

# Learning the Lessons of Hurricane Katrina for the U.S. Army

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**Abstract**

Hurricane Katrina caused enormous physical destruction and human suffering, but it also offers lessons about how the nation can better prepare for natural disasters and large-scale terrorist attacks. The military and civilian response was unprecedented but inadequate. Several actions could enhance future military disaster-response efforts: give the National Guard the federal mission to conduct homeland security activities, designate National Guard and active-duty units for homeland security in the Army's unit-readiness process, design a regional approach in the National Guard by creating ten National Guard standing homeland security task forces, and implement an approach to command and control structure that prepares decisionmakers to select from a set of predefined alternatives.

Hurricane Katrina exacted an enormous toll in death, destruction, and suffering. But tragic as the effects of the storm were, they do give the nation an opportunity to become better prepared not only for natural disasters but also for terrorist attacks. Such attacks, especially those involving weapons of mass destruction, could require responses similar in nature and scale to those demanded by Katrina. Researchers from the RAND Arroyo Center took a case-study approach to uncover the lessons from the U.S. military's response to Hurricane Katrina, drawing on published reports as well as detailed information describing the operations of civilian and military organizations throughout the country. They documented how and why problems arose in the military's response, with an eye to the

design of future Army policies. The results of their analyses appear in *Hurricane Katrina: Lessons for Army Planning and Operations*.

**What the Lessons Learned Showed**

Analyses of the many lessons learned showed that the nation's response to Katrina was both impressive and unprecedented. It was also inadequate. Focusing on the issues that had a major effect on the responses to the hurricane, Arroyo researchers found that although the most important problem was the speed with which local, state, and federal civilian organizations were overwhelmed, the military response also had problems, particularly in the critical first few days. Researchers also concluded that absent changes in how the Army plans for, responds to, and operates in catastrophic domestic emergencies, future responses will not look very different. However, the research also shows that the Army can take steps to make its response quicker and more robust.

**What the Army Should Do**

The National Guard is the military force of first resort for domestic emergencies and played a central role in the response to Hurricane Katrina. Accordingly, many of the recommendations pertain to the National Guard. Arroyo researchers recommend state governors and adjutants general do the following to improve the response of their units in out-of-state emergencies:

- Give the National Guard the federal mission to conduct homeland security activities, as is the case today in counterdrug operations.
- Prepare National Guard units for rapid response not only within their states but also for emergencies in other states.
- Designate units to fill in during disaster response operations for National Guard units deployed overseas.

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- Prepare the governors to call up units involuntarily.
- Plan on using the Air National Guard or commercial airlines to fly designated units to out-of-state emergencies.

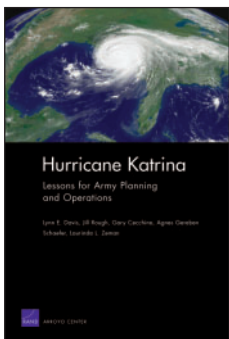
However, a National Guard focus on preparations within and among states will not be sufficient. The National Guard needs to adopt a regional focus in its preparations for catastrophic domestic emergencies. The researchers recommend the creation of ten regional task forces that would work closely with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other civilian agencies.

For both active-duty and National Guard units, the Army should take advantage of the ARFORGEN process (the structured method by which units move through a series of scripted steps to improve their readiness) to enhance its ability to respond to catastrophic domestic emergencies. All units in the ARFORGEN Ready pool should be given more extensive homeland security training, and then some active-

duty and Guard units in the Available pool could be assigned a homeland security mission. The number given the homeland security mission would be defined in light of currently available civilian responders.

Multiple command and control structures complicated the military response to Katrina. Given the uncertainty of future events, designating a single command and control arrangement is neither feasible nor wise. A set of predefined alternatives could be designed to give the lead to federal or state task forces, thereby enabling decisionmakers to make a quick selection depending on the circumstances of the emergency.

These recommendations do not come without cost. But what is most needed is a change from past practices and in perspectives on the military's role in catastrophic domestic emergencies. Hurricane Katrina came with ample warning. A terrorist attack would not. The need for trained and ready military forces to deal with homeland security is no less important than for contingencies overseas. ■



This research brief describes work done for the RAND Arroyo Center documented in *Hurricane Katrina: Lessons for Army Planning and Operations*, by Lynn E. Davis, Jill Rough, Gary Cecchine, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, and Laurinda L. Zeman, MG-603-A (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG603/>), 2007, 106 pp., \$23.00, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4167-8. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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