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POINT OF VIEW

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Homeland Security must learn from this

By DAVID SCHANZER

DURHAM – Suppose the next disaster to hit the United States is not another hurricane, but a terrorist attack that requires immediate mass evacuations of multiple cities. Flaws in our emergency preparedness revealed by the first days of Hurricane Katrina demonstrate that we have a great deal of unfinished business before we can consider our nation prepared to deal with a catastrophic act of terrorism.

Today's focus must be on aiding victims, supporting the responders, comforting the bereaved and starting the long process of recovery. But since we do not know when the next disaster will strike, it is not too early to draw some lessons from this tragedy.

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It is now clear that there were far too many people in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast when the storm hit. Evacuation orders -- first voluntary, then mandatory -- were ignored by thousands of citizens. Others were either physically or financially unable to evacuate. As a result, hundreds of people are dead; hundreds more may die or become ill.

We first need to reconsider "voluntary evacuation" orders. How can an order be voluntary? When the government speaks in such a contradictory fashion, it undermines its credibility and sends the wrong message.

If local officials believe everyone should leave town, they should issue a mandatory evacuation order. When the government equivocates, people may decide to stay, which is psychologically hard to reverse later. Once a mandatory order is issued, it needs to be enforced, since those who could leave, but do not, endanger not only their own lives but also the lives of emergency responders and of other citizens who need help. Law enforcement officers should be empowered to detain and remove those who don't comply.

Worse yet, many people who remained did not choose to stay but were unable to leave. It appears that there were virtually no plans in place to evacuate huge communities of poor people who did not have transportation, access to public transit or cash to pay for gas, food and hotels. Some of them are now dead. Thousands are trapped in an uninhabitable city. Sheltering people inside a city that is otherwise being evacuated does not make sense and certainly will not work in the event of a terrorist attack.

In order to get people out of danger as fast as possible, we will need to abandon our skittishness about involving the military in domestic operations. Why wait until disaster strikes to deploy our armed forces? How many lives would have been saved if a military convoy had been used to evacuate those who wanted to escape New Orleans before the storm instead of only using military helicopters for rescues days later?

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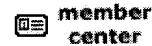
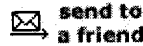
Katrina has also already taught us that states must develop regional mass relocation plans. When we try to do things on the fly, we end up moving more than 20,000 tired, hungry and possibly sick people 350 miles from the squalor of the Superdome to the Houston Astrodome, which soon may also become unfit for human habitation. State and local governments should agree in advance where thousands of people will go if their communities are destroyed and how to care for them for days, weeks or months.

As daunting as the situation in New Orleans is, each of these problems would be magnified tenfold if the incident had been the bombing of a chemical plant resulting in the leakage of chlorine gas, or some other terrorist attack. Knowing how to evacuate, who will be responsible and where people will go is even more crucial in a terrorist scenario.

The people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast had two days to leave and prepare for Katrina. Terrorist attacks provide no warning and induce fear and chaos that dramatically complicate emergency response. Local officials will need to make the tough calls right away and communicate them to the public clearly and unambiguously. For the system to work, citizens must trust what they hear from first responders and follow instructions. Evacuation plans will have to be implemented quickly and with precision.

Four years after 9/11, Katrina's terrible toll shows us that we still have a great deal of work to do.

(David Schanzer is director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security based at Duke University. He is a former Minority Staff director of the U.S. House Homeland Security Committee.)



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