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DEFENSE CIVIL SUPPORT

DOD Has Made Progress Incorporating the Homeland Response Force into the Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Response Enterprise

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-16-599, a report to the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD is expected to play a prominent role supporting civil authorities in a CBRN incident. By 2012, DOD had established the HRF, comprising 10 geographically dispersed National Guard forces. Each of the 10 HRFs consists of 583 authorized Army National Guard and Air National Guard personnel who, as part of the HRF, are to respond within 6 to 12 hours of a request for assistance. The HRF, as part of DOD's CBRN Response Enterprise, is intended to bridge the gap between the National Guard's initial response to a CBRN incident and any need for additional capabilities that the DOD military services' active-duty personnel can provide, if requested. The HRF is to provide command and control, search and extraction, medical triage, decontamination, fatality search and recovery, and assistance and support capabilities.

House Report 114-102 included a provision that GAO review matters related to the HRF. This report (1) describes the current status of HRF capabilities and readiness and (2) assesses DOD's progress incorporating the HRF into the CBRN Response Enterprise. GAO examined National Guard fiscal year 2013-15 evaluation reports and fiscal year 2012 through March 2016 readiness information; reviewed combatant command plans and DOD guidance; and surveyed all 10 HRF Commanders about HRF readiness.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any recommendations. DOD's technical comments on a draft of this report were incorporated in the final product.

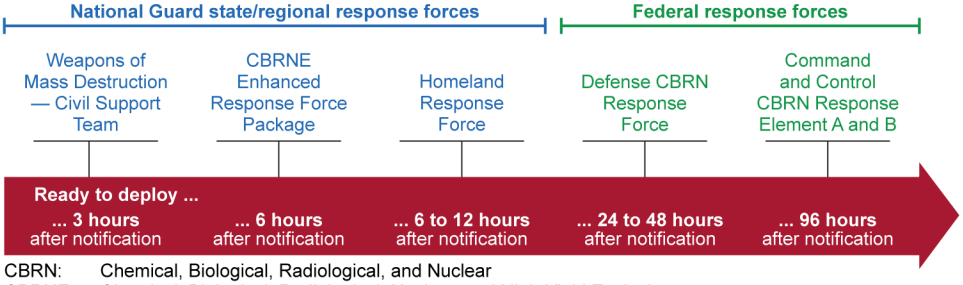
View GAO-16-599 or key components. For more information, contact Joseph W. Kirschbaum, (202) 512-9971, kirschbaumj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The National Guard has determined, through established capabilities and readiness measures, that the Homeland Response Force (HRF) is ready to conduct the HRF mission if called upon. The Department of Defense's (DOD) National Guard Bureau uses an evaluation of necessary tasks and actions as a primary measure of HRF capabilities and DOD's Defense Readiness Reporting System as a primary measure of readiness status. Six HRF Commanders told GAO that they have a goal to train between 10 percent and 30 percent additional National Guard personnel with prior HRF or similar mission experience. According to the HRF Commanders, these additional personnel, over the 583 authorized personnel, can mitigate the loss of personnel through turnover and other deployment disqualification factors, such as medical and personal factors. The capability and readiness measures indicate that the 10 HRFs are prepared for their mission. However, while the Federal Emergency Management Agency Region X (Washington) HRF partially deployed to support civil authorities after a mudslide occurred, until an entire HRF is deployed in response to a chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) incident, the HRF capabilities and mission readiness will not be entirely known.

DOD has made progress in incorporating the HRF into the CBRN Response Enterprise by updating plans, guidance, and exercises. For example, GAO found that DOD is synchronizing major exercise schedules, thereby increasing the opportunity for the HRF to exercise with the other CBRN Response Enterprise National Guard and federal response forces. The figure below shows the plan for DOD's response to a CBRN incident.

Department of Defense Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Response Enterprise's Forces and Response Time Frame



CBRN: Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear
CBRNE: Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and High-Yield Explosive[a]

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-16-599

[a]DOD's CBRN Response Enterprise is generally structured to support the response to a CBRN incident. The CBRN Response Enterprise does not maintain Explosive Ordnance Disposal capabilities—those capabilities related to the "E" in CBRNE—but is able to provide capabilities to manage the consequence of an explosion during a post-blast response.