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No Explosion at WAPA Power Plant, But Loud Boom Prompts Evacuation

Employees evacuated as a safety measure following extremely loud sound at Randolph Harley Power Plant

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The Randolph Harley Power Plant in St. Thomas, USVI. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM, ERNICE GILBERT

The loud boom heard across the V.I. Water and Power Authority's Randolph Harley Power Plant in St. Thomas on Thursday, which led to the evacuation of WAPA employees and other personnel, was not an explosion as some inside WAPA had originally thought.

Instead, according to WAPA spokesperson Shanell Petersen, the loud sound was the activation of what is called a rupture disk, which Ms. Petersen says activates when it senses harm to critical

systems.

The extremely loud boom, which was initially described as an explosion by at least one WAPA official, resulted in the V.I. Fire and Emergency Services rushing personnel and support equipment to the scene. The VIPD also blocked off access points to the power plant.

Ms. Petersen said employees were evacuated as part of emergency protocols "because it was a very loud sound." Asked if there was a break in communication between various arms of WAPA, Ms. Petersen said the rupture disk activation that led to the loud sound activates automatically on the detection of potential harm. Therefore, automatic evacuation was the best decision to enhance employee safety.

The incident comes as WAPA continues to struggle to maintain power in the St. Thomas-St. John District. On Wednesday, a district-wide power outage lasted for hours, and a similar scenario is playing out again today.

Ms. Petersen said there was no timeline regarding when the St. Thomas-St. John district would be restored, however, she stressed that the rupture disk activation is not necessarily tied to power generation.

Meanwhile, the outages continue to ripple through the community. After being forced to cancel instruction on Wednesday, the V.I. Dept. of Education found itself in a similar position on Thursday: "The Virgin Islands Department of Education is advising the public that due to the ongoing power outage affecting the St. Thomas-St. John District, all schools within the district will remain closed on Thursday, May 9, 2024," the department announced. "Schools will no longer open at 10:00 a.m. today. We apologize for any inconvenience caused and encourage everyone to stay updated through official channels for further announcements regarding school operations. Thank you for your understanding and cooperation."

Meanwhile, the V.I. Superior Court announced its closure due to a water service interruption, while the V.I. Economic Development Authority announced the disruption of its phone systems.

Elsewhere, the Lockhart K-8 Music Department postponed its Spring Concert that was originally scheduled for today, May 9th, due to inconsistent power throughout the island.