



Highlights of [GAO-06-643](#), a report to congressional committees

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. Due to widespread congressional interest, this review was performed under the Comptroller General's authority. It examined (1) the extent to which pre-Katrina plans and training exercises reflected the military assistance that might be required during a catastrophic, domestic, natural disaster, (2) the military support provided in response to Katrina and factors that affected that response, and (3) the actions the military is taking to address lessons learned from Katrina and to prepare for the next catastrophe.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to improve the military response to catastrophic disasters. The recommendations address the needs to clearly delineate military capabilities in the National Response Plan and to improve military plans and exercises. The recommendations specifically address the integration of the military's National Guard and active duty and Reserve forces, as well as response problems associated with damage assessment, communication, search and rescue, and logistics issues. DOD partially concurred with all of our recommendations. www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-643.

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 and greatly assisted recovery efforts but many lessons are emerging. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, disaster plans and exercises did not incorporate lessons learned from past catastrophes to fully delineate the military capabilities needed to respond to a catastrophe. For example, the government's National Response Plan made little distinction between the military response to a smaller regional disaster and its response to a catastrophic natural disaster. In addition, DOD's emergency response plan for providing military assistance to civil authorities during disasters lacked adequate detail. The plan did not: account for the full range of assistance that might be provided by DOD, divide tasks between the National Guard and the 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, plans had not been tested with a robust exercise program. None of the exercises that were conducted prior to Katrina called for a major deployment of DOD capabilities in response to a catastrophic hurricane. As a result, a lack of understanding exists within the military and among federal, state, and local responders as to the types of assistance and capabilities that DOD might provide in the event of a catastrophe, the timing of this assistance, and the respective contributions of the active-duty and National Guard forces.

Despite the lack of planning, the military took proactive steps and responded with about 50,000 National Guard and 20,000 active federal personnel. Based on its June 2005 civil support strategy, DOD relied heavily on the Guard during the initial response. Active duty forces were alerted prior to landfall and key capabilities such as aviation, medical, and engineering forces were initially deployed. Growing concerns about the magnitude of the disaster prompted DOD to deploy large, active ground units to supplement the Guard beginning about 5 days after landfall. 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 difficulties, force integration problems, uncoordinated search and rescue efforts, and unexpected logistics responsibilities. Without detailed plans to address these factors, DOD and the federal government risk being unprepared for the next catastrophe.

DOD is examining the lessons learned from its own reviews and those of the White House and the Congress, and it is beginning to take actions to address the lessons 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 problems that were identified by GAO after Hurricane Andrew in 1992. They will be difficult to address because they are complex and cut across agency boundaries. Thus, substantial improvement will require sustained attention from the highest management levels in DOD, and across the government.