

NATO's landmines and cluster bombs kill or maim 150 in Kosovo

By Keith Lee
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Over 150 people have been killed or maimed by landmines and unexploded munitions in Kosovo since the end of hostilities. The victims are the forgotten casualties of the NATO war against Yugoslavia.

A new study recently released by the World Health Organisation (WHO) reveals that the rate of injuries in Kosovo caused by such munitions since the end of the bombardment is the highest in the world. Some 71 percent of the victims are aged below 24 years old, and 95 percent are male.

"This rate is expected to remain high", said a WHO official injury prevention officer, Etienne Krug. "As the population returns to work in fields and collects firewood for winter we can expect many more similar maimings and deaths." Landmines killed four refugees in the first few days of returning home. The International Committee of the Red Cross has reported five to six injuries every day since the war ended.

Unexploded cluster bombs dropped by NATO are a major cause of injuries. NATO admitted that 10 percent of the bombs dropped had failed to explode, but said it would only help to remove these bombs if they were found on major roads.

Mr. Pieter Feith, NATO's director of crisis management, said at a meeting of United Nation agencies that the organisation would only mark landmines and unexploded ordinance "insofar as military security is concerned".

Cluster bombs are lethal "area impact" weapons that scatter more than 650 yellow containers of explosives over a range the size of a football pitch. Each "bomblet" contains up to 2,000 high-velocity shrapnel fragments. Paul Rogers, a professor at Bradford University's School of Peace Studies, has reported that their effect is "similar to a large number of miniature nail bombs exploding simultaneously".

The bombs are ostensibly used for military targets. But during the bombardment against Yugoslavia NATO used the munitions against civilians—such as the attack on a market in Nis, Southern Serbia—and against civilian institutions such as communication installations.

According to the organisation Human Rights Watch (HRW) these weapons have a huge dud rate: "For Operation Allied Force, the historical record and testing experience would tend to indicate that for every single CBU-87 antipersonnel bomb used there would be an average of some ten unexploded bomblets and for every RBL755, there will be an average of five unexploded bomblets.

"Bombing in Operation Allied Force was mostly from medium altitudes (circa 15,000 feet), raising important questions regarding the ability to control the collateral damage effects of the use of cluster bombs, and the number of dispersed unexploded bombs. It is also important to note that the experience of cluster bombs used in the Gulf War and other conflicts indicates the failure to fuse properly does not mean that submunitions on the ground are harmless. Cluster bomb submunitions, however fused, may explode at the slightest touch, even after extended periods of time."

The United States has more than 100 types of cluster bombs. Over 20,000 such weapons were dropped during the war against Yugoslavia. Half this total was dropped during the 1991 Gulf War. Iraq claims it has cleared over half a million unexploded weapons in urban areas of the country.

Cluster bombs have led to large numbers of casualties in Iraq and Kuwait after the war. HRW estimates that more than 1,600 civilians (400 Iraqi and 1,200 Kuwaiti) were killed and over 2,500 injured in the first two years after the end of the Gulf War from accidents

involving submunitions. "A particular problem for the civilian population, particularly children, was the very design of the submunitions. Toy-size bombs designed to kill tanks and soldiers also appear as white lawn darts, green baseballs, orange-stripped soda cans. These attractively arrayed and intriguing unexploded submunitions proved deadly to children. Kuwaiti doctors stated that some 60 percent of the victims of unexploded ordnance injuries were children aged fifteen and under."

Cluster bombs can be dropped from the air, fired from artillery guns and by multiple rocket launchers. The ATACMS missile launcher can dispense 955 bomblets. There was widespread speculation that the US was prepared to use the CBU-89 Gator scatterable mine. The US government said it reserved the right to use this inherently indiscriminate weapon should the need arise. The Gator has been banned under the 1997 Mine Ban treaty, which the US refused to sign.

The use of indiscriminate munitions by NATO coincided with a change in its war strategy. At the beginning of the war NATO had expressly said it would use only precision guided weapons in order to downgrade Serbia's military machine. Its increasing resort to less discriminating ordnance against civilian areas and targets was aimed at spreading fear in the Serbian population.

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