

## What is Precision Bombing?

By Arjun Makhijani

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Hello. I'm Arjun Makhijani with the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research.. This week's commentary is about precision bombing, which has become a central element in U.S. war strategy and seems likely to be used in case of another war on Iraq. The term "precision bombing" seems to imply that if it works, the damage is limited to the intended target and that the bombing is therefore somehow acceptable. My colleagues Sriram Gopal and Nicole Deller at the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research looked at this question by studying two factories that were bombed during the 1999 NATO-Yugoslavia war – an industrial complex housing chemical plants and an oil refinery in Pancevo and a car factory in Kragujevac.

The precision bombs found their targets accurately. They destroyed the factories. The bombing also released 1-2 dichloroethane, PCBs, mercury and other toxic chemicals into the environment, some of it into a canal leading into one of Europe's greatest rivers, the fabled Danube. The study found that civilians living near the targets may be exposed to elevated health risks from the contamination, some of which will persist for a long time.

The study, *Precision Bombing, Widespread Harm*, calls into question the legal rationale used by NATO and the United States to justify the bombings. It found that, even when the intent is to minimize civilian damage, the choice of targets may still be illegal under international law. The laws of war prohibit weapons that cause excessive injury to civilians and damage to property. Hence, destroying industrial facilities that hold little military value but whose destruction can cause serious severe health and environmental damage also appears to violate international law. The Pentagon responded to IEER's request for information about targeting rationale with 42 completely blank pages.

The idea of the rule of law is one of the most important achievements in the entire history of human political affairs. It was the United States that gave the first and possibly still the most important expression to this idea – the U.S. Constitution. Before the United States uses weapons and methods that are illegal or of dubious legality again, should there not be a serious public debate about that? In an age where nuclear ambitions are becoming more widespread, should the United States be advertising by its actions that the end justifies the means? Or would we do better by remembering Constitution in the context of the example set for us by the lives of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi?

You can download the report and related information from IEER's website, [www.ieer.org](http://www.ieer.org). This is Arjun Makhijani.

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