

Theme 5 – The Cost of War

Presentation: An Environmental Assessment of the Balkan Conflict

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The Balkans Task Force (BTF) was jointly set up in May 1999 by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements in response to the recommendation of an earlier United Nations mission to provide a detailed assessment of the full extent of the environmental impact of the conflict in the Balkans.

Sixty experts from six UN agencies, 19 countries and 26 scientific institutions and NGOs have been involved in the various BTF assessment missions, which have assessed the environmental damage to four industrial sites, the damage to the Danube River, the effect on biological diversity in protected areas, the effect on human settlements and the effect of depleted uranium weapons. The final report¹ highlights the environmental consequences of air strikes in environmental hotspots, as well as some serious long-term deficiencies that pre-date the Kosovo conflict, and indicates the need for immediate action as part of a programme of humanitarian assistance to the region.

After a preliminary field assessment, the first team of experts investigated industrial sites in Pancevo, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Nis, Bor, Prahovo and Pristina in July 1999. Samples were taken, some of which were analysed immediately in mobile field laboratories provided by Denmark and Germany; other samples were analysed in reputable scientific institutions.

Another team of international experts, nine scientists from eight countries and representatives of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Green Cross, assessed the situation of the Danube River in close co-operation with the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR). The team took numerous water and sediment samples for examination by independent laboratories and visited four different sites along the Danube River, including the Iron Gate Reservoir on the border of Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria. The team examined the Lepenica and Morava rivers, both tributaries of the Danube close to Kragujevac, and focused not only on sampling river water and bottom and bank sediments, but also on mussels and other invertebrates. Samples were taken upstream and downstream of the industrial areas for comparison.

In September 1999, another group of experts travelled to the Balkans in order to assess the damage to biological diversity sites, including selected protected areas and national parks, which were targeted during the war. The team visited Fruska Gora National Park, Kopaonik National Park, Zlatibor in Serbia and Lake Skadar in Montenegro.

A group of experts on depleted uranium from the World Health Organisation, the International Atomic Energy Agency, EU Commission, Swedish Radiation Institute, WWF and others looked into associated risks to human health and damage and pollution of soil and water. The preliminary assessment and a parallel desk study had to rely on available published information. The experts took a precautionary approach and recommended that, at places where contamination has been confirmed, measures to prevent access should be taken and local authorities and concerned individuals should be informed of the possible risks and appropriate precautionary procedures.

One of the problems faced in the field was how to distinguish between previous pollution and pollution caused by the bombings. Many of the industrial sites, such as the oil refinery in Novi Sad, plants in Pancevo, the Zastava car factory in Kragujevac or the mining town of Bor, showed signs of previous environmental pollution at alarming levels.

In Pancevo, our team was welcomed by a number of local NGOs. It was clear that there had been a need for independent environmental assessment for quite some time and that people were suffering from a range of pollution-related diseases. As we were dealing with questions related to warfare, we endeavoured to distinguish between new and old pollution. However, from the environmental point of view it is of course irrelevant whether pollution is new or old; the authorities responsible for planning the clean-up process have to deal with both.

Even if words like eco-catastrophe or eco-suicide are an over-estimation of the consequences of the war, there are several environmental hotspots in the area. I am especially concerned about the mercury released in Pancevo, the probable dioxin problems in Pancevo and Kragujevac, as well as the overall risks to drinking water in many of the industrial towns, such as Novi Sad.

Shortage of electricity in Serbia has created other problems. In some towns, the district heating system is damaged. Lack of electricity has caused additional environmental problems because fresh water and waste water pumping stations and processes have not been used properly. In the mining town of Bor, for example, emissions into the River Danube have increased as a result of electricity shortage.

With regard to land issues, our experts proposed a quick impact project to the United Nations agency in charge in Kosovo (UNMIK), which helped to identify neighbourhood improvement projects and allowed contractors to obtain tools by contributing their expertise to needed reparations. A quick impact project organising land cadastre records in various municipalities is under consideration. We are also working on a project proposal on partnerships for local development. This is a programme of strategic and practical actions to develop sustainable urban governance in Kosovo. We convened a workshop with international experts from Bosnia, Herzegovina and other countries and discussed the modalities of establishing an independent claims commission on matters of housing and property rights under UNMIK. The international community formulated political conditions before assisting the reconstruction efforts of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, but in Kosovo it is easier to include environmental concerns in the reconstruction programmes.

The Serbian authorities and a few companies have started a measure of reconstruction work in these targeted industrial sites, but those involved in the reconstruction work are currently at risk because proper environmental clean-up of the sites has not been undertaken. At Pancevo, for example, a large quantity of asbestos is still scattered around. Unless these materials are removed and the areas decontaminated before reconstruction starts, there will be serious consequences to public health. Romania and Bulgaria in turn fear transboundary pollution from targeted industrial facilities.

The BTF's final report is a reliable source of information for both the affected population and the international community and should assist the relevant authorities to address the environmental hotspots. The report also recommends the provision of ongoing technical support to UNMIK in order to produce guidelines and procedures for municipal administration. The human settlement problem involves not only reconstructing houses and bridges but also establishing procedures to ensure the development of a cadastral information system and the upgrading of property registries and documentation. Huge numbers of refugees from Kosovo have had regional impacts on Albania and the Former Republic of Macedonia. In addition, the stream of refugees into unprepared areas has put sanitation and drinking water services in overcrowded refugee camps under enormous pressure.

There is no doubt that the crisis in the Balkans has had serious environmental impact and that there is an immediate need for a clean-up in order to avoid further risk to human health and the environment. The Yugoslav government can deal with some of the priorities, but it also requires help from outside. Whatever the political situation, international action must be taken to protect both people and nature. Response to this emergency situation has to be seen as part of a humanitarian effort.

The conflict in the Balkans has raised interesting questions about modern warfare and the attendant risk of heavy pollution when industrial facilities close to big cities are targeted. In the face of such huge risks to

human health and to the environment, it is now up to the international community to discuss these questions and to decide whether the rules of modern warfare should be updated.

Note

- 1 The final report, mission reports, photographs, maps and other documents can be seen at <http://www.grid.unep.ch/btf>

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