

Harsh Reality Under The Bombs

Author: [an independent](#)

Belgrade's bravado in the wake of NATO's early air strikes disappeared as the reality of daily bombing set in.

After more than 70 days of escalating bombing, the defiance and bravado with which Belgrade greeted the NATO air strikes have all but disappeared.

Instead of singing and dancing on bridges and publicly pledging unending loyalty to Serbia's supreme leader and heroic military, Belgraders are forced to adapt to life with intermittent power and water supplies. They ask: "How much longer must this go on?" "Why do we have to put up with such conditions?"

Despite many casualties and massive destruction, the city simulated normal life for the first two months of bombing, refusing to face reality, and living off its reserves of patriotism and anger.

But apathy is taking hold of the inhabitants of the Yugoslav capital, especially among those who live in high-rise apartment blocks, the parents of young children and those who suffer from chronic illnesses. Trams and trolley buses are eerily empty, people hurry along the streets with pained expressions on their faces, and the queues for bread, cooking oil, sugar and cigarettes grow ever longer.

At the beginning of the third month of NATO's bombing campaign, the power plants Obrenovac A and Drmno, which supply Belgrade with electricity, were targeted and sustained heavy damage. Since then, the city has been receiving about 6 per cent of its normal power supply.

As a result, much of the city has to do without power. Even bakeries and health centres--including the fourteenth-floor Institute for Mother and Child--are often without water and electricity.

"Life is horrible!" says Jovanka Blagojevic, a clerk from block 45 in New Belgrade who lives on the eighth floor, with a sick mother and two children. "There is no electricity, water, bread or milk," she says. "How can we go to the shops, come back to the flat, brush our teeth, wash dishes or prepare food for children?"

"Everything is a problem, especially in the evenings, in candlelight. We are forced to spend our last reserves of food and money," she says.

Most Belgrade families have in recent years become used to privations and had prepared for the possibility of a lengthy bombing campaign. Many equipped themselves with petroleum lamps and small gas- or alcohol-powered camping stoves when NATO first threatened air strikes in October last year.

Otherwise, all the necessary accoutrements for life without power--batteries, candles and torches--are on sale in improvised stalls in the streets. The cheapest lighting burns cooking oil. Belgrade's flea market has been doing a roaring trade in camping stoves, small radios and (since digital telephones do not work without electricity) traditional telephones.

Newspapers are full of articles offering "survival tips" which housewives cut out and share with their friends. These include pieces on how to cure illnesses without medicines, using herbs, teas and acupuncture, as well as advice how to prepare meals without electricity or gas.

Other articles have examined traditional methods of preserving meat without freezers--by soaking it fat--and how to make bread last longer--by drying it in the oven at 100 degrees, when there is electricity.

The results of the first war-time opinion poll, conducted by Belgrade's Institute for Policy Studies at the beginning of May, indicate that 71 per cent of citizens suffer privations caused by shortages of certain goods.

The poll also determined that more than a half of those officially in employment are not working at present, or have lost their jobs as a result of the war. It also found that 42 per cent of citizens over 18 have had to leave their homes to move to a safer location.

As many as 72 per cent of Serbia's citizens have been directly inconvenienced by destruction to bridges and roads. And 96 per cent suffer from psychological problems caused by worry for their own future and the future of their families.

Belgrade's newest graffiti reflects the changing mood of the city. Although NATO, US President Bill Clinton and the West are still perceived as the principal enemies, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic is once again the butt of much vitriol.

"Slobo, why did you destroy Vukovar?" has just been scrawled on the wall of a building in the centre of Belgrade. It is if Belgraders are slowly beginning to recognise the enormity of the crime committed in that once-beautiful Croatian town which was systematically levelled by the Yugoslav army in 1991.

After Milosevic's Beli Dvor residence was hit by a NATO bomb, more graffiti appeared on walls throughout the Yugoslav capital complaining: "Slobo, when we needed you most you were not at home."

The author is an independent journalist from Belgrade whose identity has been concealed.

Location: [Serbia](#)

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