

Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

“The Military’s Role in Disaster Response: Progress
Since Hurricane Katrina”

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs
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Every American who witnessed Hurricane Katrina’s assault on the Gulf Coast and its aftermath has reason to feel proud of the men and women of America’s armed forces. Whether active duty or National Guard, our military worked heroically and humanely to help rescue victims, maintain order, and provide vital services.

As Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul McHale told the Committee during our investigation of the Katrina disaster, the American military response –

50,000 National Guard members and 22,000 active-duty troops – was the largest domestic deployment since the Civil War. It was indeed a massive effort, and a vital one for a devastated region and its suffering people.

As we also learned during our investigation, however, more help could have arrived sooner and been used more effectively with better planning, situation awareness, and coordination. Our Committee report on Hurricane Katrina spoke, in fact, of a “rapid but uncoordinated response.”

Most disturbing was the lack of coordination among military headquarters in the early stages of the response. As Secretary McHale testified, “National Guard planning, though superbly executed, was not well integrated with the Joint Staff at

NORTHCOM.” The director of operations at Northern Command told us that lack of a central overview of the massive state responses to the disaster prevented proper integration of capabilities and tasking of units until they arrived in the devastated region. Better arrangements are now in place.

Our Katrina investigation also produced seven specific recommendations for improving coordination between the Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security. The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 implemented several of them.

I can attest that at least one of our codified recommendations has already borne fruit. Each of FEMA’s 10 regional branches now has a Defense

Coordinating Officer in that region. During my visit to a FEMA exercise in New England this spring, I heard that this arrangement has greatly improved operating relationships and communication. In addition, DOD and DHS have full-time, senior-level liaison with each other's headquarters.

I am also pleased to hear that better coordination among planning staffs has been established, and that work advances on the 15 National Planning Scenarios. Fleshing out plans for these scenarios, which include catastrophes like earthquake, pandemic flu, small-scale nuclear attack, and toxic industrial accident, is a vital part of preparing an effective response. And each of the scenarios could require a major DOD response.

Work by FEMA and DOD to streamline and pre-define the “mission-assignment” process that caused so many delays during Katrina is another welcome sign of progress. State and local officials sending task requests to the military during the Katrina crisis wrestled with an intricate process with detailed formatting conventions. Since then, new procedures have reduced the potential for confusion and delay.

As the Committee’s report on the Katrina investigation demonstrated, the number and scale of natural and man-made threats to our country demanded progress on many fronts. We need not only better contingency planning, but a more aggressive, forward-leaning posture as identifiable threats emerge and requests for civil support can be anticipated. We need better training, exercising, and communication. We also need better protocols for

handling Emergency Management Assistance

Compact requests among states, better arrangements for federal and state command and coordination of units, and greater clarity on balancing a President's ability to call on National Guard troops to restore order with preserving the states' lead role in responding to local disasters.

Because the National Guard is such a vital factor in our response capability, I am delighted that we have the state adjutant generals' representative to FEMA's National Advisory Council here today - and that he comes from Maine. Adjutant General Bill Libby's deep experience in emergency management will make his views very helpful to us.

The issues before us today are matters of considerable concern for this Committee, as they can

**be matters of life and death for American citizens.
This panel of distinguished witnesses can help us
understand the progress since Katrina, and help us
identify areas where work remains to be done.**

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