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International News

Hospital bombing causes civilian deaths

By Candice Hughes
The Associated Press

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia — NATO missiles killed at least 16 people when they smashed into a hospital and a retirement home Monday in Yugoslavia, said Serb officials, amid growing concern about civilian casualties from the alliance's bombing campaign.

The alliance acknowledged striking a military barracks and an ammunition storage area in the area around Surdulica, 220 miles southeast of Belgrade, but would not confirm hitting the civilian sites and the reports of casualties.

Condemning the "murdering of civilians" in Serbia, President Slobodan Milosevic said the latest attacks endangered fragile peace efforts, which continue this week with talks with the Finnish president. Russia's Balkans envoy also announced plans to meet again this week with Milosevic.

The Yugoslav government reiterated that it accepts principles set forth by the Group of Eight major powers for ending the Kosovo conflict. But Milosevic's latest statement still fell short of Western demands for the makeup of a peacekeeping force in Kosovo.

Alliance officials insisted there will be "no negotiations" with Belgrade, which they said must halt the violence in Kosovo, withdraw its forces from the province and allow NATO troops into Kosovo to police the peace for ethnic Albanians.

In Washington, National Security Council spokesman Michael Hammer expressed skepticism that Milosevic is serious about peace. "Everybody's wondering whether we're on the edge of a breakthrough," Hammer said. "I think it's a bit premature."

The European Union on Monday also demanded that Milosevic translate his words into action and show an "unambiguous and verifiable" commitment to a Western plan for Kosovo.

NATO, despite being put on the defensive again over its targeting practices, pressed ahead with its escalated air campaign. In Kosovo, U.S. A-10 "Warthog" jets struck Serb forces clashing with ethnic Albanian rebels in the hills along the Albanian border.

Belgrade, the Yugoslav capital, suffered another blackout Monday evening shortly after air-raid sirens signaled a new round of NATO attacks. The private Beta news agency reported that two transformer stations outside Belgrade had been struck for the second time in less than a week, causing the outage.

Western journalists taken to Sur-

dulica by Serb authorities saw a scene of devastation, with 11 bodies lying under sheets outside the shattered medical complex and four others, those of elderly women, on stretchers in front of the retirement home. A human hand was visible, protruding from the rubble.

Rescue workers were still pulling bodies from the rubble at midafternoon, more than a dozen hours after the attack. Survivors told of four blasts shortly after a plane passed over the complex on the city's outskirts, just after midnight.

Bombs struck the main hospital building housing Serb refugees from Croatia and a retirement home.

According to Yugoslav authorities, two missiles hit the main building of the Special Hospital for Tuberculosis and Pulmonary Diseases. Two other missiles struck a retirement home within the complex, where 35 elderly people were living.

The explosions crushed a wing of the hospital, stripping off the tops of towering pine trees and scorching them.

"From the wall, the ceiling, everything fell on me," said Mica Pjevac, a Serb refugee from Croatia. "I thought it was the end of my life."

Surdulica was the scene of an errant missile strike April 27, which killed at least 15 people. NATO said at the time that a laser-guided missile had veered off course from its intended target, an army barracks.

In a separate attack, Serb state media reported 10 people were killed and at least 20 were wounded Monday when NATO missiles slammed into the central Serbian city of Novi Pazar. The report could not immediately be confirmed.

The alliance has acknowledged killing civilians in its air campaign, now in its third month, but insists all such casualties are unintentional.

In Brussels, NATO spokesman Col. Konrad Freytag insisted that "all munitions hit the planned aiming points" in the Surdulica area and the alliance could not confirm reports of casualties.

The attack came a day after 11 civilians were reported killed when NATO missiles sent a bridge in central Serbia crashing into a river.

In a report Monday about civilian casualties, The New York Times quoted refugees in Albania as saying Serb soldiers used 700 Kosovo Albanians as human shields. The refugees were herded into a warehouse in a southern Kosovo village hours before a May 13 NATO attack that Serb officials and survivors said killed more than 80 people, the paper quoted refugees as saying.

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