

ECO WARS

ECOCIDE IN THE GULF?

BY ZOLTAN GROSSMAN

THE WORLD has been horrified by the ecological devastation resulting from the Gulf War. On the weekend of January 24-27, Iraq's release of oil from a Kuwaiti facility caused a massive flaming oil slick along the Gulf coast, and threatened the Saudi water supply. Saddam Hussein's alleged "scorched water strategy" was called "kinda sick" by President Bush and the U.S. Air Force proclaimed itself the guardian of the environment by bombing the facility's valves.

But wait a minute. U.S. condemnation of Iraq's oil spill somehow implies that U.S. forces have not been deliberately targeting the environment. In fact, both sides have seen the destruction of the environment—and thus of the health of the civilian population—as a mission objective in the Gulf War.

Bush's claim that U.S. surgical strikes are not targeting civilians is directly contradicted by his choice of sites to destroy. Civilians don't have to be directly hit by air strikes in order for many civilians to die. The targets have included water purification plants, water desalinization plants, oil rigs and refineries, nuclear reactors and laboratories, chemical plants, and biological facilities. It is virtually impossible for civilians to have not been contaminated with germs, chemicals, or radiation in the air or water as a result of these bombings.

Why don't we know more about the effect of the bombing campaign? The interests of the U.S. and Iraqi leadership coincide in covering up the number of civilian casualties. For the U.S. military, a high civilian death toll would be bad for public relations; for the Iraqi military, it would be bad for public morale. Like in World War II, we may not know the true extent of the carnage until after the war is over.

To see the disastrous impact of bombing of the civilian population, one only has to look at a U.S. Air Force Tactical Pilotage Chart of central Iraq. Thin strips of green follow the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, converging in a larger green patch in Iraq's heartland around Baghdad. This dense-

ly populated fertile region is surrounded by wetlands, corresponding to the ancient extent of the Persian Gulf. The wetlands, in turn, are surrounded on all sides by desert. The region's biosphere is reliant on a very thin lifeline, and it is along that lifeline that the most contaminants have been released by the bombings.

While much attention has been paid to Iraq's destruction of Kuwaiti oil facilities, less has been paid to the U.S. bombing of Iraqi oil refineries, rigs, tankers, and other targets, resulting in widespread spills. At the same time, bombers have knocked out the civilian water supply to major cities like Baghdad (with a population of three million) and Basra, and bombed water purification plants. Civilians are reliant on treated water from the two major waterways. Foreign worker refugees have reported that Baghdad civilians are now drawing water directly from the Tigris, and that signs of water-borne diseases (such as acute diarrhea) are appearing in children.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

IT IS NOT known what kind of contaminants might have leaked into the water supply from the destruction of chemical and biological facilities. Iraq has used chemical weapons on two fronts—mustard gas against Iranian troops, and nerve gas against Kurdish civilians. At least 11 Iraqi sites have been bombed because of the possibility they may be producing bio-chemical warfare agents. But is the cure worse than the disease? When a small section of Union Carbide's Bhopal fertilizer plant leaked in 1984, more than 2,000 Indians died from inhaling methyl isocyanate gas. What is happening to the surrounding civilian population where Iraqi bio-chemical plants are being deliberately set ablaze by U.S. bombs?

Among the targeted facilities have been a fertilizer plant in Basra (Iraq's second largest city, with a population of 371,000) and the Quaim phosphate mine near Syria (organophosphates are a key ingredient in both fertilizers and nerve gas). Also on the bombing list

have been an ethylene plant in Musayyab (pop. 16,000), and a facility ion Fallujah (pop. 36,000), both along the Euphrates River. Along the Tigris River, bombers hit a plant that may have made nerve gas precursors in Sammarra (pop. 25,000), the Salman PaK facility which allegedly made biological warfare agents, and a facility in Bayji (pop. 7,000). One CNN reporter described one of the burning chemical plants as sending off "green flames." All told, at least 600,000 Iraqis live in towns (not including Baghdad) that may have been covered by toxic gases or germ clouds from the bombings, where no foreign reporters are present.

A similar threat faces civilians living near Iraqi nuclear facilities destroyed by B-52 strikes—the first successful strikes against "hot" nuclear facilities ever in warfare. Before the war, Iraq was allegedly engaged in building a nuclear device with success anywhere from one to ten years away, depending on who you talked to. When the Israeli Air Force bombed the Osirak atomic reactor within the Tuwaitha nuclear complex near Baghdad a decade ago, radioactive materials were not present within the facility. Yet before the U.S. destruction of two Tuwaitha reactors, the facility used enriched uranium, which had been recently inspected by the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The U.S. refused to accept the IAEA's finding that no nuclear material had been diverted for military use.) The SAAD-16 centrifugal uranium enrichment plant was also bombed near Mosul. Iraq's third largest city, whose population of 293,000 includes many Kurdish Muslims and Arab Christians, and a nuclear facility was bombed in nearby Erbil (pop. 107,000).

The day the bombing started, nuclear expert Leonard Spektor warned in the *New York Times* that although bombs could not trigger a Chernobyl-style catastrophe, they could result in radiological releases from the reactors, labs, and waste storage sites. Radioactivity would migrate down the Tigris, or be carried in smoke as fallout. Ominously, Spektor wrote that Sad-

dam Hussein could use contamination as a justification for unleashing his remaining arsenal of "dirty weapons."

It's not only that bombed Iraqi facilities could release chemical gases and radioactivity, or cause epidemics among civilians and troops. Conventional bombing also may have already detonated some Iraqi chemical weapons, and Iraqi counterstrikes could likewise damage Western chemical or nuclear weapons. Whatever the scenario, it is hard to imagine the outcry that would erupt throughout the world—especially in Islamic nations—once the facts are known. Instead of being hailed as humanity's protector against weapons of mass destruction, President Bush would be vilified as carrying out the same forms of mass extermination he condemns. If that's his idea of "surgical strikes," I don't want the U.S. Air Force to repair my hernia.

Double Standard

A CERTAIN HYPOCRISY permeates the current debate around weapons of mass destruction. The United States is the only country to have used nuclear weapons in warfare, and has threatened their use over a dozen times since (including President Eisenhower's 1958 threat against Iraq if it carried out plans to invade Kuwait). The U.S. also used chemical weapons by spreading Agent Orange over Indochinese forests and croplands, in the process poisoning untold numbers of civilians and U.S. soldiers. Yet President Bush is appointing himself as the guardian against Iraqi chemical arms and potential nuclear arms.

Bush does not apply the same criteria to Israel, which the CIA confirms as possessing an arsenal of atomic bombs, and whose officials recently admitted possessing chemical arms. Iraq has said that its weapons of mass destruction were being built in response to the Israeli program, and as a deterrent against a repeat of the 1981 Tuwaitha raid. (Who doubts that one of Iraq's retaliatory targets is Israel's Dimona nuclear complex?) Though Iraq's capability has been destroyed, it is only a matter of time before another Islamic nation tries to counter Israeli weapons.

Instead of destroying the weaponry of one side in the Arab-Israeli dispute,



causing untold destruction, doesn't it make sense to initiate regional disarmament? All facilities in the Middle East making weapons of mass destruction could be dismantled under UN supervision, and the region enshrined in treaties as a zone free of nuclear, radioactive, and biological arms of any country. By proposing such an agreement, the U.S. could have disarmed Saddam Hussein without resorting to an air assault, but it chose not to in order to preserve Israel's strategic advantage. Such treaties could provide a precedent for other world regions where border disputes could all too easily slip into technological genocide, and perhaps even provide an example for the military superpowers themselves.

Whose Bodybags?

THE IDEA OF an intensive bombing campaign, Bush has said, is to shorten the war so it won't be "like Vietnam." Maybe I've missed something over the years, but for some reason I thought that the Vietnam War wasn't wrong because it was long. I thought it was wrong because many hundreds of thousands of civilians and over 50,000 U.S. troops died in a war that made no sense at all. When President Bush says that the Gulf War won't be like Vietnam, I fear what he means is that as many people could be killed in a seven-month war in the Gulf as

were killed in seven years in Vietnam. A war's short length can be made up by its high intensity. The technology of war today included such conventional weapons as air-fuel explosives, which ignite flammable gases with a shock effect approaching that of a tactical atomic explosion. Such weapons don't even include the possible use of chemical weapons, germ warfare, or tactical battlefield nuclear weapons such as the Neutron Bomb.

Bush's rationale is that initial reliance on air power is weakening Iraq militarily without a high U.S. casualty rate. The strategy echoes the Nixon administration's switch from a ground war to an air war in Vietnam, to placate the peace movement's outcry against American troops coming home in bodybags. The result was that more bombs were dropped on Vietnam than were dropped in all of World War II, and Vietnamese civilian deaths increased at the same time U.S. combat deaths decreased. We generally didn't see the Vietnamese, Laotian, or Cambodian bodybags, nor have we seen the slain Lebanese, Libyans, Grenadians, or Panamanians killed in more recent interventions. Bush, like Nixon, takes it for granted that Americans have been conditioned not to accept "enemy" civilians as human beings, and would accept their high death toll as "collateral damage." A military dictionary defined "military target" as "any person, place, or thing which gives or tends to give comfort to the enemy."

PEACE ACTIVISTS who focus on the prospect of American deaths can unknowingly lend credence to the bombing strategy, resulting in a larger civilian death toll. In the Vietnam War and World War II, U.S. bombing hardened the "enemy" civilian support for their governments. The 1990s antiwar movement has to be more mature and less easily fooled than its 1960s counterparts. Either we accept Iraqi civilians as human beings, or we don't. Either we defend them as we would our own families, or we acquiesce in their slaughter. Z

Zolton Grossman is a Wisconsin-based researcher of military interventions and is the outreach director of the National Committee Against Registration and the Draft.