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Hurricane Katrina

Lessons for Army Planning and Operations

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Summary

Hurricane Katrina was a catastrophic domestic emergency that, in its deaths and destruction, had many of the possible characteristics of future terrorist attacks, especially those that could occur simultaneously in different parts of the United States or involve the use of weapons of mass destruction. It thus provides a case study that will help further our understanding of the problems that can arise during the nation's response to such an event. Such a case study will also help to determine how the United States might better prepare to respond to future catastrophic domestic emergencies.

The efforts undertaken by civilian and military organizations in response to Hurricane Katrina were historically unprecedented. But, as the many "lessons-learned" reports generated to date have documented, the response was tragically inadequate. Having researched what happened, we focused our analysis on the problems that affected the outcome of the response to Hurricane Katrina in a major way. The single most important problem was the speed with which the nation's local, state, and federal civilian organizations were overwhelmed. However, problems also arose in the military response in the critical first few days of the response, problems that contributed to the delays in evacuating the Superdome and convention center in New Orleans and in accomplishing search and rescue operations throughout the storm-ravaged areas of Louisiana and Mississippi.

The lessons-learned reports focus on the time it took for both the National Guard and active land forces to arrive in the region. Examining the considerations that influenced the size and timing of these

deployments, we found that the experience of Hurricane Katrina suggests that the characteristics of the National Guard response to that event may be close to the kind of response the nation can expect from the Guard in such future emergencies, given the reliance on volunteers among those guardsmen responding from outside the stricken states and on air (commercial and military) and ground transportation.

Many considerations lay behind the timing of President Bush's decision to deploy active-duty Army and Marine land forces. The primary reasons this decision was not reached sooner were the administration's belief that the flow of National Guard forces would be sufficient and its reluctance to have active-duty forces involved in the deteriorating law-enforcement environment. Even had the decision to deploy active-duty forces been made at the time of hurricane landfall, the time lines for readying and transporting these forces would still not have had them on the scene and engaged in response operations until after the evacuations of the New Orleans Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center had been completed.

Another problem in the military's response to Hurricane Katrina highlighted in the lessons-learned reports is the lack of a unified command and control (C^2) structure, specifically the separation of the command structures for operations involving both National Guard and active-duty forces. We examined the characteristics of the multiple and complex C^2 structures employed during the Hurricane Katrina response efforts and could not find a direct link with the speed and efficiency of the military response.

Once we developed an understanding of the events that occurred during the response to Hurricane Katrina, we turned to ways the Army's response to future catastrophic domestic emergencies could be made quicker and more robust. We identified a number of steps that could be taken to enhance a future National Guard response on the part of states and urge their adoption: Give the National Guard the federal mission to conduct homeland security (HLS) activities,¹ as is

¹ By "HLS," we mean military activities in support of civilian organizations, i.e., those involved in preventing and responding to terrorist attacks as well as in responding to other kinds of domestic emergencies, including natural disasters and civil disturbances. These

the case today in counterdrug operations; make *each* National Guard unit capable of rapid deployment; plan on having units ready to fill in for those deployed overseas; prepare governors to call up their units involuntarily to state active duty for out-of-state emergencies; and plan to use the Air National Guard, or prepare plans to use commercial airlines, to transport predesignated National Guard units to out-of-state emergencies.

At a regional level, we see the need for steps that would dedicate National Guard units to HLS and have them work closely with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other civilian organizations. The creation of ten standing homeland security task forces, as recommended in our earlier report *Army Forces for Homeland Security*, deserves support and is in line with the Army Campaign Plan's regional approach to meeting HLS requirements in the National Guard.²

The Army's Force Generation (ARFORGEN) process, whereby units move through a structured and predictable process of unit readiness over time, offers additional possibilities to improve the military's readiness to respond to a catastrophic event, and these possibilities deserve serious consideration. Some National Guard units could be given HLS as their mission, with their training and readiness tailored accordingly. To achieve a quick and robust response to catastrophic emergencies, National Guard and active-duty Army units in the Available pool could be designated for an HLS mission. While in the ARFORGEN process these units would be designated as "theater committed" and planned for use within the United States, they could still be deployed overseas if needed.

The issue of how to structure the military C² arrangements will always emerge in responses to domestic emergencies. Given the obstacles to deciding on a structure in advance of events and the drawbacks

activities encompass what the Department of Defense calls Defense Support to Civil Authorities (DSCA).

² See U.S. Army, Army Campaign Plan, Annex F (ARFORGEN Implementation Plan) to Army Campaign Plan Change 4, July 27, 2006, p. F-4-C-7. For a more detailed description of characteristics of these homeland security task forces, including the training, personnel, legal issues, and command and control, see Lynn E. Davis et al., *Army Forces for Homeland Security*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-221-A, 2004, pp. 31–37.

of having the structure emerge slowly over time (as happened in the response to Hurricane Katrina), we urge the adoption of an approach that would prepare decisionmakers to quickly select from a set of pre-defined alternative C² structures designed to give the lead to federal or state task forces, depending on the characteristics of the emergency.

Some of these recommendations will cost money, but what is most needed is a change from past practices and in perspectives on the role and responsibility of the military in catastrophic domestic emergencies. Having military forces trained and ready for homeland security is no less important than for contingencies overseas.