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SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
ON  
HURRICANE KATRINA: THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT'S ROLE IN THE RESPONSE

9 FEBRUARY 2006

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Chairman Collins, Senator Lieberman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the role of our active duty forces in disaster response. My comments today will first focus on the actions U.S. Northern Command took to prepare for and respond to Hurricane Katrina. I will also discuss proposals for improving the Command's disaster response capabilities.

**USNORTHCOM Operations.** The Department of Defense (DoD) has a long history of supporting civil authorities in the wake of catastrophic events with specialized skills and assets that can rapidly stabilize and improve the situation. All DoD support is provided at the direction of the President or Secretary of Defense and in accordance with the National Response Plan.

As directed by the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Northern Command supported the Department of Homeland Security/Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) disaster relief efforts. Hurricane relief was conducted as a team effort among Federal, state and local governments, as well as non-governmental organizations. USNORTHCOM was fully engaged in supporting the massive operation to save lives, reduce suffering and protect the infrastructure of our homeland.

USNORTHCOM began tracking the tropical depression that became Hurricane Katrina on 23 August. Before Hurricane Katrina's landfall in Louisiana and Mississippi, USNORTHCOM established staging bases and deployed Defense Coordinating Officers and Defense Coordinating Element teams to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida to manage DoD response efforts in coordination with State and Federal officials. These teams are normally not activated until a Presidential Disaster Declaration is made; however, as authorized by the Secretary of Defense, we deployed them early due to the magnitude of Katrina.

In addition, we alerted forces to be prepared to move as soon as the situation on the ground stabilized and the Department of Homeland Security,

through FEMA, determined what assets were needed. We coordinated with U.S. Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) to provide heavy lift aircraft. We also worked with Joint Forces Command to identify available Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force units to perform missions such as imagery support and damage assessment, inter-coastal waterway search and rescue, aviation medical evacuation, and construction/bridge/utility engineering to restore key infrastructure. This enabled us to identify appropriate units to perform requested assistance quickly and provide transportation to the scene as soon as possible.

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina made landfall, we were given authority by the Deputy Secretary of Defense to deploy the forces we deemed necessary to preserve life and reduce suffering. We had not yet been asked by Federal agencies for these capabilities, but we wanted to ensure we could respond when needed. As the levees in New Orleans gave way and the magnitude of the disaster grew, we continued to lean forward by preparing and moving additional capabilities, including emergency medical teams and communications experts.

In anticipation of the significant role the Department of Defense could play in the rescue and recovery efforts, USNORTHCOM established Joint Task Force Katrina (JTF-Katrina). Led by Lieutenant General Russ Honoré (Commander, First Army), JTF-Katrina provided command and control of Title 10 assets deployed to save lives, mitigate suffering, and restore critical services. JTF-Katrina grew to include 22,500 active duty forces, over 200 fixed and rotary wing aircraft, and 20 ships at its peak. General Honoré and his staff provided pivotal leadership on the ground and did a superb job providing Department of Defense assistance in coordination with state National Guard Forces and other Federal, State, local, and non-governmental partners.

USNORTHCOM met every request for support received from FEMA. In support of the relief effort, Department of Defense forces conducted search and rescue operations, assisted with evacuations, organized a complex logistical system to deliver food, water, and other essential supplies, provided medical care, provided imagery support, conducted fire fighting and mosquito abatement missions, cleared debris, safely managed crowded airspace and assisted with mortuary affairs.

Throughout the operation, we worked with our interagency partners through on-site liaison officers who provided a daily assessment of anticipated requests for military support. In addition, we shared information through teleconferences with Joint Task Forces Katrina, Defense Coordinating Officers, FEMA and other interagency organizations, and the Secretary of Defense.

Relationships and lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina relief operations were extremely valuable in facilitating our response to Hurricane Rita. USNORTHCOM worked with FEMA to define requirements early and responded by ensuring Title 10 forces, imagery support, and search and rescue assets were in place ahead of the storm, helping to mitigate additional suffering.

**Lessons Learned.** We are actively involved in efforts to compile lessons learned and incorporate them into future operations. One very important lesson we learned pertains to unity of effort.

We all witnessed the employment of 50,000 National Guardsmen in Title 32 status along with 22,500 active duty (Title 10) troops. But due to various factors, we lacked complete visibility into the National Guard's efforts throughout disaster relief operations.

Commanding, directing and coordinating the efforts of over 70,000 troops present many challenges under any circumstances. While we embrace the fact that the National Guard will play a pivotal role in all disasters, the nation should have the capability to properly leverage active duty forces that have

the inherent structure and capacity to achieve unity of effort when assembling and directing a large-scale, multi-state response to a catastrophic event.

If a tragedy occurs on a local level, the local and/or state leadership should retain command and control. They know the terrain, they have the personal relationships with responders, and they are familiar with the most likely challenges. However, DoD capabilities can prove extremely helpful in mitigating a disaster when local and state responders are overwhelmed, consequences are grave, and the scope of the suffering and the casualties is extensive. We are prepared to respond as directed by the President or Secretary of Defense.

Another lesson learned from our response to Hurricane Katrina relates to communications. We need immediate, reliable communications that are survivable and flexible. These communications must be mobile, secure and both voice and data capable.

The National Response Plan remains a solid framework for responses to crises on a certain scale, but there is room for improvement.

**Conclusion.** Our experience demonstrated we have adequate capability to meet emerging homeland defense and civil support crises. Even as we act to support civil authorities in responding to natural disasters, we never lose focus on our primary mission of homeland defense. One fact remains constant—our enemies should make no mistake about our resolve or our capabilities.