

Drones to help rescuers

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BATON ROUGE, Louisiana

(Reuters) – Unmanned remote-controlled airplanes used in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars may be deployed to find people trapped in New Orleans' buildings by Hurricane Katrina's flood waters, a U.S. congressman said Friday.

Five Silver Fox "unmanned aerial vehicles," or UAVs, equipped with thermal imaging technology to detect the body heat of storm survivors, are en route to the crippled city, Pennsylvania Republican Rep. Curt Weldon said. Weldon told reporters in Baton Rouge that he had bypassed government bureaucracy to obtain the drones from a private company to be used in search and rescue operations in New Orleans, scene of one of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history. "With thermal imaging capability ... you can actually see into the buildings and see the body image of a person still alive," Weldon, vice chairman of the House Armed Services and Homeland Security Committees, said. "It could help assess whether there are people trapped alive in attics or upper floors," Weldon said. "Once you've got them pinpointed you can send rescue teams in." City officials have said there could be thousands of people trapped in the city. The small, lightweight drone, about 5 feet long, looks like a large model airplane and can be operated with a laptop computer. They can be used to gather battlefield intelligence.

Weldon said the UAVs were being transported to Baton Rouge and he had requested the deployment of U.S. military personnel capable of operating them. They could be in operation over New Orleans within hours of arrival, he said.