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## Katrina: Failure at every turn

Knight Ridder Newspapers

Two weeks after Hurricane Katrina crashed into the Gulf coast, there is little argument that the response was botched. But an extensive Knight Ridder review of official actions in the days just before and after Katrina's landfall Monday, Aug. 29, reveals a depth of government hesitancy and a not-my-job attitude that may have cost scores of people their lives.

The Department of Homeland Security, facing its first major catastrophe since it was created, failed to issue a critical disaster declaration until more than a day after the storm. The White House never appointed a coordinator to monitor disaster developments.

Though several government agencies were certain by 6 p.m. on Monday that New Orleans' levee system had given way, no official screamed for urgent help when daylight hours might still have permitted a rescue effort.

By that time, water had been pouring from the damaged 17th Street Canal for perhaps as long as 15 hours. A National Guard Bureau timeline places the breach at 3 a.m. Monday and an Army Corps of Engineers official said a civilian phoned him about the problem at 5 a.m., saying he had heard about it from a state policeman.

But officials sounded no alarm until Tuesday morning, after the city had been flooding for at least 24 hours.

No one knows how many people might have survived Katrina if officials had responded more aggressively. The official death toll in Louisiana and Mississippi is now at 365, at least some of whom died in the sweltering heat of the Superdome or awaiting evacuation from flooded hospitals.

Scores of others may have drowned unnecessarily in their homes. In Mississippi, some may have been lulled into complacency by memories that they'd survived the last great Gulf storm, Camille. In New Orleans, others were cut off by the torrent unleashed by the collapse of levees that were never designed to withstand a Category 4 hurricane like Katrina.

But what's clear is that four years after terrorists, on another late summer day, flew hijacked aircraft into buildings in New York and Washington, the United

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Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, center and FEMA director, Mike Brown, right, speak about rescue efforts for victims of Hurricane Katrina, in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, Sunday, Sept. 4, 2005.

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States is no better prepared to respond to catastrophe — even when it comes with days of public anticipation and warning.

A final accounting of what went wrong and what went right will take months, perhaps longer. Some agencies performed splendidly: the Coast Guard launched rescue missions of people trapped by the flooding as soon as the weather permitted.

But it's already clear that a multitude of local, state and federal officials and agencies failed the people in Katrina's path.

The federal Department of Homeland Security, established in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, waited until 36 hours after Katrina struck to declare it an "incident of national significance." The never-before-used disaster designation was established in the post-9/11 National Response Plan to mobilize the full strength of the federal government, including the military, to deal with a catastrophe.

The Pentagon, even as it moved its own people and equipment out of the storm's way, remained aloof. A 1993 report by the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, concluded that the Department of Defense "is the only organization capable of providing, transporting and distributing sufficient quantities of items needed" in a catastrophe such as Katrina.

Cargo planes had been put on alert, but Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld took in a baseball game in San Diego on Monday night, Aug. 29, while floodwaters inundated New Orleans. The military didn't set up a task force to respond until Wednesday, Aug. 31, two days after landfall. By then, Katrina was little more than a rainstorm over Ohio.

Before landfall, President Bush, on vacation in Crawford, Texas, was briefed repeatedly on the storm's progress. He was deeply engaged, issuing disaster relief orders, talking to the governors of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida, and, on the Sunday before landfall, urging citizens in Katrina's path to seek safety.

But no member of the White House staff was assigned responsibility for tracking federal actions and no senior-level official was given oversight responsibilities. Asked in an e-mail who had been in charge at the White House as the storm bore down, administration spokeswoman Dana Perino replied, "Overall, the president is in charge at the White House."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, its top ranks filled by political appointees and its budget hit by deep cuts, seemed unable to grasp the magnitude of the disaster. On the day after the storm, FEMA director Michael Brown met in Biloxi, Miss., with Gov. Haley Barbour, a former Republican National Committee chairman, and told him not to worry, because FEMA had had lots of hurricane practice in Florida. "I don't think you've seen anything like this," Barbour responded. "We're talking nuclear devastation."

Brown was removed Friday from overseeing disaster response and replaced with a Coast Guard admiral.

Both Barbour and Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco, a Democrat, also seemed not to understand the size of the storm headed their way when they issued their first National Guard call-ups — Barbour, on Friday night, and Blanco, on Saturday morning.

Barbour summoned only about 1,000 troops initially, according to Mississippi National Guard spokesman Lt. Col. Tim Powell, and placed another 600 on standby. That number was consistent with what the state had needed 36 years earlier after Camille, but it was inadequate given the gambling-fueled boom that had brought tens of thousands of new residents to the coast.

Blanco's contingent was larger, 4,000, but it was dwarfed by the more than 30,000 that eventually would be summoned to

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help.

Both Louisiana and Mississippi successfully employed so-called contra-flow plans that turned super highways one-way out of the coastal area, to speed evacuation. New Orleans officials were pleased that 80 percent of the city's population had reached safety before the storm hit. But neither state had made any provision for getting people without cars out of the danger zone.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, after receiving the direst of warnings in a dinner-time phone call at home from National Hurricane Center Director Max Mayfield a day-and-a-half before landfall, delayed issuing a mandatory evacuation order for 15 hours. He finally told residents that the storm surge "most likely will topple our levee system" at 10 o'clock Sunday morning, when Katrina was on his city's doorstep.

Nagin wasn't alone in his hesitancy, however. In Harrison County, Miss., where Biloxi is located, Civil Defense Director Joe Spraggins, in his job less than a month, also declined to order an evacuation on Saturday, saying he wanted to wait to see what the storm did. A mandatory evacuation order came Sunday. The state's emergency management director, Bob Latham, worried that residents wouldn't evacuate because of false alarms in the past.

Perhaps the most startling failure came in the reaction — or the apparent lack of one — from federal, state and local officials to the discovery that New Orleans' fragile levee system had collapsed hours before Katrina even made landfall. Engineers and emergency planners had warned for years that such a collapse would be catastrophic for the below-sea-level city and the people who lived there.

Yet reports of the breach failed to spark action. The commander of the New Orleans district of the Army Corps of Engineers, Col. Richard P. Wagenaar, finally confirmed that a breach had occurred between 3 and 6 p.m. Monday and reported it to headquarters in Vicksburg, Miss.

The mayor had told reporters during a 1 p.m. news conference that there was an unconfirmed report of a levee break, but he quickly turned to other topics. Shortly before nightfall, a FEMA official, back from a helicopter survey of the city, reported the breach to his colleagues in Baton Rouge, then broke the news to the mayor.

Still no concerted effort was made to reach the thousands of people whose houses were rapidly filling with water. As many crawled from their flooded bedrooms into attics, and some hacked their way onto their roofs, much of the world went to sleep thinking that New Orleans had survived the worst.

Not until Tuesday dawned, and morning news show anchors expressed surprise that the once-dry streets around them were filling with water, did the magnitude of the disaster become evident.

There were many other instances of bungling. Federal officials, accustomed to serving a supportive but not commanding role in a disaster, waited for specific requests from state and local officials. Local officials, overwhelmed, trapped by the devastation around them, and unable to survey the damage, couldn't gather the information they needed to make specific requests. Radio communication was impossible and phone service as bad.

"You don't have to be a genius to know when the storm hits, you're going to need water, food, diesel, gasoline, evacuation needs, helicopters, boats, medicine," said Terry Ebbert, New Orleans' director of homeland security. "So why does someone call me up when I don't have any communications and ask me, 'What do I need?' The system needed to go into automatic."

Determining what took place in the aftermath of Katrina is a daunting task. No single person or agency has a bird's-eye view of everything that happened, and memories quickly fade for officials who've been working non-stop for days with little sleep. Many are uncertain what day of the week it is. Others are deeply enmeshed in rescue work and can't be reached.

Some information is unavailable — the Department of Homeland Security, for example, was unable to provide an accounting of Secretary Michael Chertoff's comings and goings in the days immediately before and after the storm — and with a series of investigations likely, some accounts smack of political damage control.

Still, Knight Ridder reporters in Louisiana and Mississippi, as well as Washington and California, found many officials willing to talk at length about preparations and responses. All but one of the interviews were on the record.

Knight Ridder reporters also interviewed experts on evacuation plans, examined government studies of past disaster responses, read reports about New Orleans' levee system, and reviewed their own notes for accounts of events they had witnessed.

Once the Hurricane Center drew the bull's-eye on New Orleans, at 10 p.m. Friday, Aug. 26, officials reacted quickly, at

least in terms of saying all the necessary words.

On Friday night, Gov. Blanco declared a state of emergency in Louisiana. Barbour did the same in Mississippi. President Bush backed up each declaration with a federal declaration of his own, for Louisiana on Saturday, for Mississippi on Sunday.

But because of a clerical error, the federal emergency declaration for Louisiana omitted 24 parishes, the state's equivalent of counties, including ones such as Orleans and Jefferson that were likely to be hit the hardest. While the mistake had no practical impact, it was a sign of what was to come.

Both states activated their national guards. Local officials issued evacuation orders, some mandatory, some voluntary, and both states made the interstate highways one way, heading away from the coast.

On Saturday evening, around dinnertime, the Hurricane Center's Mayfield made a round of phone calls to top state and local officials. He wanted to impress on them the severity of what was about to happen — and to be able to go to sleep that night knowing that he'd done everything in his power to save lives.

One of his calls went to Mayor Nagin in New Orleans. Earlier in the day, the mayor had asked residents to leave. But his order was voluntary, not mandatory, and residents understood the distinction. Worried about such matters as the city's liability in ordering hotels and other businesses to shut down, Nagin had been reluctant to take the next step.

Now Mayfield told Nagin, who was having dinner at home with his wife and 6-year-old daughter, that this was the worst hurricane he'd ever seen and that public officials ought to do everything in their power to get people out of the way.

"It scared the crap out of me," Nagin recalled. "I immediately said, 'My God, I have to call a mandatory evacuation.'"

Still, he hesitated. About 130,000 New Orleans residents lived below the poverty line, and he knew that he didn't have adequate shelter space or public transportation available to get the poor out of town. And what about hospitals? Should they be exempted? He and the city's lawyers wrestled with the issues through the night.

It was 10 a.m. Sunday morning before Nagin went on television and issued the order. People who couldn't get out on their own could board city buses at 12 locations for transport to the Louisiana Superdome, the shelter of last resort, he said.

As he was speaking, the National Weather Service at 10:11 a.m. issued a warning that Katrina, by then a Category 5 storm — the most severe, with winds of 155 mph or more — would make most of southeast Louisiana "uninhabitable for weeks, perhaps longer." The forecast predicted "human suffering incredible by modern standards."

By bus and by foot, as many as 25,000 people streamed to the Superdome. FEMA before the storm had dropped off 90,000 liters of water and 43,776 MREs at the Superdome, a place neither the state of Louisiana nor the city of New Orleans had planned to stock with food or water.

Why not? According to Art Jones, division chief of the disaster recovery division of the Louisiana Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, the idea was that the Superdome should be the shelter of last resort, not a place where people would stay.

The elements, of course, would have something to say about that.

Asked what lessons he learned, Jones replied that the state needs to rethink what "mandatory" evacuation means.

At the Army Corps of Engineers headquarters near Tulane University in central New Orleans, the phone call came into the bunker at 5 a.m. Monday, just as the storm was blasting the city. The caller said that there was a breach in the levee along the 17th Street Canal, which runs along the boundary between Orleans and East Jefferson parishes.

No news could have been worse. The levees were the reason that a Category 4 or 5 hurricane hitting the city had long been considered one of the nation's most likely catastrophes-in-waiting.

Most of the bowl-shaped city sat below sea level. Once the levees broke, the bowl would fill. And the levees weren't in great shape.

There was no way to get to the levee, at least not then. The storm was so fierce that even the bunker — which had walls five inches thick and was anchored to a concrete pad inside a steel warehouse — was shaking.

But the bunker was not the only place with the news. Mayor Nagin told reporters there were unconfirmed reports of a breach on the 17th Street Canal during a 1 p.m. news conference. But he couldn't be sure, and he didn't sound too concerned, talking more about a burst water main and suggesting that life would return to normal in a matter of days.

Finally, at 3 p.m., with the worst of the storm having passed, the engineers ventured out to see if they could drive to the canal across town and confirm the damage. They circled around, until they ran into 10 or 15 feet of water near where I-10 meets I-610.

"It was just a lake there," said Col. Wagenaar, the corps' district commander. "My first reaction was, 'Wow, we are in trouble.' I knew that amount of water should not be at that location that fast. At that point, we considered it confirmed. We knew something was wrong."

When he returned to his office, Wagenaar notified his superiors at the Corps' headquarters in Vicksburg that the levee had failed, then wrote a formal situation report, which he filed by e-mail around 7:30 p.m. What happened to that report is unclear, Corps spokesman John Rickey said.

At about the same time, Marty Bahamonde, a FEMA spokesman who'd spent the day at the Superdome, told the mayor what he'd seen from a Coast Guard helicopter. He described the surge of water as "surprising in its intensity."

"The mayor was devastated," Bahamonde said. "He knew his city was damaged beyond what they'd realized. There were women in the room crying. It was a very emotional meeting."

Bahamonde, who said he doesn't know what Nagin did with the information, managed to get a phone call through to the FEMA team in Baton Rouge and gave them the bad news. It's not clear what the FEMA team did either.

Why the news of the first breach — several others were visible by dawn Tuesday — didn't produce a bigger response baffles Ivor van Heerden. As the head of a hurricane center at Louisiana State University, he oversaw a simulation last year, known as Hurricane Pam, in which a slow-moving Category 3 storm swamped the city.

"What's very obvious," van Heerden said, "is that the powers that be either didn't recognize how bad the flooding would be from breached levees or totally misunderstood what the impacts would be."

By Tuesday, Aug. 30, the focus was on FEMA.

With New Orleans flooded and the extent of the devastation in such Mississippi cities as Biloxi and Gulfport becoming clear, FEMA's few publicly available reports show that it was deploying eight additional disaster medical assistance teams, each with 35 members; that it had sent emergency crews to check out possible oil spills; that it was working with the Department of Agriculture to provide food and water, and with Health and Human Services to supply doctors and medicine.

That was about it.

FEMA director Brown had flown into Baton Rouge on Sunday and had ridden out the storm at the state operations center there, confident that adequate preparations had been made. His agency had pre-positioned ice, water and Meals-Ready-to-Eat in three layers, in the storm zone, in adjacent states, and at pre-existing logistical centers in Atlanta and Denton, Texas. But getting the supplies distributed was proving to be a daunting challenge.

Critics of the agency, many of whom used to work there, said the response was inadequate but not surprising. Under the Bush administration, they said, FEMA had been reduced to a shadow of its former self, its budget gutted, its authority sapped.

One problem, they said, was structural. Before Sept. 11, FEMA had been an independent, cabinet-level agency devoted to coordinating the federal response to natural disasters. Now, it was part of the vast, new Department of Homeland Security, with its focus more on acts of terrorism than acts of nature.

Chertoff, the department's secretary and a former appeals court judge who has also served as an attorney for the Senate committee investigating the Whitewater matter, hadn't been hired for his expertise in natural disasters. In the days after Katrina, he said, "the collapse of a significant portion of the levee leading to the fast flooding of the city was not envisioned." In fact, the simulation exercise that predicted the flooding was paid for by FEMA, and experts had been forecasting a levee collapse for years.

FEMA itself was light on experience and heavy with political appointees, starting with Brown, a lawyer who'd worked for an Arabian horse association before coming to the agency, first as general counsel, then as deputy director, then director.

Of the top 10 natural-disaster jobs listed on FEMA's Web site, five were occupied by individuals with no prior disaster experience. In addition, 14 of the top 25 posts were being filled on a temporary basis or by someone working two senior jobs at the same time.

"If the chain of command is riddled with inexperience and impermanence, then you've got a recipe for inaction and indecision, which is precisely what you can't tolerate in FEMA," said Paul C. Light, a professor at New York University who has written 18 books on how the federal government operates.

Homeland Security officials acknowledge they were struggling to come to grips with the problems on the ground. On Monday, Bush, while flying from his ranch to California, had made major emergency disaster declarations for Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, freeing up federal funds.

But there was one step that the government had failed to take in this new, post-9/11 emergency system: issuing an "incident of national significance" declaration. That would make disaster recovery a national responsibility.

Sometime in the late afternoon or early evening on Tuesday, Chertoff made the declaration, but no public announcement was made until Wednesday. Homeland Security spokesman Russ Knocke said no specific event triggered the decision, just an avalanche of problems.

"There are extraordinary frustrations within the department," he said.

From the outset, it was clear that this was the sort of disaster that would require the intervention of the active-duty military - the arm of the government with the most personnel, the most resources, and the most equipment.

That intervention, when it came, would prove critical in turning the tide.

FEMA's initial request for military help did not come until Tuesday, Aug. 30, the day after the storm, according to a Defense Department official, speaking on the condition of anonymity. It was for two helicopters for flyovers.

The military's Task Force Katrina, based at Camp Shelby, Miss., under Army Lt. Gen. Russell Honore, wasn't activated until Wednesday. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld ordered the move after the Department of Homeland Security made its "incident of national significance" declaration.

The military, however, was prepared to act quickly.

On Aug. 19, the Joint Chiefs of Staff placed responsibility for any hurricane season relief under the U.S. Northern Command, which was created after the attacks of Sept. 11 to oversee homeland defense, among other things.

In subsequent days, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense Paul McHale asked his staff to look at what the department might be asked to do if Katrina became a problem and for inventories of supplies. Military units took steps to protect themselves. On Friday, Aug. 26, 74 hours before landfall, 700 Marines stationed at the Marine Reserve Headquarters in New Orleans were ordered evacuated.

On Monday, Aug. 29, as the storm hit the Gulf Coast, the Northern Command designated bases for FEMA's use. But not until Wednesday was Joint Task Force Katrina activated and the go-ahead given.

The military had an immediate impact. Air Force combat air controllers had the New Orleans International Airport reopened by Friday, Sept. 2, when evacuations of the critically ill began.

The USS Bataan, an amphibious assault ship, arrived off Louisiana and began search and rescue missions. Five Air Force helicopters from the 920th Rescue Wing at Patrick Air Force Base, Fla., and the 347th Rescue Wing from Moody Air Force Base, Ga., began flying search and rescue missions in Mississippi. Eight helicopters from the Army's 1st Cavalry Division at Ft. Hood, Texas, arrived in New Orleans.

Even a U-2 spy plane was pressed into service, providing aerial images to FEMA officials trying to assess the region's destruction.

Officials in Mississippi, which, unlike Louisiana, has a Republican governor, have been reluctant to criticize federal officials. But the state, which may have been hit harder than its neighbor by the storm itself, has had plenty of problems.

"We haven't gotten the supplies we need at times," said Robert Latham, who runs the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency. "We've been getting 10 to 15 percent of what we have been requesting [from FEMA]."

In anticipation of the storm, Gov. Barbour positioned 1,000 National Guard troops at Camp Shelby near Hattiesburg, about 60 miles inland. Hattiesburg and other upland areas, though, suffered significant damage, slowing the response. Troops had to cut their way out of Camp Shelby with chain saws on Monday.

After surveying the damage along the coast on Tuesday, Adjutant Gen. Harold Cross, the commander of the Mississippi National Guard, got permission to call up the remainder of the state's guard troops.

He asked the Pentagon's National Guard Bureau for another 11,000 troops, which would give him 15,000 in all. He wasn't sure that would be enough.

The state had food, water and ice left over from Hurricane Dennis earlier this year. The guard distributed them on Wednesday — until they ran out. Cross asked for more supplies from FEMA and was told that nothing would be immediately available.

"There were people waving signs on roofs that said, 'Send Food,'" he said.

Rather than wait for FEMA, he contacted the Pentagon's Northern Command. The military responded, airlifting meals-ready-to-eat into Gulfport on Thursday.

For all the criticism that's been directed at the decision-makers at every level, it's important not to forget how daunting the aftermath of Katrina was.

The storm will be remembered by the numbers: the death toll, the homes wiped out, the cost of rebuilding, and the amount of time the city and port of New Orleans were out of business. But dealing with its aftermath was an extraordinary challenge for all concerned.

The communication breakdown made coordination difficult. No one, including Mayor Nagin, seemed to know that there were thousands of people at the New Orleans Convention Center, desperate for sustenance and protection, until television showed the scene (and the dead bodies) on Thursday.

The disaster deprived local communities, especially New Orleans, of many of their first responders. Some police officers and firefighters were trapped or dead or occupied with their own families. Some simply abandoned their jobs, contributing to the breakdown of law and order.

The flooding in and around the city caused all sorts of logistical problems.

In Louisiana, there was plenty of food and water in the affected areas, some of it courtesy of FEMA. But officials had no way to distribute it.

"We don't distribute house-to-house," said National Guard Col. Jay Mayeaux, who served as the logistics chief for the disaster response.


On Thursday of hurricane week, the American Red Cross begged to be allowed to go in to do the distribution. National director Marty Evans made a personal plea to Louisiana Gov. Blanco. But state officials said to wait for better conditions.

Finally, on Friday, the long-sought reinforcements arrived. A military convoy plowed through the waters of New Orleans and made it to the Convention Center.

Within minutes, the facility was secure; in a matter of hours, the needy were being cared for; in a day, the place was empty, its former residents off to more secure locations. And now the people were in place to distribute the food and continue with the slow work of evacuating the city.

When the time comes for the postmortems, and it will, one big question will be one that Nagin posed during hurricane week: "How many people died as a result of us not having the resources to get them water, to get them pulled out of harm's way quick enough to get them evacuated out of this city?"

*Reporting for this story was provided by Geoff Pender and Don Hammack of The Sun Herald in Biloxi, Miss.; Brandon Bailey of the San Jose Mercury News in Jackson, Miss.; Erika Bolstad and Marc Caputo of The Miami Herald in New Orleans; Frances Robles of The Miami Herald in Baton Rouge, La.; Seth Borenstein, Drew Brown, Joseph L. Galloway, Ron Hutcheson, Jonathan S. Landay, Shannon McCaffrey and Alison Young of Knight Ridder's Washington Bureau, and Pete Carey of the San Jose Mercury News in San Jose, Calif. The story was written by Larry Eichel of The Philadelphia Inquirer.*

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