

HURRICANE KATRINA AFTERMATH

Katrina's body count could reach 10,000

*Bodies found piled
in freezer at
Convention Center*

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Staff writer

Arkansas National Guardsman Mikel Brooks stepped through the food service entrance of the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center Monday, flipped on the light at the end of his machine gun, and started pointing out bodies.

"Don't step in that blood - it's contaminated," he said. "That one with his arm sticking up in the air, he's an old man."

Then he shined the light on the smaller human figure under the white sheet next to the elderly man.

"That's a kid," he said. "There's another one in the freezer, a 7-year-old with her throat cut."

He moved on, walking quickly through the darkness, pulling his camouflage shirt to his face to screen out the overwhelming odor.

"There's an old woman," he said, pointing to a wheelchair covered by a sheet. "I escorted her in myself. And that old man got bludgeoned to death," he said of the body lying on the floor next to the wheelchair.

Brooks and several other Guardsmen said they had seen between 30 and 40 more bodies in the Convention Center's freezer. "It's not on, but at least you can shut the door," said fellow Guardsman Phillip Thompson.

The scene of rotting bodies inside the Convention Center reflected those in thousands of businesses, schools, homes and shelters across the metropolitan area. The official death count from Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana was 71 as of Monday evening, but that included only those bodies that had been brought to a make-shift morgue in St. Gabriel.

Nearly a full week after Hurricane Katrina, a rescue force the size of an invading army had not yet begun the task of retrieving the bodies Sunday. What's more, officials appeared to have no plan.

Daniel Martinez, a spokesman for FEMA working on Interstate 10 in eastern New Orleans, said plans for body recovery "are not being released yet."

Dozens of rescue workers questioned Monday said they knew of no protocol or collection points for bodies; none said they had retrieved



Staff photo by Alex Brandon

CONVENTION CENTER: ATF Senior Special Agent Dave Millen of the Special Response Team walks past one of many bodies found inside the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center on Monday. Millen, along with the New Orleans Police Department SWAT team, searched the building for anyone left following the mass evacuation of refugees.

even one of the many corpses seen floating in neighborhoods around the city as they searched for survivors.

Scores of rescue workers this week repeated the same mantra, over and over: We can't worry about the dead; we're still trying to save the living.

But as rescue teams across the city said they had checked nearly every house for survivors, the enormity of the death that lay in Hurricane Katrina's wake came into sharp focus even as the plans for taking care of the dead remained murky.

Mayor Ray Nagin, addressing the potential body count for the storm for the first time, said the storm may have claimed more than 10,000 lives.

In a news conference Monday morning, Deputy Chief Warren Riley said his department was "not responsible for recovery."

"We don't have a body count, but I can tell you it's growing. It's growing," he said.

As the rescue missions covered more and more ground but yielded

fewer survivors, New Orleans Police Deputy Chief Steve Nicholas said the time has come to start dealing with the dead.

"I know we're still rescuing people, but I think it's time we start pulling out the bodies," he said.

The highest concentration of casualties from Hurricane Katrina likely will come in the Lower 9th Ward, St. Bernard Parish, areas first inundated on Aug. 29 with floodwaters that engulfed second story homes in minutes. New Orleans also will likely see mass casualties, New Orleans Police Capt. Timothy Bayard said.

"We're going to see a lot more bodies out of New Orleans East than we anticipated," he said.

In just one subdivision, Sherwood Forest, survivors who showed up to the Convention Center on Monday said police told them roughly 90 people in the subdivision had died.

In St. Bernard, 22 bodies were found lashed together. Officials surmised the drowning victims had tried to stay together to keep themselves from being washed away in

the storm.

Lt. Governor Mitch Landrieu said "more than a thousand" people had died in St. Bernard. "When the death toll comes out, it's going to be a jolt for everybody," he said. "I'll be surprised if the casualties in St. Bernard are less than a thousand."

Even Uptown near the river, one of the few spots of dry land, a body lay in front of a white wooden shotgun double at 4732 Laurel St. The body of an older woman lay under a gray blanket, pinned down at the corners by brick and slate, adorned with a plastic-wrapped flower bouquet. Above her, a yellow cardboard sign quoting John 3:16 had been taped to the window.

Alcede Jackson
Rest in Peace
In the loving arms of Jesus
Given the length of time many had been dead, and in the water, some of the bodies already might be unrecognizable, and some may never be recovered.

Many trapped by flood waters in shelters found their own ways of dealing with those who died in their

midst.

Near an elementary school at Poland and St. Claude avenues, Dwight and Wilber Rhodes, two brothers, said they had tried to save a middle-aged man and woman at the Convention Center who appeared to have drowned.

"We performed CPR on them, but they were already dead," Dwight Rhodes said. "So we took the food out of the freezer and put the bodies in."

Of the four bodies that lay just inside the food service entrance of the Convention Center, the woman in the wheelchair rattled Brooks the most. When he found her two days before among the sea of suffering in front of the Convention Center where one of the last refugee camps evacuated, her husband sat next to her. He had only one concern when Brooks and some of his comrades carted her away.

"Bring me back my wheelchair," he recalled the man telling him.

One of the bodies, they said, was a girl they estimated to be 5 years old. Though they could not confirm it, they had heard she was gang-

raped.

"There was an old lady that said the little girl had been raped by two or three guys, and that she had told another unit. But they said they couldn't do anything about it with all the people there," Brooks said. "I would have put him in cuffs, stuck him in the freezer and left him there."

Brooks and his unit came to New Orleans not long after serving a year of combat duty in Iraq, taking on gunfire and bombs, while losing comrades with regularity. Still, the scene at the Convention Center, where they conducted an evacuation this week, left him shell-shocked.

"I ain't got the stomach for it, even after what I saw in Iraq," said Brooks, referring to the bodies sat decomposing. "In Iraq, it's one-on-one. It's war. It's fair. Here, it's just crazy. It's anarchy. When you get down to killing and raping people in the streets for food and water □ And this is America. This is just 300 miles south of where I live."