

Use Military Bases To House Storm-Displaced

by Carl Osgood

Although large numbers of people have been moved out of the storm-stricken area, little consideration has been given to using regional military bases in the manner that Lyndon LaRouche has called for. Instead, evacuees are being scattered all over the country in shelters, like the Houston Astrodome, and National Guard armories, like the one in Washington, D.C, which currently hosts about 400 people from New Orleans. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has not asked the military to provide housing for large numbers of displaced people, nor will the military provide it unless asked by FEMA.

During a video-teleconference with reporters at the Pentagon on Sept. 7, Lt. Gen. Joseph Inge, the deputy commander of the U.S. Northern Command, could not even say to what degree military bases were being considered for housing evacuees. This characterizes the piecemeal approach to the problem across-the-board.

In fact, while LaRouche is placing such importance on military infrastructure as part of the recovery process from this disaster, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has been

Make Use of Military/National Guard Bases To House Those Displaced by Katrina



Source: U.S. Department of Defense, *EIR*

Thousands of persons who lost their homes in Hurricane Katrina could be housed nearby in the region in active military or National Guard facilities, or housing set up there by the military.

1. England Air Force Base, Alexandria, La. Closed in 1992 by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC). Now the home of an industrial park, and port of embarkation for Army troops from Fort Polk.
2. Fort Polk, north of Lake Charles, La. Home of the Army's Joint Readiness Training Center, it comprises 198,000 acres.
3. Barksdale Air Force Base, in northwest Louisiana, near Bossier City. Home of a B-52 wing and an Air Force Reserve A-10 wing. It comprises 22,000 acres.
4. Columbus Air Force Base, Miss., in the northeast part of the state, near the Alabama border. This installation is used for basic and advanced pilot training.
5. Fort Rucker, Ala., 80 miles south of Montgomery. Home of the Army Aviation Center, it comprises 64,500 acres.
6. Fort McClellan, Anniston, Ala. Closed as an Army post by the 1995 BRAC round. Its 45,000 acres were turned over to the Alabama National Guard for use as a training facility.
7. Fort Chaffee, Ark. Closed in the 1995 BRAC, its 66,000 acres were turned over to the Arkansas National Guard for use as a training facility.
8. Eglin Air Force Base, near Fort Walton Beach in the Florida panhandle. It is used as a base for testing and evaluating aircraft, munitions, and electronic warfare systems. It comprises 724 square miles of ranges.
9. Meridian Naval Air Station, Miss.
10. Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.

This list excludes the two Gulf Coast region military installations which were directly and severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina: New Orleans Naval Air Station, La., and Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss.

trying to shed what he considers "excess" military infrastructure, as indicated by the regional hearings over the past three months on what bases are to be down-scaled or closed altogether.

Rather than the defense of the common good, Rumsfeld's strategy is premised on real estate scams and cost-cutting. If allowed to prevail now, his mentality will mean immediate harm to hundreds of thousands, and will ensure that the "surge" capacity required will not be there to deal with future emergencies.

There are nine major military facilities in the immediate vicinity of the disaster zone, including two that were closed by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) rounds in the 1990s, some of which are providing support for rescue and recovery operations, including to FEMA. These include Barksdale Air Force Base, England Air Force Base, and Fort Polk in Louisiana; Fort McClellan, Fort Rucker, and Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama; Columbus Air Force Base and Naval Air Station Meridian in Mississippi; and Eglin Air Force Base in the Florida panhandle.

Fort McClellan and England AFB were both closed in the 1990s; Fort McClellan was turned over to the Alabama National Guard, and England AFB was turned into an indus-

trial park, with the Army retaining access to it as a port of embarkation for troops at Fort Polk. Another base closed by BRAC in the 1990s is Fort Chaffee, in Arkansas. During the early 1980s, Fort Chaffee was, in fact, used to house Cuban refugees. The Army turned over 66,000 acres of that facility to the Arkansas National Guard in 1999. The scale and scope of the Katrina disaster is such, however, that many bases outside the immediate vicinity, including in Texas, Georgia, and other states are also providing support.

So far, only three bases are providing, in very small degree, some of the kind of support LaRouche is calling for. The 4,000 Louisiana National Guard troops that will be returning from Iraq over the next couple of weeks will be put up temporarily at Fort Polk. Maxwell AFB is housing some small number of people. Eglin and other bases are also supporting field hospitals, which are being staffed by the Department of Health and Human Services.

The Associated Press reported on Sept. 2 that FEMA had approved the use of empty dormitories at Fort McClellan for housing evacuees, which, according to Alabama's Governor, Bob Riley, have space for up to 10,000 people. Also being used to support relief and recovery efforts is Keesler AFB in Biloxi, Miss., although that base was devastated by the storm,

reportedly losing upwards of 90 percent of its housing.

The lack of military initiative on this issue has spurred Congressional calls for action, however. On Sept. 3, Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) called for the reopening of England AFB to house evacuees. On Sept. 7, Representatives John Spratt (D-S.C.) and James Clyburn (D-S.C.) wrote to FEMA Director Michael Brown, proposing that 450 vacant housing units at Shaw Air Force Base, S.C., along with other vacant housing at other military bases, should also be made available to house Hurricane Katrina victims.

Their letter states, in part: “Shaw Air Force Base in Sumter, S.C., like many military bases, has several hundred housing units scheduled for demolition, which are to be replaced by privatized housing development. Based on our discussions with the base, there appear to be some 450 housing units that were vacated three years ago, and have been kept up with essential maintenance since then. Many of these units would require plumbing and electrical work before being re-occupied, but most can be put into habitable condition. . . .”