

Joint ops plan driving hurricane mobility response

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TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. -- As Hurricane Ike marches across the Gulf of Mexico, military and civilian disaster response forces continue to coordinate requests for mobility support outlined in a new joint operations plan that removes hurdles previously impeding response to natural disasters.

Lessons learned in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 prompted U.S. Northern Command and Air Forces Northern to create a plan that greatly improved communication, coordination and collaboration between local, state and federal officials and their military counterparts, said Col. Greg Nelson, deputy director of mobility forces for Air Forces Northern.

"Hurricane Katrina was the nation's most effective use of air mobility since the Berlin Airlift, but there was no visibility of what was coming into the crisis area or what should come in first, second, third, etc.," Colonel Nelson said. "We needed a system to provide visibility of all aircraft coming into the crisis area and the ability to coordinate the flow based on the priority of need."

Joint Concept of Operations, Air Mobility Coordination for Crisis Response, or J-CONOPS Air Mobility, became the solution.

In June 2007, Colonel Nelson, Col. Bob Millmann (another AFNORTH deputy DIRMOBFOR) and Federal Aviation Administration representative Carmel Leese met to lay the plan's groundwork. Taking notes originally scribbled on a napkin, senior decision makers from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Federal Aviation Administration, Northern Command, Transportation Command, Air Mobility Command, the 618th Tanker Airlift Control Center, the National Guard Bureau, the Army and Air National Guard and the Air Force Reserve Command met to turn these ideas into a true interagency, comprehensive joint air mobility plan.

"J-CONOPS Air Mobility ... provides optimized air mobility support to the lead civilian [crisis response] agency," Colonel Nelson said.

During natural disasters like Hurricane Ike, this support network begins before the storm hits and remains in place throughout post-storm response and recovery operations at the local, state and federal levels.

"We stand up and stand down as needed in support of crisis response within the United States," said Colonel Nelson, who also serves with the Kentucky Air National Guard's Joint Forces Headquarters.

Earlier this year, the joint mobility plan saw its first "live fly" test during exercise Ardent Sentry. The annual interagency exercise is designed to hone coordination between the Department of Defense as well as federal, state, local and private agencies in a series of scenarios ranging from natural disasters to terrorist incidents.

Based on its successes during Ardent Sentry, the plan received a seal of approval from the commanders of AFNORTH as well as 18th Air Force, which provides mobility support to combatant commanders. Gen. Gene Renuart, commander of U.S. Northern Command, approved the plan on Aug. 22 -- around the same time Hurricane Gustav started to form in the Atlantic.

In response to Hurricanes Gustav, Hanna and Ike's pending arrival, AFNORTH is implementing the J-CONOPS Air Mobility plan from the Regional Air Movement Control Center operating from the Contingency Operations Center here.

The RAMCC (pronounced ram-see) concept first saw use during the Balkan conflict in the 1990s with centers opened in Afghanistan in 2002 and in Iraq in 2003 to manage the heavy amount of airlift flowing into these regions.

"The RAMCC coordinates all U.S. military air mobility support into and out of specific airports in the crisis area," Colonel Nelson said.

These airfields are designated as Aerial Ports of Embarkation and Aerial Ports of Debarkation. APOEs and APODs serve as major air mobility hubs established temporarily in response to natural disasters and can serve as evacuation points for people living directly in the storm's path.

"APOE and APODs represent 'big muscle' air mobility locations where a lot of aircraft will come and go," Colonel Nelson said. "The J-CONOPS, with the FAA as the lead agency, orchestrates the tremendous flow of aircraft moving into and out of those locations."