

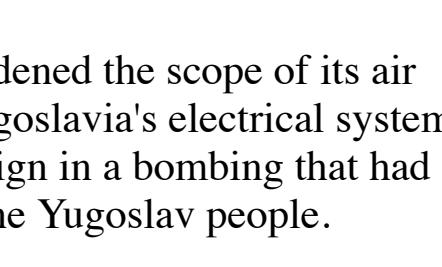
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THE OVERVIEW

NATO Air Attacks on Power Plants Cross a Threshold

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By MICHAEL R. GORDON

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- NATO broadened the scope of its air strikes on Monday and attacked Yugoslavia's electrical system, crossing a threshold in the 40-day campaign in a bombing that had an immediate and widespread effect on the Yugoslav people.

NATO officials said the aim of the attacks, which plunged Belgrade into darkness Monday for several hours, was to disrupt military communications, command centers and air defense systems. Special bombs containing strands of carbon were used to short-circuit transformers without destroying them.

NATO planes have attacked bridges, oil refineries and other targets in raids that have affected civilians. But until Monday they had refrained from striking the electrical system. The alliance has repeatedly insisted its fight is with President Slobodan Milosevic, not with the Yugoslav people.

"The fact that lights went out across 70 percent of the country shows that NATO has its finger on the light switch now," said NATO spokesman Jamie Shea. "We can turn the power off whenever we need to and whenever we want to."

Despite a flurry of diplomacy Monday, NATO says it needs to maintain the military pressure on Milosevic to withdraw his forces from Kosovo and accept the demands of the allies.

Having deferred serious consideration of using ground troops, the alliance is relying on bombing attacks as its main source of leverage on Milosevic. And in recent days the allies have expanded both the range and intensity of the air strikes. In addition to attacking the electricity network, NATO warplanes are flying more low-level bombing raids against Yugoslav forces in Kosovo, a tactic that until now had been ruled out as too dangerous. Pentagon officials said Monday. The lower-altitude runs, coupled with strikes against a wider array of targets, a spell of clearer weather and a stepped-up Yugoslav defense, has greatly increased the risk to allied pilots. Over the weekend three NATO fighter-bombers were hit by ground fire. One of them crashed, but the pilot was rescued.

Though NATO insisted that its attacks on the electrical system would frustrate the Yugoslav and Serbian military, it was not immediately clear whether the forces had been hampered. The allies also say the attacks will not cut power to hospitals and other vital civilian services because they can turn to back-up generators powered by diesel fuel.

Still, Milosevic may soon face a choice: whether to use limited fuel supplies for civilian generators or devote that fuel to the military.

"We realize the inconvenience that may be caused to the Yugoslav people, but it up to Milosevic to decide how he wants to use his remaining energy resources: on his tanks or on his people," Shea said.

While NATO sought to downplay the effect of the strikes on civilians, the raids remain politically sensitive.

Critics say the latest attacks on the electrical systems will not do lasting damage to Serbian forces because military systems are likely to be restarted again once the carbon is swept up and the transformers restarted.

But if the attacks are repeated, critics say, they may force the shut down of plants for water purification and sewage treatment, undercutting NATO's assertion that it is not at war with the Yugoslav people, and undermining public support for the allied military campaign in the West.

"It will take a consistent effort to take out the national electrical grid," said William Arkin, a military consultant to Human Rights Watch. "That would have an onerous effect on civilians."

The attacks on Yugoslavia's electrical system were directed at five large installations that distribute power, including one at Obrenovac, which transfers power to Western Serbia and a transformer at Nis, which NATO says provides power to the Yugoslav 3rd Army in Kosovo.

Other electrical transformers that were attacked are located at Bajina Basta, Drinov, Novi Sad.

NATO officials emphasized that allied planes had not destroyed the installations. Instead, they dropped "soft bombs" that spewed strands of carbon, short-circuiting the electrical transmission equipment. It was as if the transmission equipment had been hit by a lightning strike.

The Pentagon declined to give details about the new bomb, saying it was highly classified. A similar technique, however, was used during the 1991 Persian Gulf war when sea-launched cruise missiles carrying spools of carbon filament were fired at Iraq's electrical grid.

Electricity has long been one of the most politically sensitive of targets. Early in the Persian Gulf war, Iraq's electrical system was attacked and experts still debate the military usefulness of the raids and their effects on Iraqi civilians.

Allied war planners insisted those attacks on the Iraqi electrical grid were needed to hamper Iraq's air defenses, especially during the initial stages of that air campaign. While many Iraqi military units had back-up generators, relying on them in the early days of the war could be disruptive.

Reflecting the caution with which NATO diplomats have overseen the gradual escalation of the air campaign against Yugoslavia, however, attacks against electrical transformers and distribution centers have not taken place until the sixth week of bombing.

Still, the diplomats insisted Monday, they were needed to disrupt military communications systems, hamper military headquarters and interfere with air defense systems.

"Command and control or a computer in military hands without electricity simply becomes a mass of metal, wire and plastic," Shea said Monday.

NATO spokesman declined to say whether the strikes would be carried out regularly, but they suggested that they would need to be repeated.

Diplomats also indicated that they wanted to limit the effect on civilians. NATO also does not want to completely disable it, according to NATO's military spokesman, German Maj. Gen. Walter Jertz.

Jertz said that Yugoslav authorities had restored much of the electricity in a matter of hours. Reports from Belgrade Monday night, however, indicated that many people were spending a second night without electricity as they did the previous night.

Montenegro as saving 17 people. One report quoted 21 officials killed.

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MONDAY'S DEVELOPMENTS	
COMBAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NATO attacked Yugoslavia's electrical power grid, knocking out power across much of the country for hours, with new "soft bombs" that short-circuited transmission equipment. • Serbian media said NATO warplanes bombed a bus full of civilians in Montenegro, killing 17 people and injuring 40. NATO said it had no information on the incident.
DIPLOMACY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President Clinton met with Russia's envoy for the Balkans, Viktor S. Chernomyrdin, to discuss a proposal for ending NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia. Clinton said "we could have a bombing pause" if President Slobodan Milosevic would accept NATO demands. • The Rev. Jesse Jackson presented President Clinton with a letter from President Milosevic.
PRISONERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three American soldiers released from captivity in Yugoslavia were reunited with their families.

KOSOVO IN TRANSITION

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