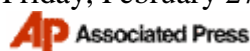


National Guard is pulling out of New Orleans

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NEW ORLEANS, LA -- Three and a half years after Hurricane Katrina, the National Guard is pulling the last of its troops out of New Orleans this weekend, leaving behind a city still desperate and dangerous.

Residents long distrustful of the city's police force are worried they will have to fend for themselves.

"I don't know if crime will go up after these guys leave. But I know a lot more of us will be packing our own pieces now to make sure we're protected," said Calvin Stewart, owner of a restaurant and store.

New Orleans Police Superintendent Warren Riley said his rebuilt police department is up to the job of protecting the city. "I think we're ready to handle things," he said.

The National Guardsmen were welcomed as liberators when they arrived in force in a big convoy more than four days after Katrina struck New Orleans in August 2005 and plunged the city into anarchy. The force was eventually 15,000 strong.

The last of the troops were removed in January 2006 as civil authority returned, but then, after a surge in bloodshed, 360 were sent back in beginning in mid-2006 to help police keep order. As of February, only about 100 troops were left in the city.

With Louisiana facing a \$341 million budget deficit, state lawmakers were reluctant to keep the Guard in place any longer.

The Guard was used to patrol the less populated sections of the city where Katrina's floodwaters left most houses uninhabitable. That included the woeful Ninth Ward, where renovated houses are outnumbered by moldy, boarded-up wrecks and weed-choked vacant lots.

In their camouflage uniforms and Humvees, the troops were often a welcome sight.

"We don't have enough cops. It's not that they're bad, it's just that there's not enough of them. These guys are Johnny-on-the-spot when you need them," said 57-year-old Tom Hightower, who is still trying to get the mold out of his house. He added: "This is still a spooky place after dark."

The troops had full arrest powers but were required to call New Orleans police on serious matters. In their time on the streets, Guard troops were involved in only one shooting, and the district attorney ruled it justified.

The Guardsmen answered lots of calls involving domestic violence, reported to be up in New Orleans since the hurricane, and handled car wrecks, house and business alarms and other problems.

"One of the biggest things we did was keep those places safe so people could rebuild," said Sgt. Wayne Lewis, a New Orleans native who has been patrolling the streets since January 2007. "People would put the things to rebuild in their houses and thieves would come along and take them right out again. We stopped a lot of that."

New Orleans had 210 murders in 2007, making it the murder capital of America, with the highest per-capita rate in the country. That number dropped to 179 in 2008.

Nevertheless, "crime continues to be this community's No. 1 concern. Even with the lower numbers it is still unacceptably high," said Rafael Goyeneche, executive director of the Metropolitan Crime Commission.

Before the hurricane, the police force had more than 1,600 officers. But its ranks were reduced after the storm by more than 30 percent because of desertions, dismissals, retirements and suicides. (New Orleans has only about 70 percent of its pre-Katrina population of 455,000.)

The department has climbed back up to about 1,500 officers, and hopes to add by the end of April more than two dozen Guardsmen who liked the work so much they signed on.

The Guard was supposed to leave on Jan. 1, but Louisiana lawmakers approved funding to keep 100 troops through February to give the police more time to recruit officers.

The Guard's departure, which will take place after the final patrol ends at 3 a.m. Sunday, will be low-key. There will be no convoy, no bands playing. The last few Guardsmen on the street will check in their vehicles and head home for good.

"I don't think the city is ready for us to leave," said Lt. Ronald Brown, who has been part of Task Force Gator since April 2007. "I'd like to see us stay. I think we make a difference, but I guess it's a money thing."