

Behind Poor Katrina Response, A Long Chain of Weak Links

Changing Structure of FEMA, Emphasis on Terrorism Contributed to Problems

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(See Corrections & Amplifications item below.)

Just two weeks ago, five state emergency managers brought a tough message to a meeting in Washington with Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and his top deputies.

- [Economy Shows Resilience in Face of Jolt](#)
- [Draining New Orleans Could Take Months](#)
- [As Evacuees Pour In, Generosity and Some Unease](#)
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- [Updated photos](#)
- [See complete coverage.](#)

"We told them straight out that they were weakening emergency management with potentially disastrous consequences," says Dave Liebersbach, the director of Alaska's Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. The department's focus on terrorism was undermining its readiness for other catastrophes, said the visiting officials, who included emergency managers from Mississippi and Alabama.

Now that Hurricane Katrina has left the Gulf Coast flooded and New Orleans in ruins, the question ricocheting around the nation and the world is this: How could the world's biggest superpower fail so badly in protecting and rescuing its residents from a natural disaster so frequently foretold?

The answer is sure to receive intense scrutiny this fall in Congress and around the nation, especially given revived fears that the U.S. is ill-prepared for a terrorist attack. "We are going to take a hard, hard look at our disaster-response procedures," said Republican Majority Leader Bill Frist of Tennessee this weekend as he assisted patients at the New Orleans airport.

Yesterday, the government moved aggressively to show it has the situation in hand. President Bush paid his second visit to the region in four days, visiting Baton Rouge, La., and Poplarville,

Miss. He asserted that federal, state and local governments are "doing the best we can." The major levee breach in New Orleans, at the 17th Street Canal, was closed, allowing the city to begin pumping out floodwaters, a process expected to take about 30 days.

Meanwhile, thousands of federal troops appeared to be firmly in control of the city, with most residents evacuated and searches for survivors well underway. A Customs and Border Protection aircraft operating as a flying communication link gave first responders in New Orleans the ability to communicate for the first time since Katrina struck more than a week ago. In suburban Jefferson Parish, thousands of residents were allowed to check their homes under tight restrictions to evaluate what was left.

But the weekend's progress hasn't erased the troubling questions left by the government's delayed understanding of the scope of the damage last week and its initial slowness in mounting rescues and bringing food and water to stricken citizens. The problems include:

- The decision to transform the Federal Emergency Management Agency from a cabinet-level agency reporting directly to the president to just one piece of a new, gargantuan Department of Homeland Security, which altered FEMA's mission and watered down its powers.
- Too few helicopters stationed in the Gulf Coast area ahead of the storm.
- A military stretched by wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which left commanders near New Orleans reluctant to commit some active-duty units at nearby Fort Polk, La., because they were in the midst of preparing for an Afghan deployment this winter.
- A total breakdown of communications systems, an echo of the problems that faced New York officials dealing with the 2001 terrorist attacks and a system the government has been trying to fix for four years.
- Poor coordination among federal, state and local officials in the days immediately before and after the hurricane.
- Failure at all levels of government to take seriously many studies and reports over many years warning of the potential disaster.

Indeed, despite many warnings of the dangers, Mr. Chertoff and other administration officials have explained their poor initial response by saying government planners didn't expect both a serious hurricane and a breach in levees. "This is really one which I think was breathtaking in its surprise," Mr. Chertoff told reporters on Saturday.

Planners, he said, "were confronted with a second wave that they did not have built into the plan, but using the tools they had, we have to move forward and adapt."

Plenty of missteps at the local level contributed to last week's disaster too, from a failure to take basic steps to protect the telecom infrastructure to inadequate food and water at the Superdome. New Orleans may be able to stage events such as Mardi Gras and Jazzfest and provide parking, crowd control and adequate toilets for millions of visitors, but its hurricane plan was more

rudimentary. "Get people to higher ground and have the feds and the state airlift supplies to them -- that was the plan, man," Mayor Ray Nagin said in an interview yesterday.

But so far, the federal government is bearing the brunt of criticism, given its vast resources and unique role in responding to major disasters. Critics say the response shows that the nation's disaster-response system, rebuilt in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks, is woefully inadequate. In a Washington Post-ABC News poll taken on Friday, the public said by a 67% to 31% margin that the federal government wasn't adequately prepared for Katrina.

"What the events of the last week have shown is that over the last few years since 9/11 we have slowly disassembled our national emergency response system and put in its place something far inferior," says Bill Waugh, an academic expert on emergency management at Georgia State University. "We reinvented the wheel when we didn't need to and now have something that doesn't roll very well at all."

Many of last week's problems are rooted in January 2003, when the Bush administration, urged on by some members of Congress, created the Homeland Security Department. It amalgamated 22 agencies, from the Coast Guard to the Secret Service, creating the largest government bureaucracy since the Pentagon was formed in 1947.

From the start, emergency experts and even the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, warned that a special effort was needed to be sure FEMA's traditional mission of providing disaster relief wasn't lost in the shuffle.

But it was. FEMA's clout had long depended on its ability to help states plan for natural disasters by providing emergency preparedness grants and other resources. Under Homeland Security, grant-making decisions were transferred to a new, department-wide office in an attempt to consolidate funding. As a result, FEMA lost control of more than \$800 million in preparedness grants since 2003, congressional figures show.

Focus on Terrorism

State emergency managers and congressional investigators say the overwhelming focus for grants is now on fighting terrorism. More money goes to local police and fire departments for that mission than responding to and recover from disasters.

Officials from Shelby County, Ala., for instance, last year said they could get federal money for chemical suits. But they were unable to get money for an emergency operations center that could link computers, phones and televisions to respond to tornadoes. Between 1957 and 2003, the county had 20 tornadoes that it said killed 11 people and caused more than \$32 million in damages.

Meanwhile, morale at FEMA has dropped since it was subsumed by Homeland Security. Several key jobs are unfilled and its executives are overtaxed. Its acting chief operating officer in Washington, for instance, is also the director of FEMA's Atlanta region; his seat there is being held by another acting director. That area includes much of the hurricane-prone Southeast.

In July, Mr. Chertoff unveiled a departmental restructuring that would cement FEMA's reduced role. Among other moves, the plan restricted FEMA's purview to disaster response, stripping away longstanding functions such as helping communities build houses outside flood zones.

The plan, he told Congress, was "to take out of FEMA a couple of elements that were really not related to its core missions, that were generally focused on the issue of preparedness in a way that I think was frankly more of a distraction to FEMA than an enhancement to FEMA."

'Extremely Negative Impact'

On July 27, Alaska's Mr. Liebersbach, in his role as the head of the National Emergency Management Association, an association of state emergency management directors, warned in a letter to Congress that Mr. Chertoff's plan was nothing short of disastrous. It would have "an extremely negative impact on the people of this nation," he wrote.

"The proposed reorganization increases the separation between preparedness, response and recovery functions," the letter said. "Any unnecessary separation of these functions will result in disjointed response and adversely impact the effectiveness of departmental operations." It was the letter that prompted the meetings with Homeland Security officials in late August.

Last week's response certainly revealed cracks in the current system. Though President Bush declared a state of emergency before Katrina made landfall on Monday, officials appear to have underestimated the severity of the damage caused by the storm. By Tuesday it became clear that the response was not meeting needs and that FEMA and Louisiana emergency teams were overwhelmed. Then the flood waters hit in New Orleans. It still took several more hours for Mr. Chertoff to declare the disaster an "incident of national significance."

Even then, some requirements hampered speed. Because of worries that terrorists could take advantage of such chaos, FEMA now must abide by post-9/11 security procedures, such as putting air marshals on flights. That meant stranded residents couldn't be evacuated from the New Orleans airport until FEMA had rounded up dozens of Transportation Security Administration screeners and more than 50 federal air marshals. Inadequate power prevented officials from firing up X-ray machines and metal detectors until the government decided evacuees could be searched manually.

Slow Off the Mark

In the hours before and after Katrina struck, there weren't firm procedures in place for directing people and materials. Dan Wessel, owner of Cool Express Inc., a Blue River, Wis., transportation company that contracts with FEMA to move supplies, said he didn't get a green light to send trucks to a staging area in Dallas until about 4 p.m. Monday, hours after Katrina made landfall. That was too late to meet a deadline of getting trucks to Dallas by noon Tuesday, he said.

Once the trucks arrived, drivers often found no National Guard troops, FEMA workers or other personnel on hand to help unload the water and ice, Mr. Wessel said. "I almost told the guys to leave, but people are wanting the water," he said. "The drivers distributed it."

Inside New Orleans, said Dr. Joseph Guarisco, chief of the emergency department of Ochsner Clinic Foundation, a 580-bed hospital in New Orleans above the water line, said there was confusion about where to direct evacuees seeking shelter.

'There's No One There'

For a couple of days, Dr. Guarisco said, he directed a stream of patients to what he understood was a FEMA mass-casualty tent at the intersection of Interstate 10 and Causeway Boulevard. "A number came back and said, 'there's no one there.' " Dr. Guarisco said.

Some critics have blamed the war in Iraq, and the deployment of thousands of troops, including National Guard members, to that effort. President Bush has vehemently denied that charge. The administration has said problems on the ground were due to an unexpectedly severe storm and unanticipated flooding.

Four weeks before the hurricane, Lt. Colonel Pete Schneider, of the Louisiana National Guard, told WGNO, a local ABC affiliate, that when guard members left for Iraq last October, they took a lot of needed equipment with them, including dozens of high-water vehicles, Humvees, refueling tankers and generators that would be needed in the event a major natural disaster hit the state.

"You've got combatant commanders over there who need it, they say they need it, they don't want to lose what they have and we certainly understand that," he said. "It's a matter of us educating that combatant commander [that] we need it back here as well."

Col. Schneider also said the state had enough equipment to get by, and that if Louisiana were to get hit by a major hurricane, the neighboring states of Mississippi, Alabama and Florida had all agreed to help. In the end, those states were hit by Katrina as well.

The U.S. Army has a large facility, Fort Polk, in Leesville, La., about 270 miles northwest of New Orleans. Officials at Fort Polk, which has nearly 8,000 active-duty soldiers, said their contribution so far has consisted of a few dozen soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division manning purification equipment and driving half-ton trucks filled with supplies and equipment. The first contingent of soldiers didn't receive orders until Saturday afternoon.

A spokeswoman at Fort Polk said she did not know why the base received its deployment orders so late in the game. "You'd have to ask the Pentagon," she said. A senior Army official said the service was reluctant to commit the 4th brigade of the 10th Mountain Division from Fort Polk, because the unit, which numbers several thousand soldiers, is in the midst of preparing for an Afghanistan deployment in January.

Instead, the Pentagon chose to send upwards of 7,500 soldiers from the 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, Texas and the 82nd Airborne Division from Fort Bragg, N.C., along with Marines from California and North Carolina. Soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division are able to deploy anywhere in the world in 18 hours. It took several days for them to arrive on the ground in Louisiana.

Helicopters Proved Crucial

There, no piece of equipment was more necessary than helicopters. But in the first 48 hours after the levees were breached, the shortage of helicopters became acute. FEMA wanted choppers to save stranded residents, while the Army Corps of Engineers needed the aircraft, known as "rotary wing" in military jargon, to repair the breaches. The Coast Guard, the primary agency responding to the disaster in New Orleans, had a total of 20 aircraft in the area, mostly helicopters, which focused solely on rescue operations.

"We have very limited aviation assets and rotary wing is what we need to put materials into those breaches, and that's the very asset we need to do search and rescue and save victims, so our efforts became something of a second priority and our initial plan was delayed a bit because of that," says Lt. Gen. Carl Strock, commander of the Army Corps of Engineers.

A FEMA spokesman said the Coast Guard and National Guard had adequate numbers of helicopters on hand, but that rescue and supply operations were hampered by other factors, including limited airspace around New Orleans, which is geographically small. "You put in 30 helicopters in that area and you create a dangerous situation," said the spokesman, Marty Bahamonde.

On the supply front, helicopters flew food to the Superdome, he said, but the helipad there could only accommodate small aircraft, which couldn't hold many supplies.

Communications systems also broke down, as they did at the World Trade Center in 2001, preventing emergency officials from communicating with each other and the military. That led to the odd juxtaposition of top federal officials praising the rescue effort and denying problems at New Orleans' overcrowded convention center while TV cameras showed people there crying for help.

Radio Systems Lacking

Flooding and power shortages appear to be behind most of the serious communications problems, but incompatible radio systems didn't help.

Emergency responders in New Orleans and three nearby parishes all use different radio systems. New Orleans and nearby Jefferson Parish both use radios that operate on the 800 Mhz band, according to a Louisiana State Police interoperability report, but they were manufactured by different vendors. That means officials there had up to five channels on which to talk to one another.

"Communication is always difficult in emergency situations because of increased traffic," says William Vincent of the Lafayette Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, about 135 miles from New Orleans. Emergency 911 dispatchers in Lafayette fielded calls from New Orleans residents who still had working cellphones but couldn't reach local police.

New Orleans officials had equipment at the fire department's communication center that could link otherwise incompatible local and federal systems. It was reportedly knocked out by flooding.

Another problem: Even after 9/11, local officials and federal emergency responders don't typically use the same radio frequencies, which can make communication difficult until agreements are reached on sharing channels.

As handheld radios began losing power in New Orleans, police officers and other emergency responders had no way of recharging them. Unlike radios used by firefighters combating wild fires, which can be powered by disposable batteries found in any grocery store, a typical handheld police emergency radio uses rechargeable batteries similar to those powering cell phones, according to Ron Haraseth, director of automated frequency coordination at the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officers.

Bad Information

FEMA itself seemed to frequently have bad information. At a Tuesday press conference Bill Lokey, federal coordinating officer for FEMA and the agency representative on site, downplayed the severity of the flooding caused by the breaches in New Orleans, saying the water wasn't rising in most areas. "I don't want to alarm everybody that, you know, New Orleans is filling up like a bowl," he said. "That's just not happening."

Within hours, much of the city was under water, and Mr. Lokey was calling Katrina "the most significant natural disaster to hit the United States."

The possible problems had long been trumpeted. In June 2004, FEMA spent more than half a million dollars to commission a "catastrophic hurricane disaster plan" from IEM Inc., a Baton Rouge-based emergency-management and homeland-security consulting firm. A report

analyzing results of a mock hurricane hitting New Orleans, dubbed "Hurricane Pam," was envisioned and a response and recovery plan was to be drawn up.

During a five-day mock exercise in July 2004, emergency-management responders huddled in Baton Rouge to plan a response to "Hurricane Pam," a Category 3 storm which featured 120 miles per hour winds and a storm surge that topped New Orleans's levees. For reasons that aren't clear, the mock exercise never anticipated the levees giving way, despite such warnings. Even so, the mock hurricane destroyed 500,000 buildings in New Orleans and displaced one million residents.

The group developed a plan to get stranded residents out of the way and construction of a "command structure" with enough space for upwards of 800 rescue workers. A report, dated Jan. 5 of this year, detailed recommendations from the exercise and was provided to FEMA, an IEM spokeswoman said. FEMA has not released the report.

—Greg Jaffe, Yochi J. Dreazen, Dionne Searcey and Marilyn Chase contributed to this article.

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Corrections & Amplifications:

A statement playing down the severity of the flooding in New Orleans in this article was incorrectly attributed to Bill Lokey, the federal coordinating officer for the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the agency's on-site representative, because of an error by a transcription service. Sen. David Vitter (R., La.) was the official who said: "I don't want to alarm everybody that, you know, New Orleans is filling up like a bowl. That's just not happening."