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U.S. Virgin Islands on High Alert After 9 Earthquakes Strike Puerto Rico in One Day; State of Emergency Declared in Puerto Rico

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Home is damaged by 6.5 magnitude Earthquake in Puerto Rico on Tuesday morning

After nine earthquakes impacted Puerto Rico on Tuesday, and ten in two days, the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) said the U.S. Virgin Islands has been placed on high alert.

The first earthquake, a magnitude 6.5, struck the island commonwealth at 4:24 a.m. today. Then, at about 7:18 a.m., a magnitude 5.6 earthquake impacted the island, followed by a magnitude 4.8 at 9:00 a.m. Thereafter, six earthquakes — the last being recorded at about 2:46 p.m. — struck the U.S. territory, most coming in at magnitude 4.5. There have been more than 50 aftershocks as a

result of the earthquakes.

The government of Puerto Rico has declared a state of emergency. "We've never been exposed to this kind of emergency in 102 years," said Gov. Wanda Vázquez as the island grapples with ongoing aftershocks and assesses the damage. The earthquakes have resulted in the death of at least one individual.

Government offices and schools were closed, and some hospitals, especially in the southwestern region, were evacuated for safety reasons. Residents, especially in the south, have been terrified to go into their homes for fear that another quake will bring the structures down.

"Every single one of you know how your homes were built. Don't put yourselves at risk. Your homes can be replaced but we can't replace your or your children's lives," Ms. Vázquez said.

Neighboring islands, including the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, as well as a number of Caribbean islands — among them Dominica, the Bahamas, Saint Martin, Sint Maarten, Haiti, Guadeloupe, Saint Kitts, Nevis, Turks and Caicos Islands, the Caribbean Netherlands, Saint Barthelemy, Antigua and Barbuda, Montserrat and Anguilla — were impacted at varying magnitudes.

The National Weather Service's Tsunami Warning Center said there was no threat of tsunami for the Caribbean islands as a result of the earthquakes. However, the center cautioned individuals to "be observant and exercise normal caution if you are near or in the ocean in case of minor sea level changes."

VITEMA said Tuesday that the territory stands in solidarity with Puerto Rico. The agency said the southern shore of Puerto Rico is experiencing an increase in earthquakes which are registering as high as 6.4 on the Richter Scale. The increased occurrence of these earthquakes, which have caused infrastructure damage and power outages, places the U.S. Virgin Islands on alert.

"The recent earthquakes in Puerto Rico are a stark reminder that we have to ensure we are prepared for more than just hurricanes," said Governor Albert Bryan. "Our prayers are with the people of Puerto Rico today, and with the many Virgin Islanders who have loved ones residing on the island. While there is no current Tsunami threat, I am urging you all to remain calm but vigilant and to please pay attention to the alerts from VITEMA."

"The majority of the earthquake activity is occurring to the south of Puerto Rico," said VITEMA Director D. Jaschen. "While we stand ready to respond to earthquake related hazards in our area, we are focusing in on potential earthquake generated tsunami threats."

The 44 tsunami sirens that are presently undergoing repairs will not sound during this crucial time period. However, VITEMA said in the event a Tsunami Watch or Warning is issued by the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC), it can immediately notify citizens using the Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS). Through IPAWS, real-time emergency notifications are sent to all cellphones, cable providers and radio broadcasters connected to towers in the US Virgin Islands.

Residents are strongly encouraged to sign up to Alert VI on VITEMA's website which will provide real-time emergency notifications via cell phone calls, text messages, landlines, emails and TTY devices. Staying informed of potential threats will ensure that every available moment to react is not lost. It is important to read all Alert VI messages to differentiate between advisories, alerts, and warnings.

Immediate recommended actions include:

- Signing up to Alert VI today at www.vitema.vi.gov
- Prepare an emergency “go-bag” for your home and vehicle today
- Practice “Drop, Cover, and Hold On” earthquake techniques with the elderly, disabled, and children
- Designate meeting points and reuniting plans should family members be in different areas at the time of an event
- Be sure that you have a battery-operated radio available if communication systems become impaired. Follow instructions provided by VITEMA and other official sources
- Find the best route to get to higher ground in all the areas that you work and spend leisure time

“As of right now, leadership is ready, communication is good, and response partnerships are committed,” said Director Jaschen. “If we all do something today to prepare for these threats, we will be in a better position to recover and preserve life and property in the U.S. Virgin Islands.”

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