New Orleans becomes a war zone

A dress rehearsal for martial law?

Bill Van Auken
8 September 2005

The disaster that struck New Orleans and the southern Gulf Coast has given rise to the largest military mobilization in modern history on US soil. Nearly 65,000 US military personnel are now deployed in the disaster area, transforming the devastated port city into a war zone.

Squads of combat-equipped troops toting assault rifles and columns of humvees with gunners at the ready crisscross its flooded streets. Soldiers with bayonets mounted have begun house-to-house canvassing of the city to enforce the complete removal of its civilian population.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the disastrous delay in providing aid to the city's beleaguered citizens was in large part a matter of waiting until this massive military force was ready to deploy.

With New Orleans under de facto martial law, its mayor, Ray Nagin, issued an order Tuesday for the forced evacuation of its remaining residents, estimated at anywhere between a few thousand and tens of thousands. New Orleans police officials indicated that they were prepared to forcibly drag people from their homes.

US military spokesmen initially said that they would support the operation, but claimed that uniformed soldiers would not participate directly in these evictions. But Army Lt. Gen. Joseph Inge, deputy commander of US Northern Command, told Pentagon reporters Wednesday that national guard units, which are formally under state control, could be used to compel people to leave.

Nagin's proclamation asserted that the presence of civilians in the city would "impede" and "distract" from the recovery operation. Some officials have cited a potential public health disaster resulting from the city's inundation by waters polluted by toxic chemicals and decaying corpses.

Whatever the validity of these motives, the proposed forced evacuation will constitute the most massive military operation mounted against the people of an American city since the Civil War.

While the US military deployment includes medical teams, search-and-rescue helicopters and other forms of relief, the largest troop contingents have been deployed as a military occupation force, to protect private property and suppress civil disturbances.

The Pentagon has issued continuous press releases touting how many millions of meals, gallons of water and pounds of ice it has delivered to the city in the last few days. These reports, however, beg the question of why such supplies were not made available during the first four days after the hurricane hit, when impoverished residents of the city were literally dying in the streets.

With the bulk of the population having left the city, the greatest supply operations now will involve not the relief of hurricane victims but logistical support for the tens of thousands of troops themselves.

The Bush administration's defenders have made demonstrably false claims that no one could have expected a disaster on this scale, while attempting to shift blame onto state and local officials. The deadly delay in the relief effort has been attributed by the administration's opponents to the government's criminal incompetence and seeming indifference to the plight of New Orleans' largely poor and black population.

While no doubt incompetence and indifference played a major role, there is also strong evidence that aid was deliberately withheld by the White House and the Pentagon as part of a strategy for asserting unfettered military control over the city.

Both hurricane victims and public officials have given multiple accounts of US authorities actively turning back aid and blocking rescue attempts in the days that followed the breaching of the city's levees.

Aaron Broussard, president of Jefferson Parish, for example, broke down in tears Sunday during an appearance on the NBC television program "Meet the Press," declaring, "It's not just Katrina that caused all these deaths in New Orleans here. Bureaucracy has committed murder here in the greater New Orleans area."

He cited repeated actions by FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Administration) that involved the deliberate sabotage of relief efforts. He reported that FEMA turned back trailer truckloads of water sent by Wal-Mart, claiming the city didn't need them. He also said that the Coast Guard's offer of fuel urgently needed to power generators was countermanded by FEMA.

Finally, he said that just a day earlier FEMA agents had come in and "cut all of our emergency communication lines" without any warning. The local sheriff, he added, had the lines reconnected and then posted armed guards to see that they were not cut again.

This last, and most sinister, example is in keeping with the Pentagon's "information war" doctrine, which demands the complete control of communications in an area targeted for invasion and occupation.

Denise Bottcher, press secretary for Governor Blanco, also charged that FEMA deliberately blocked offers of aid from Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson and others.

And a spokesman for Sen. Mary Landrieu (Democrat, Louisiana), told the media that FEMA held up aid from both public and private agencies, withholding approval for the US Forest Service to use water tanker aircraft to put out fires and delaying the arrival of Amtrak trains to evacuate people from the city. Offers by private companies to provide communications equipment were also held up by the agency. There were also reports that the Red Cross was prevented from going into the city and that FEMA refused to allow the unloading of food, water and medical supplies brought by ships into New Orleans harbor.

The apparent aim of this organized obstructionist behavior by the

© World Socialist Web Site

agency that is supposedly charged with coordinating relief was to block any significant aid until the military could intervene in the city with overwhelming force.

This came on Friday, with military commanders treating New Orleans as a combat operation. This was the term used by Brig. Gen. Gary Jones, commander of the Louisiana National Guard's Joint Task Force, in an interview with the *Army Times*.

"This place is going to look like Little Somalia," said General Jones. "We're going to go out and take this city back. This will be a combat operation to get this city under control." The newspaper clearly got the message, referring in its report to troops coming in to "fight the insurgency in the city."

There were numerous reports from New Orleans residents of being treated as if they were indeed "insurgents," with police and troops sealing off the city to prevent attempts to leave.

Over 1,000 National Guard troops and police were sent in Friday to seize control of the New Orleans Convention Center, one of the areas where evacuees had been left to die. Military officials referred to the operation as a "clear and hold" mission, using the phraseology employed by the Pentagon to describe its attacks on towns in Iraq where there is substantial resistance to the US occupation.

Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, bragged of having "stormed the convention center," while acknowledging to Pentagon reporters, "We waited until we had enough force in place to do an overwhelming force."

Asked specifically by a reporter if the buildup of this force was the reason why it took until Friday before the National Guard came in with any significant aid, Blum responded, "That is not only fair, it is accurate. You've concisely stated exactly what was needed, and I told you why. We took the time to build the right force."

Also on Friday, Bush administration officials sent Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco a legal document demanding that she sign over control of the state's National Guard as well as state and local police units. The memo sought their federalization under the Insurrection Act, a statute that allows the president to take control of state militias under conditions in which state governments themselves are unable to "suppress rebellion."

Blanco rejected this demand, no doubt seeing it as an admission of failure by her own administration.

For Bush, the assumption of full military control was a matter of political importance. Under the Insurrection Act, the US president is required to issue a public order for those in "rebellion" to cease and disperse. There is little doubt that had he gained the acquiescence of the Louisiana governor, he would have taken to the airwaves as the "commander-in-chief," in an attempt to dispel the wave of outrage sweeping the country over the government's response to the disaster.

As early as Wednesday, White House spokesman Scott McClellan was telling the press that "martial law has now been declared in Mississippi and Louisiana," an indication of the administration's intentions but not the legal reality in either state.

Blocked from achieving total military control, Bush dispatched Lt. Gen. Russell Honore from the US Northern Command to develop a parallel command structure overseeing active duty troops.

The media has lionized Honore, portraying him as the "John Wayne" of New Orleans—with the city's residents presumably assuming the role of Indians. The general thrust of such commentary is that the military is the only institution that can "get the job done."

That the civilian agency which was created to deal with such disasters—FEMA—has been gutted, with an unemployed former horse show organizer, Michael Brown, placed at its head, has everything to do with such perceptions.

The most adamant proponent of the thesis that the military must take charge is the *Wall Street Journal*, whose editorial board enjoys the closest political relations with the Bush White House. In a Tuesday editorial titled "Bush and Katrina," the *Journal* commented: "The New Orleans mess improved only after the Pentagon got involved. Though the military is normally barred from domestic law enforcement by the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, Defense officials have been doing a lot of creative thinking about what they can do and what the public now expects post-September 11."

Washington's response to the disaster in New Orleans is hardly a manifestation of "creative thinking," much less "what the public now expects."

In reality the US ruling elite and both major parties have used September 11 as the pretext for implementing far-reaching attacks on democratic rights and breaching legal barriers—such as Posse Comitatus—against the use of military force against the American people.

Just last month, the *Washington Post* published an article revealing that the US military's Northern Command had developed a series of "war plans" for the military "to take charge" in domestic crises. (See: "Pentagon devising scenarios for martial law in US".)

While apparently these plans involved a response to supposed terrorist attacks, including the detonation of a nuclear device in a major American city, the catastrophe that struck New Orleans provided ideal conditions for testing the plans out.

The growing reliance on the military, however, is a response neither to terrorist threats or natural catastrophes. On the international arena, the US ruling elite has turned toward the use of military aggression and the seizure of strategic assets and territories as a means of offsetting the relative decline of American capitalism's position in the world economy.

At home, the turn toward martial law is a manifestation of growing fears within America's fabulously wealthy financial oligarchy that conditions of social polarization and the steady decline in the living standards of the vast majority of working people have created a social powder keg.

The deliberate denial of food, water and means of escape to tens of thousands of suffering New Orleanians in order to prepare a massive military exercise is a crime. It is moreover a warning that the deepening of the social crisis in America raises the threat of military repression and dictatorship.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site