

Kansas tornado recovery hampered by dispatch of National Guard to Iraq

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A massive hurricane leveled the small US town of Greensburg, Kansas on Friday evening, killing at least 10 people and destroying 95 percent of its homes and businesses. After the devastation, Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius said the state's ability to respond to the disaster had been impeded because National Guard troops and equipment needed for the recovery effort were in Iraq.

The tornado, categorized as an F-5, the highest level, was the strongest recorded in the US since May 1999. The twister was up to 1.7 miles wide, with wind speeds of 205 miles (330 km) per hour.

The 10 deaths mean that 73 people have been killed in tornados in the US so far this year, making 2007 the deadliest year since 1999, with several more months remaining in the tornado season.

The death toll in Greensburg could have even been greater given the enormous destruction the tornado caused. Even the 5 percent of the city that was not destroyed sustained severe damage. Because of a warning given 20 minutes prior to the tornado's impact, many people were able to retreat to basements.

Greensburg is a small town of 1,600 people in southern Kansas, with a per capita income of \$18,054, just over half of the national average. Most of those killed were elderly people, with limited mobility, and without access to basements or cellars in their homes.

"When you look around at the devastation here, it is amazing that there aren't more deaths," Sharon Watson, a spokesman for the Kansas Division of Emergency Management, told the Associated Press. "You really can't look in any direction without seeing destruction, without seeing houses that are demolished, piles of rubble."

Authorities in Kansas have begun clean-up operations, but Governor Sebelius, a Democrat, said the

effort had been hampered by the fact that many of the state's National Guard troops are in Iraq, along with much of its heavy equipment.

In an interview with CNN Monday, Sebelius said, "I don't think there is any question if you are missing trucks, Humvees and helicopters that the response is going to be slower. The real victims here will be the residents of Greensburg, because the recovery will be at a slower pace."

She said that neighboring states also lacked equipment to help Kansas. "The issue for the National Guard is the same wherever you go in the country," she said. "Stuff that we would have borrowed is gone." She reported that she had asked the Pentagon and the Bush administration in December and January for new equipment to replenish what had been sent to Iraq, but received no response.

The AP reported that Major General Todd Bunting, the state's adjutant general, said the state's National Guard had only 40 percent of its necessary equipment, down from 60 percent prior to the war.

The White House was on the defensive Tuesday morning. President Bush is preparing to visit the town Wednesday in order to make a show of concern for the plight of the Kansas residents.

Certainly the destruction of Greensburg has parallels, though on a smaller scale, with the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. That event revealed to the population of the entire world the enormous social inequality that characterizes the United States, as well as the gross incompetence and indifference of the Bush administration, state and city officials and the ruling elite as a whole. In the wake of Katrina, the lack of rescue and recovery equipment due to the war in Iraq was also a major issue.

Responding to Sebelius's charges, White House press

secretary Tony Snow insisted Tuesday morning, “As far as we know, the only thing the governor has requested are FM radios. There have been no requests to the National Guard for heavy equipment.... If you don’t request it, you’re not going to get it.” Later in the day, Snow was forced to backtrack, acknowledging that the state had also requested an urban search and rescue team, a mobile command center and several helicopters.

Evidently coming under political pressure, Sebelius herself backtracked on her previous remarks, saying through a spokesperson on Tuesday that the state had all it needed for the present disaster. “What the governor is talking about is down the road,” Nicole Corcoran, the governor’s spokeswoman, said.

Whatever its effect on the aftermath of the Kansas tornado, it has been long acknowledged that the war in Iraq has drained equipment that would be used to respond to natural disasters in the US. A 2005 report by the Government Accountability Office found that National Guard units across the country have only 34 percent of required equipment.

In the US, the National Guard plays the twin role of responding to natural disasters as well as domestic repression during times of social unrest. The guard generally acts under the control of the state governors, but they can also be activated for federal missions. The increasingly heavy reliance on these troops for the Iraq war has therefore become a major concern for state governors, who have been deprived of their use in the US. This has had an effect on disaster response.

National Guard troops deployed to Iraq have been instructed to leave essential equipment behind when they return to the US. This includes not only weapons, but helicopters, trucks, other heavy equipment and communications gear. The National Guard estimates that between 2003 and 2005, more than \$1.2 billion of its equipment had either been destroyed or left in Iraq.



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