



Highlights of [GAO-06-808T](#), a statement to Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Hurricane Katrina was one of the largest natural disasters in U.S. history. Despite a large deployment of resources at all levels, many have regarded the federal response as inadequate. GAO has a body of ongoing work that covers the federal government's preparedness and response to hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This statement summarizes key points from GAO's report on the military's response to Katrina (GAO-06-643), which was issued earlier this month. It addresses (1) the support that the military provided in responding to Hurricane Katrina along with some of the challenges faced and key lessons learned; (2) actions needed to address these lessons, including GAO's recommendations to the Secretary of Defense; and (3) the extent to which the military is taking actions to identify and address the lessons learned.

In its report, GAO made several recommendations to improve the military response to catastrophic disasters. The recommendations called for updating the National Response Plan to reflect proactive functions the military could perform in a catastrophic incident; improving military plans and exercises; improving National Guard, Reserve, and active force integration; and resolving response problems associated with damage assessment, communication, search and rescue, and logistics issues. The Department of Defense (DOD) partially concurred with all of the recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-808T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Sharon Pickup at (202) 512-9619 or pickups@gao.gov.

HURRICANE KATRINA

Better Plans and Exercises Needed to Guide the Military's Response to Catastrophic Natural Disasters

What GAO Found

The military mounted a massive response to Hurricane Katrina that saved many lives, but it also faced several challenges that provide lessons for the future. Based on its June 2005 civil support strategy, DOD's initial response relied heavily on the National Guard, but active forces were also alerted prior to landfall. Aviation, medical, engineering, and other key capabilities were initially deployed, but growing concerns about the disaster prompted DOD to deploy active ground units to supplement the Guard beginning about 5 days after landfall. Over 50,000 National Guard and 20,000 active personnel participated in the response. However, several factors affected the military's ability to gain situational awareness and organize and execute its response, including a lack of timely damage assessments, communications problems, uncoordinated search and rescue efforts, unexpected logistics responsibilities, and force integration issues. A key lesson learned is that additional actions are needed to ensure that the military's significant capabilities are clearly understood, well planned, and fully integrated.

As GAO outlined in its recommendations to the Secretary of Defense, many challenges that the military faced during Katrina point to the need for better plans and more robust exercises. Prior to Katrina, disaster plans and exercises did not incorporate lessons learned from past catastrophes to fully identify the military capabilities needed to respond to a catastrophe. For example, the National Response Plan made little distinction between the military response to smaller regional disasters and catastrophic natural disasters. In addition, DOD's emergency response plan for providing military assistance to civil authorities during disasters lacked adequate detail. It did not account for the full range of assistance that DOD might provide, address the respective contributions of the National Guard and federal responders, or establish response time frames. National Guard state plans were also inadequate and did not account for the level of outside assistance that would be needed during a catastrophe, and they were not synchronized with federal plans. Moreover, none of the exercises that were conducted prior to Katrina had called for a major deployment of DOD capabilities to respond to a catastrophic hurricane. Without actions to help address planning and exercise inadequacies, a lack of understanding will continue to exist within the military and among federal, state, and local responders as to the types of assistance and capabilities that DOD might provide in response to a catastrophe; the timing of this assistance; and the respective contributions of the active, Reserve, and National Guard forces.

DOD is examining the lessons learned from a variety of sources and is beginning to take actions to address them and prepare for the next catastrophe. It is too early to evaluate DOD's actions, but many appear to hold promise. However, some issues identified after Katrina, such as damage assessments, are long-standing, complex problems that cut across agency boundaries. Thus, substantial improvement will require sustained attention from the highest management levels in DOD and across the government.