



'It is the Same Here as in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.' Serbians Suffer Long-term Effects of NATO Depleted Uranium Bombs

Akira Suemori

'It is the Same Here as in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.'
Serbians Suffer Long-term Effects of NATO Depleted Uranium Bombs

by Suemori Akira

Translator's Introduction: The manufacture of depleted uranium (DU) ammunition is a prototypical Cold War arms race story. The Pentagon reported in the 1970s that the Soviet military had developed armor plating for Warsaw Pact tanks that NATO ammunition couldn't penetrate, and began searching for material to make harder bullets, bombs, and shells. After testing various metals, ordnance researchers settled on depleted uranium, a low-level radioactive waste left over from making nuclear fuel and bombs. DU ammunition, which scorches through metal targets, is now supplied to arsenals in the U.S. and abroad which also continue to store "conventional" ammunition. DU shells, when fired, leave a radioactive trail of toxic dust that still lies in parts of Kuwait and Iraq where they were first fired in combat during the 1991 Gulf War. Prohibited from use in training anywhere overseas, it is restricted certain installations in the United States. Citing serious health risks, the Pentagon requires moon-suit type protective gear when approaching anything hit with DU ordnance.

Nevertheless, the American press revealed in 1996 that Marine Corps aircraft had been firing depleted uranium shells on their bombing range at Torishima Island, just off Okinawa in an important fishing ground. When Okinawans, particularly local fishermen, angrily protested over yet another act of negligence by the U.S. military that threatened their safety, welfare, and livelihood, a Marine Corps spokesman claimed that the radiation "amounts to only about what a color television set emits." By that time, however, Congressional hearings had reported that both veterans of the Gulf War and Iraqi civilians were suffering serious, long-term disabilities with depleted uranium as the suspected cause. They continue to suffer debilitating effects from radiation to this day. But that is hardly the end of the story.

Used not only in Iraq, NATO dropped approximately 30,000 depleted uranium bombs in air raids on Kosovo and elsewhere in Yugoslavia. Soldiers and civilians now suffer from cancer and other diseases.

Five years have now passed since NATO air attacks on Serbia and Montenegro in Yugoslavia. A confrontation in Kosovo between ethnic Albanians, who make up a majority, and a Serbian minority escalated into armed conflict between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and Serbian Security Forces. A "humanitarian intervention" relying on air power lasted 78 days. It was supposed to lead to stabilization, but riots erupted last March in Kosovo, now administered by the United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). The chances for resolution of this conflict remain remote.

The anguish of battlefield photographers

Nedejko Deretic (54) was a press photographer for the former state-operated Tanjug News Agency and recipient of a photography prize awarded by the United Nations. He had always enjoyed good health until he suddenly suffered a cerebral infarction five years ago. He has undergone continued rehabilitation since then, but suffered another in 2000. He can no longer run or move quickly, has trouble remembering things, and is increasingly irritable. Unable to continue the job he loved, he retired at age fifty from the company where he'd worked for eighteen years. A disability pension is his only income. His senior colleague, press photographer Milorad Dobricic, died last winter from cancer of the lymph glands. He was fifty-five. Another press photographer for Tanjug is undergoing chemotherapy for cancer of the lymph glands.

"All three were in the best of health and among our best news photographers, so they photographed the war the longest. Working for the state agency, they often accompanied the military for official coverage, and, whenever a bombing was reported, would hurry to the site within an hour," explained Dragan Milenkovic (57), former chief of Tanjug's photography section. During the 78 days of bombing, Deretic was in Kosovo a total of one month photographing the damage. "Weapons didn't kill me during the war," he says. "But I believe depleted uranium is what made me sick."

Decontamination has been slow and difficult.

NATO forces dropped about 30,000 depleted uranium bombs in 1999, leaving approximately ten tons of DU in Serbia and Montenegro. DU ammunition was first used in the 1991 Gulf War by U.S. and British forces. Ingestion by soldiers and local residents has been cited as the suspected cause of serious health problems. Yet it was more than one year before NATO officials revealed the locations where they said DU had been used. And, according to Colonel Predrag Minjlovic, there are obvious errors. "NATO indicated where pilots interviewed said they had dropped bombs, but these places were quite far from where the bombs landed." Large numbers of depleted uranium bombs remain in the soil where many penetrated some 1.5 meters underground in the mud. According to Colonel Minjlovic, this happened because, although DU bombs were used for their power to penetrate tank armor, they only hit a total of four or five tanks. All the others buried in the ground could easily have drifted in the rainwater. Efforts continue to remove them and the soil they've contaminated, but the job has been completed at only two of the 90 locations identified in a survey by Serbian and Montenegro authorities as the sites of 99 bombings. Now funds are running out, but Western countries have not responded positively to appeals for assistance. All that can be done is to cordon off the other 88 sites.

Depleted uranium ammunition was used mostly where the conflict was centered in Kosovo and in southern Serbia. I visited Bujanovas in southern Serbia where approximately 58,000 people live in the town and nearby villages. With antenna for telephone and television communications located there, the surrounding hills were targeted for bombing.

Radiation phobia

Dr. Milan Jovic has worked for more than fifteen years at a hospital in the center of town. "Since the bombings, cancers of the lungs, bones, and tongue have all increased with many children falling ill. The number of cases has risen at least 30 percent. Many more people are dying young. It is the same here as in Hiroshima and Nagasaki." Zorisa Markovic (58), a reporter, formerly with the Tanjug News Agency now with Balkan newspaper, has long covered health care issues. He estimates that "it will take more than ten years to determine accurately the effects of depleted uranium ammunition. When symptoms began appearing among Italian soldiers, there was an uproar in the Western European media, but in Serbia under economic sanctions there was no money to survey the health of residents. What is known is how much depleted uranium was dropped, and that cancer has increased since the bombings which are also thought to have caused weakened resistance to stress. Another problem is that many young physicians, who see no future here, have left for other countries."

The bombings targeted not only military installations, but also the economic infrastructure. They hit the oil refinery at Pancevo, 20 kilometers north of Belgrade, causing the release of dioxin poison. Deretic, the Tanjug photojournalist, rushed there after the bombing to film the damage. Zora Zunic (57), a researcher at the National Institute for the Study of Atomic Energy, emphasized the need to monitor the bombings' contamination of underground water. "At this point," he added, "their psychological effects in the form of radiation phobia are even more widespread than the physiological illnesses."

"Accident" sparks rioting

"No one can cross the bridge to bring people over here, or take them across to the other side," an officer of the United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) stated emphatically. The river running through the town of Mitrovica in northern Kosovo forms the border dividing the Albanian and Serbian ethnic districts. In March, 2004, the death of three Albanian boys in the village of Chabra, about eight kilometers west of Mitrovica, ignited protests among local residents. The worst two days of rioting since 1999 spread to other areas of Kosovo, taking the lives of nineteen people and causing some 4,000 to flee their homes. According to Georgi Kakuk, UNMIK press officer at Mitrovica district headquarters, "We have found no attacker, either a dog or a human suspect. This was most likely an accident." The boys' bereaved families don't buy his explanation. In Chabra I visited Cerkin Vesely (37), whose younger son had been nine when he died. "The investigation of their deaths as politically motivated has ended," he said with chagrin, dismissing the possibility that they were accidental. "The river's waters were high and cold at the time. No one was going there." His eldest son, who had managed to swim to safety, said that the boys had been chased by a Serbian with a dog. "Someone has to take the responsibility for finding them." The family is still in shock. They have not placed their son's photograph in the house, keeping it in a drawer at Mr. Vesely's workplace.

Guiding me around the village, he explained that "all the houses are the same style because they were rebuilt after the Serbians demolished them five years ago. Twenty-two villagers were killed, and five are still missing." He stared at the Serbian village a few hundred meters from the river where his son had died. Asked about the future of Kosovo, he replied, "Things in Kosovo will get better, if it becomes independent." As for the Serbians, they grow ever more apprehensive living under the present circumstances in Kosovo cut off from Serbia.

Families commute by train to the ruins of homes they were forced to flee

I visited the village of Zvecan, about three kilometers from Mitrovica, where Serbian civilians must now live as refugees from the March, 2004 rioting. After entering a building with brick siding, I met a family staying in a drab concrete room. The building had been under construction when it was hastily prepared to house refugees. There was no toilet or running water. Bozidar Antic (67) and his wife Gordana (67) came from the village of Svinjare, about three kilometers from Mitrovica. Approximately 180 Serbian and twenty Albanian families had lived there. But with the three children's deaths last March, Albanian protests spread throughout Kosovo and the NATO-led international Kosovo Force (KFOR) lost control of public safety.

"Albanians carrying weapons ran into the village from all sides. They started breaking the windows of our homes and throwing gasoline-soaked rags inside. The KFOR troops were there, but did nothing. Some wanted to mount an armed defense, but the U.N. had taken away all their weapons after the bombings. So we Serbians gathered in the center of the village after their attack, and escaped in a U.N. truck." As Mr. Antic told what had happened, his wife's eyes filled with tears. The family had been forced to flee, literally, with only the clothes on their backs. Three coffee cups and one saucer were among the only things left in the burnt ruins of their home. Still, they wanted to keep some remembrance of it, and had retrieved a pot with scorch holes from the ashes.

Though only a few kilometers away, going back to their village is far from easy. The only way is to take a train through Albanian territory, leaving and returning the same day. Mitrovica station is in an Albanian district, and Albanians board the train one stop before it at Zvecan. The glass in the train windows was replaced after the riots, but we can see new cracks made by stones thrown at the train as it passes through Albanian territory. Fearing the Albanians, Serbians try to travel to and from the village in groups. On board I met Lelja Radivojevic (86) who, nevertheless, rode the train alone. He had already gone back and forth about ten times. After arriving at the station where KFOR troops were standing, we climbed a narrow road between the unscathed houses of ethnic Albanians to reach the burnt remains of his home.

"I've lived almost ninety years, but what took so much work to build was reduced to ashes in a day. Some people coming to see the burnt ruins of their home might get upset, but I was born in this house so it calms me to come here." That's why he returns over and over again to the home that will never be like it was before, no matter how many times he comes to see it. He hadn't wanted to leave the day it burned down, but his eldest son came and took him away. "I want to stay to die here," he told me. His second son who had lived here with him died six years ago. "He was shot by an Albanian. The attack on our village had nothing to do with the death of those children. It was planned and organized by Albanian extremists." All the Serbians in the village whose houses were burned agree with him, and they deeply resent the blatant ineffectuality of the United Nations. With Serb and Albanian opinion clashing over the issue of independence, nothing bright can be seen in Kosovo's future. All that can be seen is the devastation inflicted on its residents from "humanitarian" bombings by countries who won't put their soldiers at risk on the ground.

This article appeared in Shukan Kinyobi, October 1, 2004, pp. 35-37. The article appeared at Japan Focus on February 6, 2005. Suemori Akira is a photojournalist.

Translated for Japan Focus by Steve Rabson, whose "Memories of Okinawa: Life and Times in the Greater Osaka Diaspora," appears in Laura

