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Daunting task: Houston company collecting remains

RECOVERY

[MICHAEL HEDGES, Copyright 2005 Houston Chronicle](#)

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NEW ORLEANS - As the collection of Hurricane Katrina's dead began in earnest over the weekend, a Houston company that has mastered the craft of dealing with the carnage of disasters was at the center of the effort.

Kenyon International Emergency Services is the sole private company on retainer with the U.S. government to respond to disasters and help manage events causing a catastrophic loss of life.

"When we work on one of these incidents, we work on every part from the beginning to the end. Over the past 76 years we have developed that niche, that presence," Kenyon President and Chief Executive Officer Robert Jensen told the Houston Chronicle in his first interview since the hurricane struck the area.

Kenyon already has about 100 people working on the storm's aftermath, and "that number is growing daily," Jensen said. It has provided a portable morgue and has begun its primary job of collecting remains. It has the ability to help identify victims as well, but so far has not been given that job.

Company employees were with soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division and National Guard units as they began the grim, house-to-house search for victims. When a body is located, the military or police secure the scene. Then Kenyon's workers, all trained mortuary professionals or former coroners, move the badly decomposing remains into body bags.

By Sunday, workers wearing protective gear had finished removing about 30 bodies at St. Rita's nursing home in Chalmette. But the major task of collecting remains of people who died alone, or in groups of two or three was just beginning.

Anything with a body that might later aid in an identification such as a purse or wallet or distinctive object is collected at the same time. Bodies are loaded in refrigerated trucks, and driven to a morgue south of Baton Rouge.

So far in Louisiana, where Kenyon is working, the official number of fatalities was still under 200 Sunday.

Identifying a corpse found in putrid water for nearly two weeks can take a long time, as Kenyon found when it was hired by the Australian government to recover and identify people killed in December's tsunami in Asia.

"We still have 1,500 or 1,400 people unidentified from the tsunami. I don't think this one will take that long, but I don't know. There is still a lot of water," said Jensen, 40.

Kenyon is kept on retainer by most of the major airlines in the world, many foreign governments, cruise ship owners, the United Nations and other entities. Those retainers both allow the company to keep a core team in place between disasters and require it to be prepared to react to deadly events all over the world within days.

The company was started in 1929 in England by a funeral director in response to an air crash. By the 1990s, it had changed to a full-service disaster management company. It's headquartered in Houston, with other offices in Sydney, Singapore and London.

The list of calamities the company has helped manage reads like a summary of man's and nature's capacity to inflict heartbreak: The U.N. bombing in Baghdad, a ferry sinking on Lake Victoria, a shipwreck in the United Kingdom, the Pennsylvania field where terrorists crashed a plane during the Sept. 11 attacks and last year's tsunami, among many others.

Katrina won't be the company's biggest job. It aided in the recovery of more than 20,000 buried in mass graves in the Balkans in the 1990s.

What would seem relentlessly grim work has its satisfactions, Jensen said.

"For us, our end customer is the families of people who are directly affected," he said.

That's why Jensen said he doesn't focus on the numbers of dead when working a disaster.

"Each one of these numbers people use represents a person who had a family and a life," he said. "It is important that the system provides for them."

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