

National Guard and Reserves at the verge of collapse, panel reports

by Steve Liewer

SAN DIEGO - The simultaneous burdens of warfare and homeland defense have battered the National Guard and Reserves, leaving them thinly staffed, underequipped and on the verge of collapse, a blue-ribbon panel with strong ties to San Diego concluded Thursday in a report to Congress.

"They are at their lowest level of readiness in decades. They'll continue to be less and less ready," said Arnold Punaro, chairman of the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves and an executive for Scientific Applications International Corp., a San Diego defense contractor.

Fixing the situation starts with a major overhaul of federal agencies that manage these forces, the panel concluded after holding public hearings nationwide for a year. The commissioners, including three from San Diego, also recommended several measures to give reserve forces more clout and representation in Washington, D.C.

Some of their 23 proposed changes are already part of widely supported legislation moving through Congress. Others would only need approval by the executive branch.

"Our initial impression (of the findings) is very optimistic, very pleased," said Stephen M. Koper during a news conference in Washington, D.C., to release the report. He is a retired Air Force brigadier general and president of the National Guard Association of the United States.

Among other assertions, the commissioners accused the U.S. Defense Department of long neglecting the National Guard. They criticized it for chronically underfunding the contingent while overusing it for combat service since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

In addition, Punaro said the Pentagon has given short shrift to the Guard's civil-defense and

emergency-response roles.

Typically, governors nationwide oversee the Guard units in their respective states. But once those units are federalized - as hundreds have been for combat duty in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere - the governors lose control over them.

Meanwhile, governors can't fill gaps in their Guard ranks by automatically borrowing from reserve forces, which are controlled by the Pentagon. They also can't poach Guard troops from other states.

This lack of options hurt the military response following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when a large segment of the Louisiana National Guard was serving in Iraq and replacement forces couldn't be mobilized quickly to provide disaster relief.

On the war front, meager funding has forced nearly every Guard and Reserve unit to borrow service members and equipment from other units in order to meet the Pentagon's troop demands.

California has been especially hard-hit by this process. Punaro cited a 170-member transportation company from Lancaster that went to Iraq with only seven of its original soldiers.

Units from the state frequently deploy with only 40 to 60 percent of their initial members, said Col. Kerry Diminyatz, the California National Guard's assistant operations officer.

About 22,000 California Guard members have been called up since 2001 and about 3,000 are on active duty now, according to Pentagon figures.

Many of those soldiers have come from San Diego County, which is home to Guard and Reserve units based at armories in Kearny Mesa, National City and Escondido, said 2nd Lt. Scott Ghiringhelli, a spokesman for the Guard's headquarters in Sacramento.

Those units include the 40th Infantry Division, the 670th Military Police Company and the 96th Military Police Battalion, all of which have deployed to Iraq.

A year ago, Congress created the blue-ribbon panel and asked it to devise reforms for the National Guard and Reserve system. A congressional panel asked the commission to hold hearings coast to coast and render its findings by this spring, resulting in Thursday's report.

Among the commission's suggestions:

- Congress should establish a bipartisan council to advise federal officials on matters involving the National Guard and Reserves.

- The National Guard Bureau's commander should be equal in rank to members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, giving him more clout in the Pentagon.

- The departments of Defense and Homeland Security should set up programs to train National Guard troops on emergency-response and homeland-defense needs.

- Senior-level Guard and Reserve officers should have more chances to serve in joint-service commands and become high-ranking generals.

Copley News Service writer Paul M. Krawzak contributed to this report.

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