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Territory Shelters to Remain Closed as Tropical Storm Ernesto Approaches, Sandbags Available for Residents

VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen advises residents to prepare for potential flooding and strong winds, with sandbags available at designated fire stations. Shelters will not open, and a curfew is not expected

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Janeke Simon **August 12, 2024**

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The V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency has announced that shelters will not be opening in anticipation of Tropical Storm Ernesto, which is expected to impact the territory this week. Director Daryl Jaschen emphasized that, given the forecasted conditions, shelters are not deemed necessary, nor is a curfew expected to be imposed.

Mr. Jaschen, speaking during the Government House weekly press briefing on Monday, highlighted the importance of preparing for the storm, noting that "besides the wind, the rain is going to be a factor." He detailed that tropical storm force winds, ranging from 39 to 57 miles per hour, are expected to begin affecting St. Croix on Tuesday evening with about a 40% chance of occurrence. St. Thomas and St. John are forecasted to experience similar conditions on Wednesday morning as the system moves across the territory.

Rainfall poses a significant concern with the potential system, as it may linger over the Virgin Islands, bringing substantial precipitation. Jaschen warned of possible accumulated rainfall of six to eight inches within a 24-hour period from Tuesday night through Wednesday night. He stressed the importance of being prepared for "thunder, lightning, strong winds" accompanying the rain.

To assist residents in safeguarding their properties, VITEMA has set up self-fill sandbag depots at various fire stations, operational from 10 am to 3 pm on Tuesday. Locations include Grove Place and Cotton Valley on St. Croix, Hotel Company on St. Thomas, and Cruz Bay on St. John. Residents are advised to bring their shovels to fill sandbags.

Given that the approaching system is not expected to reach hurricane strength, shelters will not be opened. Mr. Jaschen also advised against driving or walking through flooded areas, cautioning that even a few inches of water can float a car and pose significant danger. "Please stay off the road," he urged.

For those residing in flood-prone or unsafe areas, Mr. Jaschen suggested making arrangements to stay with someone else and recommended contacting the Department of Human Services for specialized assistance if needed.

At 500 p.m. AST, the center of Tropical Storm Ernesto was located near latitude 16.0 North, longitude 57.5 West. Ernesto is moving toward the west-northwest at approximately 28 mph (44 km/h). A westward to west-northwestward motion with some decrease in forward speed is expected during the next couple of days. On the forecast track, Ernesto is expected to move across portions of the Leeward Islands late tonight or Tuesday and near or over the U.S. and British Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico by Tuesday evening. Ernesto is then forecast to turn northward over the western Atlantic.

Maximum sustained winds have increased to near 40 mph (65 km/h) with higher gusts. Gradual strengthening is expected during the next few days. Tropical-storm-force winds extend outward up to 60 miles (95 km) from the center. The estimated minimum central pressure is 1009 mb (29.80 inches).

Residents are encouraged to monitor weather updates and take all necessary precautions to ensure their safety during the storm.