NEW ORLEANS, June 21 (Reuters) - National Guard troops fanned out in three New Orleans neighborhoods on Wednesday to help stop a spasm of violence and looting in deserted areas as the city struggles to recover from Hurricane Katrina.

Guard Humvees began the day shadowing police officers through streets nearly devoid of life that have become fertile ground for thieves, some posing as builders.

By afternoon the Guard troops were on their own. "We've pretty much got our feet wet," said Staff Sgt. Michael Levesque, 37, a casino dealer in Bossier City, Louisiana who had less than a day to mobilize for a job that city police say will last through a long, hot and possibly stormy summer.

Guardsmen and women dressed in army-style fatigues carried holstered pistols instead of automatic rifles. "We're not here to show that much of a force," Levesque said.
The call for the Guard was a shock for many in the United States who had watched emergency responders leave New Orleans earlier this year. But rising violence and drugs, the expected return of residents during the summer and a bloody quintuple teen homicide over the weekend galvanized city and state officials to act.

The pall of Katrina, which struck Aug. 29, flooding the vast majority of the city and killing more than 1,500 from Louisiana, still hangs over New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward, where Levesque was patrolling.

Slumping, twisted homes, weedy fields that used to be front yards, debris from broken cars and piles of muddy furniture still define the area.

Lionel Worthy, 73, said from the stoop of his battered house that the soldiers were a welcome sight. "With all the murders and things, I think it is beautiful," he said.

The Guard also began paroling the Lakeview and New Orleans East areas covered by several feet of water for weeks.

ROUND-THE-CLOCK COVERAGE
One hundred troops hit the streets during the day and a second hundred were arriving in New Orleans in the afternoon, with 100 more due on Thursday, spokesman Pete Schneider said.

Many in New Orleans are frustrated by the slow pace of recovery in a city where few of the badly damaged homes have been rebuilt and many remain gutted. Trash piles still litter streets in nearly every neighborhood.

Patrols will continue around the clock, Schneider added. State police are also helping patrol the French Quarter, the tourist magnet for the jazz city.

City police will refocus on the most populated areas, where the murder rate per capita is returning to roughly pre-Katrina levels, even though the total number of killings has fallen.

Residents decried the shooting of five teens on Saturday in a crime police say may be drug or revenge related, and the city accelerated a call for summer reinforcements that leaders said was already in the works.

Police Captain Bernardine Kelly, one of the commanders for the Ninth Ward area, said on Tuesday evening that much of the Guard's job would involve looking for looters.
"You can't tell the contractors from the thieves," she said.

A number of Guard veterans of Iraq and post-storm patrol in New Orleans said the job was not daunting.

"Even if this city's been destroyed, it's better than Iraq," said Guard Sgt. Rachel Hall, 23, stopping at a warehouse near the Mississippi River levee where police investigated a possible burglary by men with a rental truck.

"I don't want to see New Orleans go under," she added. "I want to be able to come back down here and eat, drink and be merry on my own time."