



Military due to move in to New Orleans

Governor warns thugs: Troops 'know how to shoot and kill'

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NEW ORLEANS, Louisiana (CNN) -- A fearful Friday has arrived in lawless New Orleans, with police snipers stationed on the roof of their precinct, trying to protect it from the armed thugs roaming seemingly at will through the flood-ravaged city.

The surreal scene comes amid wretched chaos, with incredible scenes of desperation for those people still marooned in the city more than three days after Hurricane Katrina struck a deadly and devastating blow.

Adding to the uncertainty Friday morning was a large explosion in the city's railroad district, possibly from a rail car. (See video on the military response -- 2:40)

Authorities were trying to get a hazardous materials team to the area, a police officer told CNN. The officer said he believed the team could reach the area by vehicle since the water there had receded.

He said he believed "several cars blew up," but it was not known what they were carrying.

No other details were immediately available.

Earlier, police officers told CNN that some of their fellow officers had simply stopped showing up for duty, cutting manpower by 20 percent or more in some precincts. Before Thursday night fell, police were stopping anyone they saw on the street and warning them that they were not safe from armed bands of young men who were attacking people and attempting to rape women.

A fed-up Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco warned the lawbreakers that extra troops have already arrived in the city, and others are on the way -- and "they're locked and loaded."

She said Thursday night that 300 soldiers from the Arkansas National Guard had arrived -- "fresh back from Iraq."

"These are some of the 40,000 extra troops that I have demanded," Blanco said. "They have M-16s, and they're locked and loaded ... I have one message for these hoodlums: These troops know how to shoot and kill, and they are more than willing to do so if necessary, and I expect they will."

Blanco earlier Thursday gave the grim news that "thousands" of people died in the hurricane and its aftermath in New Orleans and surrounding parishes, though she said no official count had been compiled.

Recovery efforts are also continuing in Mississippi, where Katrina washed away entire neighborhoods and killed at least 185 people.

"We got hit by the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States," Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour told CNN Thursday.

'Conditions of urban warfare'

Outside the Louisiana Superdome, where as many as 30,000 people sought shelter, refugees waiting for a bus out of town completely covered an outside plaza, where they waited in the heat and rain. Several people in the crowd collapsed and had to be carried away by National Guard troops.

The Houston Astrodome in Texas, where thousands of refugees had been bused over the past couple of days, stopped accepting refugees late Thursday.

However, authorities later decided to process evacuees at the Astrodome and house them in the nearby Reliant Arena, said Patrick Trahan, city spokesman.

Other New Orleans refugees are being taken to Huntsville, Texas, along with San Antonio and Dallas, he said.

At the Ernest Morial Convention Center in New Orleans, thousands of increasingly frustrated people waited for help amid dead bodies, feces and garbage, in 90-degree heat and rain with little food and water. (See video on the desperate conditions -- 4:36)

A National Guard helicopter finally came to drop them some supplies, and Mayor Ray Nagin advised those inside the convention center to march across a bridge to the other side of the Mississippi River for help.

Federal Emergency Management Director Michael Brown told CNN that federal officials were unaware of the crowds at the convention center until Thursday, despite the fact that city officials had been telling people for days to gather there.

"We just learned about that today, and so I have directed that we have all available resources to get to that convention center to make sure that they have the food and water, the medical care that they need," he said.

Brown also said his agency was attempting to work "under conditions of urban warfare."

An effort to evacuate patients and staff from downtown's Charity Hospital had to be suspended after a sniper opened fire on rescuers. The hospital was caring for about 200 patients with no power or water, and the only food left was a couple of cans of vegetables and some graham crackers, according to a doctor at the scene. (Full story)

Sgt. Mark Mix of the Louisiana State Police told CNN late Thursday that a force of police officers would be arriving in New Orleans soon to beef up the law-and-order effort.

Mix said the officers would be coming from Texas, Arkansas, Kentucky, and even Michigan to join with Louisiana law authorities in bringing order to the streets.

"The state of civil unrest is probably going to come to an abrupt end in the very near future," Mix said.

Meanwhile, stranded people remained on roofs, in the backs of trucks or gathered in large groups on higher ground, having little or no idea when help would arrive, or whether it would come at all. (See video on the continuing rescues -- 4:03)

Buildings smoldered from fire and gas leaks bubbled up through brackish floodwater, occasionally catching fire and burning on the water surface.

Despite the deteriorating conditions in the city, hurricane survivors from neighboring Plaquemines Parish have started streaming into the city, according to Nagin.

"We are overwhelmed and out of resources, but we welcome them with open arms and will figure this out together," the mayor said in a written statement.

Trying to quell the violence and chaos, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said Thursday that 4,200 National Guard troops trained as military police will be deployed in New Orleans over the next three days, which he said would quadruple the law enforcement presence in the city.

The first contingent of 100 military police officers arrived at Louis Armstrong International Airport late Thursday -- combat-ready for immediate deployment in New Orleans.

Suffering amid the corpses

A heartbreaking humanitarian catastrophe unfolded at the convention center, near the Mississippi River, where thousands of refugees with nowhere else to go gathered, seeking help and hoping for bus rides out of the city.

They waited in increasing frustration in hot, unsanitary conditions, with little food and water. Numerous bodies could be seen, both inside and outside the facility, and one man died of a seizure while a CNN crew was at the scene.

A National Guard helicopter dropped food and water to the refugees Thursday afternoon, although the amount was not nearly enough to meet the needs of the throngs that had gathered.

Shortly after disturbing images from the convention center were broadcast on CNN, Nagin sent out a statement that he called a "desperate SOS," advising those gathered there to march over the Crescent City Connection bridge to the west bank of the Mississippi River to find relief in neighboring Jefferson Parish.

"The convention center is unsanitary and unsafe, and we are running out of supplies for the 15- to 20,000 people," said Nagin, who also said officials did not expect to have enough buses to evacuate people from the convention center.

There were similar stories across the city. At the Ritz-Carlton Hotel on Canal Street, Phyllis Patrick said she and other hotel guests were in "dire straits." The hotel has been trying to bring in buses to evacuate them, but she said the Federal Emergency Management Agency "will not let them in."

"I don't believe that we have very much food left at all. We had no lunch today. All we're being given is a glass of water," she said. Off-duty police officers were guarding the hotel with shotguns to protect them from bands of looters outside, she said.

"It just amazes us to hear what is going on outside, that people don't understand the seriousness of the situation," she said.

Boat rescue teams looking for Katrina survivors told CNN they had been ordered to stand down Thursday by FEMA officials concerned about security. However, FEMA issued a statement from Washington denying that it had suspended operations, though the agency conceded that there had been "isolated incidents where security has become an issue."

However, U.S. Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Jeffrey Carter told CNN that its rescue efforts had been suspended in some areas, although they continued in other parts of the city.

"We're having to hold off going in until we're assured that the areas are safe to transit," he said. "We're following the lead of FEMA on that."

At Armstrong airport, a field hospital set up by FEMA was overwhelmed with patients. Equipment normally used to move luggage was instead ferrying patients to a treatment center and to planes and buses for evacuation.

Ozro Henderson, a medical team commander with FEMA, said staff was "so overwhelmed, it's not funny."

"I do not have the words in my vocabulary to describe what is happening here," Henderson said. "Catastrophe and disaster don't explain it."

One bright spot Thursday was news that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers expects to complete the sealing off of the 17th Street Canal, in western New Orleans, where a flood-control levee breached, sending floodwater cascading into the downtown area.

Two other breaches in northern and eastern New Orleans remain to be repaired. The Corps has had some problems getting access to one of the breaches.

Other developments

In Washington, the Senate convened in special session Thursday night and approved a \$10.5 billion disaster relief request from the Bush administration. The House is expected to do the same when it takes up the matter Friday. (Full story)

The debate is raging over whether the emergency response to the hurricane has been adequate. (Full story)

Gasoline prices spiked as high as \$5 a gallon in some areas Thursday as consumers fearing a gas shortage raced to the pumps. The run-up in prices prompted Bush to warn against gouging and to encourage Americans to conserve. (Full story) (See video on Katrina's possible impact on you)

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