



United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Opening Statement of Chairman Joseph Lieberman
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Hearing
“The Military’s Role in Disaster Response: Progress Since Hurricane Katrina”
Washington, DC
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Almost two years ago, Hurricane Katrina overwhelmed a system that was shockingly under prepared. Local, state and federal emergency response agencies – with certain exceptions, like the Coast Guard and the Louisiana Fish and Wildlife Service – stumbled while a region drowned. And many lives were lost.

In the immediate aftermath of that disaster, we in the federal government, and the American people more generally, were faced with a big, painful question: “Why weren’t we better prepared for a disaster we knew – one day – was coming?”

Today’s hearing – which will focus specifically on the role of our nation’s military in responding to disasters – is an important part of this Committee’s ongoing efforts to ensure that we won’t ever have to ask that question again.

The response of our nation’s military – both active duty and National Guard – to Hurricane Katrina was ultimately unprecedented and very important. More than 70,000 military personnel deployed to the Gulf Coast from all across the country, bringing with them helicopters, ships, medical support and logistical capabilities.

However, this Committee’s investigation into the aftermath of Katrina revealed critical weaknesses in planning, preparedness and coordination within the Department of Defense, and between Defense and the Department of Homeland Security.

In March, the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves, tasked by Congress with assessing the role that DoD should play in homeland defense, reached this sobering conclusion:

“Although the current DoD Strategy for Homeland Defense and Civil Support states that securing the U.S. homeland is ‘the first among many priorities,’ DoD, in fact, has not accepted that this responsibility requires planning, programming, and budgeting for civil support missions.”

The Commission made a number of thoughtful recommendations to ensure that the active and reserve components of the military, the Department of Homeland Security, and the states can respond more seamlessly and effectively to a disaster.

To his credit, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has agreed with a majority of those recommendations, and directed the department to begin an aggressive implementation schedule to improve the military’s ability to provide support after domestic disasters – both natural and terrorist.

I hope to get the answers to three key questions today.

One: What do we expect from the military – active and reserve – in contributing to the homeland security mission?

Two: What is the Department of Defense doing to put in place the planning, programming, and budgeting to fulfill this mission?

And three: Are the Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security doing everything they can within the current structure to ensure an effective, coordinated, response to a catastrophic disaster, including a catastrophic terrorist attack with weapons of mass destruction?

The National Intelligence Estimate announced two days ago its finding that Al Qaeda remains intent on conducting another attack on our homeland – ominously warning, and I quote from the report:

“We assess that Al Qaeda will continue to try to acquire and employ chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear material in attacks and would not hesitate to use them if it develops what it deems is sufficient capability.”

Are we prepared to prevent and respond to such attacks?

In April of this year, the Preventive Defense Project of Harvard and Stanford Universities, co-chaired by Ash Carter and William Perry, provided an answer that was not reassuring. They brought together leading federal, civilian, and military officials, and other experts, and asked them a jarring question: What would our nation do in the 24 hours following a nuclear blast on a U.S. city.

The conclusion of Carter and Perry was also jarring – policy makers in Washington continue to believe that state and local officials will be able to control the situation “the day after” a nuclear attack. Yet, Carter and Perry argue, “as the fiasco after Hurricane Katrina suggests, most cities and states will quickly be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the humanitarian, law and order, and logistical challenges of responding to a nuclear detonation.”

The result, they say, “is a failure to plan realistically.”

This sounds eerily like the lack of preparedness that contributed so much to the failed response to Katrina. We cannot allow that to happen again. That is why we are holding this hearing today with a sense of urgency.

Today’s witnesses are: Peter Verga, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense; Roger Rufe, DHS Assistant Secretary for Disaster Operations; Gen. Victor Renuart, Commander, U.S. Northern Command; Lieutenant General H. Steven Blum, Chief of the National Guard Bureau; and Major General Bill Libby, Adjutant General, Maine National Guard and Commissioner of Maine’s Department of Defense, Veterans and Emergency Management.

Thank you all for coming.

Senator Collins.