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THE VANCOUVER SUN

Descent into horror: Gunfire, looting stall B.C. rescuers

Vancouver Sun
Friday, September 2, 2005
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Section: News
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Source: Vancouver Sun

Gunfire, looting and civil unrest in Louisiana forced the 42 members of Vancouver's Urban Search and Rescue team to "hunker down" Thursday in Kenner, La., until local police deem it safe enough for them to conduct rescue operations.

"The lid has blown off this place," said Brian Inglis, manager of the Vancouver team in an update on the USAR website, vancouver.ca/usar.

"There's a lot of gunfire, a number of hostage situations right down the street. So all search and rescue has been halted in the area right now.

"We will not be performing any search and rescue operations for at least the next eight to 12 hours," he said in a 10 a.m. Thursday posting.

"It's far too dangerous for even the state troopers and police to wander out. It's absolutely crazy, the devastation is unreal -- the gunfire, the shooting, the looting is like something you see in a movie."

The team was posted to Kenner, 21 kilometres outside of New Orleans, after arriving at Lafayette, La. early Thursday morning.

Trooper Willie Williams of the Louisiana State Patrol confirmed the problems in a phone interview with The Vancouver Sun at about 5:30 p.m. Thursday.

"We have a situation of total and complete chaos here because of the fact that there is no electricity, no water, no anything, so we're having to work almost blind and everything, trying to do search and rescue," said Williams, who was escorting a National Guard unit to New Orleans.

"We've also had a situation of looters that have been taking pot-shots at rescuers, so we're combatting that as well at the same time."

The Vancouver team left at 8 p.m. Wednesday on a chartered flight and arrived in Lafayette around 4:30 a.m. local time Thursday with enough supplies to remain self-sustaining for up to 10 days.

Included in their gear were satellite phones to keep in touch with emergency agencies in B.C., but "even our satellite phones aren't working here right now," Inglis said.

Capt. Rob Jones-Cook of the Vancouver fire department said Thursday afternoon it had been 12 hours since the team had been in contact.

Williams said local search and rescue teams had just recently got access to satellite phones. Until then, "they were contacting each other face-to-face, getting assignments, going out doing what they had to do and reporting back. That's the way it was working," he said.

Vancouver police Const. Howard Chow said he was confident local police authorities could ensure the safety of the search and rescue team. Even though six members of the team are police officers, Chow said, "their role isn't to be police officers but to be searchers and rescuers.

"If you're asking if the team comes with a component with their guns, that wouldn't be the case," he said.

"With searches, you have the tendency to be focused on what you're looking for. Your mind is focused on a specific task, so clearly with something like this, they would have others to deal with the safety aspect of it," he said.

Vancouver police Sgt. Malcolm Cox, a USAR team member who couldn't go to Louisiana because of a knee injury, said he's not concerned about the group's safety.

"They're in a dangerous area, and they have to use the caution they would normally use, whether they are conducting rescue operations or in a danger zone, but you are down there to perform a task and do your job the way you have been trained."

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Idnumber: 200509020174

Edition: Final

Story Type: Crime

Length: 579 words

Keywords: NATURAL DISASTERS; HURRICANES; FLOODS; EVACUATIONS; EMERGENCY MEASURES; SEARCH & RESCUE; CANADIANS; SECURITY; NEW ORLEANS; UNITED STATES

PRODUCTION FIELDS

BASNUM: 4412002

NDATE: 20050902

NUPDATE: 20050902

DOB: 20050902

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