlorine, chlorine-hydrogen, propylene and vinyl chloride monomers (VCM). Well documented by environmentalists, the VCM monomer used to produce plastics (eg. PVC resin) is a dangerous cancerogenic contaminant (see photo 2). Vinyl chloride also has the potential to cause neurological and liver damage, as well as damage to the fetus causing serious birth defects.

If NATO’s intent were solely to disable the plant without risking “collateral” environmental damage, they could have done it by smart bombing the equipment and machinery. Why did they also decide to hit with utmost accuracy the tanks containing noxious liquids?

The “smart bombs” were not dumb; they went where they were told to go. NATO had scrupulously singled out the containers, tanks and reservoirs, which still contained toxic materials. According to the petrochemical plant director, NATO did not hit a single empty container: “This was not accidental; they chose to hit those that were full and these chemicals spilled into the canal leading to the Danube”. Moreover, according to the plant director, the ethylene-dichloride (EDC) spillovers had contaminated 10 hectares of land on and in the vicinity of the plant. ³

When the smart bombs hit their lethal targets at Pancevo (see photos below), noxious fluids and fumes were released into the atmosphere, water and soil. The containers were deliberately blown up or perforated. The soil at the petrochemical complex is still soaked with toxic ethylene-dichloride. According to a report of the Regional Environment Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC):

- *“More than one thousand tons of ethylene dichloride spilled from the Pancevo petrochemical complex into the Danube [through the canal which links the plant to the river]. Over a thousand tons of natrium hydroxide were spilled from the Pancevo petrochemical complex. Nearly 1,000 tons of hydrogen chloride spilled from Pancevo into the Danube River”⁴*

Eight tons of mercury also escaped from the petrochemical complex spilling into the soil. The wastewater treatment plant was also bombed thereby contributing to exacerbating the ecological impacts. ⁵

NATO military strategists knew precisely what they were doing and what would be the likely consequences. At the neighboring oil refinery, two NATO missiles had hit on April 4th the refinery’s control rooms killing three staff members. The strikes had set the plant on fire, reducing it to a toxic wreck. The objective was not to avoid an environmental disaster. The objective was to create an environmental disaster (see photos). NATO was expecting that by ruthlessly bombing Pancevo among other civilian sites, this would intimidate Belgrade into accepting the Rambouillet Agreement including its infamous Military Appendix which essentially gave NATO the right to occupy all parts of Yugoslavia.

In the wake of the bombings, the Greens from Germany and experts from the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) as well as other groups visited the Pancevo plant. The UNEP report dismisses the environmental impacts caused by the bombings while underscoring in its main conclusions that Pancevo and other petrochemical plants in the country were an ecological hazard prior to the bombings due to lax environmental standards.⁶ The UNEP report is a carefully worded cover-up. It whitewashes NATO; it downplays the seriousness of the environmental catastrophe, while placing the blame (without supporting evidence) on the Yugoslav authorities. Tacitly upholding the legitimacy of the Western military alliance, UNEP’s findings are in overt contradiction with those of other scientific studies including that of the Regional Environment Center for Central And Eastern Europe (REC) prepared for the European Commission (see footnote 4).

The complicity of UNEP –a specialized agency of the UN with a track record of integrity- is yet another symptom of the deterioration of the United Nations system which now plays an underhand in covering up NATO war crimes.



A ‘smart bomb’ hit this container with perfect accuracy. (Pancevo petrochemical complex (©Michel Chossudovsky, March 2000)



The container on the right was targeted by NATO because it was full of highly cancerogenic VCM (© Michel Chossudovsky, March 2000)

Notes

1. Statement of General Charles Wald of the Pentagon, Department of Defense Press Briefing, Washington, 12 April 1999.
2. Department of Defense Press Briefing, Washington, May 14th, 1999.
3. Interview conducted by the author in Pancevo, March 2000.
4. See the report of the REC entitled *Assessment of the Environmental Impact of Military Activities During the Yugoslavia Conflict* at <http://www.rec.org/REC/Announcements/yugo/background.html>)
5. Interview conducted by the author in Pancevo, March 2000.
6. The UNEP report entitled *The Kosovo Conflict: Consequences for the Environment & Human Settlements prepared for the European Commission* can be consulted at <http://www.grid.unep.ch/btf/final/index.html>

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