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Saturday, September 03, 2005

FLIGHT 93
FROM CHAOS TO COURAGE

By Ann Rodgers, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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As the National Guard delivered food to the New Orleans convention center yesterday, American Red Cross officials said that federal emergency management authorities would not allow them to do the same.

Other relief agencies say the area is so damaged and dangerous that they doubted they could conduct mass feeding there now.

"The Homeland Security Department has requested and continues to request that the American Red Cross not come back into New Orleans," said Renita Hosler, spokeswoman for the Red Cross.

"Right now access is controlled by the National Guard and local authorities. We have been at the table every single day [asking for access]. We cannot get into New Orleans against their orders."

Calls to the Department of Homeland Security and its subagency, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, were not returned yesterday.

Though frustrated, Hosler understood the reasons. The goal is to move people out of an uninhabitable city, and relief operations might keep them there. Security

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is so bad that she fears feeding stations might get ransacked.

"It's not about fault and blame right now. The situation is like an hourglass, and we are in the smallest part right now. Everything is trying to get through it," she said. "They're trying to help people get out."

Obstacles in downtown New Orleans have stymied rescuers who got there. The Salvation Army has two of its officers trapped with more than 200 people -- three requiring dialysis -- in its own downtown building. They were alerted by a 30-second plea for food and water before the phone went dead.

On Wednesday, The Salvation Army rented three boats for a rescue operation. They knew the situation was desperate, and that their own people were inside, said Maj. Donna Hood, associate director of development for the Army.

"The boats couldn't get through," she said. Although she doesn't know the details, she believes huge debris and electrical wires made passage impossible.

"We have 51 emergency canteens on the ground in the other affected areas. But where the need is greatest, in downtown New Orleans, there just is no access. That is the problem every relief group is facing," she said.

"America is obviously going to have to rethink disaster relief," said Jim Burton, director of volunteer mobilization for the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Southern Baptists, who work under the Red Cross logo, are one of the largest, best-equipped providers of volunteer disaster relief in the United States. Most hot meals for disaster victims are cooked by Southern Baptist mobile kitchen units. Burton is a veteran of many hurricanes.

"Right now everybody is looking at FEMA and pointing fingers. Frankly, I have to tell you, I'm sympathetic. When in your lifetime have we experienced this? Even though we all do disaster

scenario planning, we have to accept the reality that this is an extraordinary event. This is America's tsunami, that struck and ravaged America's most disaster-vulnerable city," he said.

Because New Orleans remains under water, it is different from other cities where Katrina struck harder, but where relief efforts are proceeding normally. Agencies place workers and supplies outside disaster areas before storms, to move in quickly. But there are always delays, Burton said, because nothing is deployed until experts survey the damage and decide where to most effectively put relief services.

The Southern Baptists operate more than 30 mobile kitchens that can each produce 5,000 to 25,000 meals daily, as well as mobile showers and communications trucks equipped with ham radios and cell phones. They are supporting refugee centers in Texas and Tennessee, and doing relief in Mississippi and Alabama. They have placed mobile kitchens around New Orleans to feed people as they come out.

Initially they tried to drive a tractor-trailer kitchen into New Orleans from Tennessee. It was stopped by the Mississippi Highway Patrol because the causeway it would have to cross had been destroyed, Burton said.

His agency has planned for missing bridges. The Southern Baptists' worst-case planning is for reaching Memphis after an earthquake on the New Madrid fault, which in 1812 whiplashed at a stone-crushing 8.1 on the Richter scale. Burton envisions the Mississippi without bridges.

So when state and local Southern Baptists raise money to build a mobile kitchen, he tells them to design it to be hoisted in by helicopter.

After Katrina, he thought he would have to airlift a feeding unit to one isolated town, but a road was cleared, he said. He doubts that dropping a kitchen into the New Orleans' poisoned waters, filled with raw sewage, dead bodies and possible industrial

contaminants, would do any good. It made sense to prepare meals outside the area and truck them in or bring people out.

"The most important thing is to get the people out of that environment," he said.

He expects unusual problems to continue, because victims of Katrina flooding will need emergency food for far longer than the usual week or so. He's planning on at least two months.

Like the military, relief work requires a supply chain. Because business management favors just-in-time inventory, rather than stockpiling goods in warehouses, there isn't a huge stock of food to draw on, he said.

"When you go into a local area, it doesn't take long to wipe out the local food inventories," he said.

The Red Cross serves pre-packaged food, including self-heating "HeaterMeals" and snacks, that require no preparation. Yesterday the Red Cross was running evacuation shelters in 16 states, and on Thursday, the last day for which totals were available, served 170,000 meals and snacks in 24 hours.

While emergency shelters typically empty out days after a hurricane or other natural disaster, in Katrina's case they are becoming more crowded, Hosler said. People who had evacuated to the homes of relatives or hotels are moving in because they're out of money or want to be closer to what is left of their homes.

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