



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

Defense Support of Civil Authorities: A Vital Resource in the Nation's Homeland Security Missions

June 10, 2015 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications subcommittee hearing entitled “Defense Support of Civil Authorities: A Vital Resource in the Nation’s Homeland Security Missions”:

“Nearly ten years ago, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast and devastated the communities in its path.

During the response and recovery efforts, we learned painful lessons about planning and training gaps that undermined successful response efforts.

One of the most important lessons that emerged after Hurricane Katrina was the failure to coordinate Federal, State and local assets to allow for rapid deployment of much-needed resources.

In Mississippi, for example, household goods supplied by the Federal government never made it into the hands of disaster survivors, and were given instead to State agencies.

In the storm’s aftermath, I worked with my colleagues in Congress to enact the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act, which provided a mechanism for the FEMA Administrator to be elevated to the President’s Cabinet during a disaster and directed FEMA to develop pre-scripted mission assignments for Federal agencies, including the Department of Defense.

Although Hurricane Katrina triggered many reforms to improve the ability to leverage defense support of civil authorities during emergencies, it is important to note that Hurricane Katrina was not the first time that defense resources were not effectively leveraged during a disaster response.

Following the September 11th attacks, Federal Reservists tried to respond to ground zero, but there was no legal authority to put them to work - so an on-the-fly approach was employed.

In the weeks and months that followed, Congress and the Executive Branch began to reassess the Department of Defense’s role in domestic responses to terrorist attacks and major disasters.

While some progress was made to bolster DoD’s role in certain civil response activities, Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that critical gaps remained.

For example, our National Response Plan did not distinguish the type of defense support that might be required during a small disaster versus a catastrophic disaster.

The Plan did not include detail about how defense support would be provided, whether resources would be supplied by Federal forces or the National Guard, nor how long it would take to deliver defense assets.

Most notably, we did not conduct training exercises for catastrophic disasters in which DoD assets were fully deployed.

Accordingly, Military, Federal, State, and local responders were determining what defense assets could be supplied and who would supply them while response efforts were underway.

For example, in Mississippi, Governor Barbour initially called up about 1,000 National Guard troops, and

put an additional 600 on standby – which was consistent with the State's response to Hurricane Camille but did not account for the population increase.

The military deserves credit for its response to Hurricane Katrina– 50,000 National Guard Troops and 20,000 Federal troops were ultimately deployed, which undoubtedly saved lives.

That said, the response would have been more effective had appropriate plans been in place before the Hurricane.

Nearly three-years ago, Hurricane Sandy pummeled the northeast, and it was the first time many of the post-Katrina reforms were utilized.

Although efforts to bolster and clarify the role of the dual status commander after Hurricane Katrina did appear to improve coordination between National Guard troops and Federal forces during Hurricane Sandy relief efforts, many involved in the response did not fully understand the chain-of-command.

Additionally, Hurricane Sandy revealed challenges presented by multi-state disasters, in which more than one dual status commander is appointed but no coordinating process exists.

I will be interested in learning what training is underway to help those in the chain-of-command better understand the role of the dual status commander and how DoD and FEMA are working together to improve response capabilities for multi-state disasters.

I will also be interested in learning how FEMA is working with DoD to identify capability needs and develop pre-scripted mission assignments at the regional level to ensure that defense assets can be deployed in a timely manner.

Finally, I will be interested to understanding how defense resources have supported the response to the horrific flooding in Texas and Oklahoma.”

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