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## Redstone surveillance planes to help assess storm damage

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**From staff, wire reports**  
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2 battery-powered UAVs, 6 workers en route to Biloxi

Unmanned surveillance planes are being pressed into action for reconnaissance over the Katrina-ravaged Gulf Coast in what defense contractors call the biggest civilian deployment ever for the technology.

Redstone Arsenal is sending two unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs, to Biloxi, Miss., today to help the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation do reconnaissance over the area.

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The Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Systems office at Redstone dispatched two UAVs - a tiny "Raven" small enough to fit in a backpack and a larger "Shadow" UAV - to Biloxi this morning, said Tarah Hollingsworth, a spokeswoman for UAV Systems.

Maj. Robert Blanchette will lead a team of six arsenal employees taking the UAVs to help in the search.

Already this week, 10 UAVs have been taking turns flying from the New Orleans Naval Air Station and relaying photos of the devastation to the Air Force.

The original mission for these UAVs - a new class known as the Evolution, an upgrade over the 4-pound Dragon Eye reconnaissance drones used in Iraq - was to help the search for stranded hurricane survivors.

But now the planes are being used mainly to assess damage to oil and gas distribution, dikes, berms and other aspects of the region's infrastructure, said Alfred Lumpkin, director of operations for ISR Group LLC, which provides logistical support for the planes' manufacturer, L-3 Communications Corp.

These UAVs are a far cry from their larger, more robust cousins such as the Predator that are employed by the U.S. military and intelligence services and can fire missiles and fly all day.

The battery-powered Evolution planes, which can stay aloft for two hours, are circling at 500 to 1,000 feet to capture finely detailed images with their miniature cameras. They also have infrared capabilities for night missions and could be used for atmospheric sampling.

Although UAVs traditionally have been eyed for situations considered too "dull,

dirty and dangerous" for human pilots, their workload is expected to expand in coming years because of the increasing sophistication of the vehicles' computers and communication systems.

ISR and L-3 say this is the largest civilian mission for UAVs to date, but drones have been used domestically.

The Border Patrol has sent UAVs to scan for illegal immigrants darting across southwestern deserts from Mexico. Remote-controlled planes also are launched for environmental studies and fire patrols.

