

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Virgin Islands To Host 2,000 National Guard Soldiers May 2017 For 'Vigilant Guard Exercise'

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ST. CROIX -- Local, federal and military officials along with private sector representatives will convene for two days next week to begin the yearlong planning effort for Vigilant Guard, a national-level, full-scale exercise scheduled for May in the Virgin Islands.

The exercise will test the territorial government's ability to respond to a catastrophic event, looking closely at how officials coordinate the delivery of federal and military assets in support of emergency response operations.

US Northern Command and the National Guard Bureau sponsors the Vigilant Guard program, which is designed to give states and territories the opportunity to improve

emergency coordination with their federal and military partners. The Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) and the VI National Guard are leading the exercise.

Vigilant Guard 2017 will evaluate the territory's response to a major earthquake and tsunami. According to the exercise scenario, the U.S. Virgin Islands will experience a 7.5 magnitude earthquake, which will generate a tsunami with waves of up to 20 feet. The tsunami will reach the shores of the US Virgin Islands within 10 minutes. As part of the scenario, the island of St. Thomas will sustain significant damage to its critical infrastructure including the utility, the hospital, and ports, and will lose vital communications capabilities. Thousands of citizens and visitors will be displaced and hundreds more will self-report to the hospital for medical treatment. St. Croix will sustain moderate damages.

"Vigilant Guard gives us the rare opportunity to comprehensively assess of the Territory's response capabilities – what we refer to as a 'gap analysis,' " said Brig. Gen. Deborah Howell, Adjutant General of the Virgin Islands National Guard. "The exercise play is meant to stretch local resources beyond its limits and to require us to seek immediate assistance from our federal and military partners and the private sector. Through that process we want to pinpoint, not just what we do well but also where our gaps are. During a real emergency is not the time to try and figure it out."

She added: "Knowing our shortfalls allows us to identify the right training and to place resources where it's needed most to improve emergency response and coordination across all levels – the local and federal government, the military, non-government organizations and the private sector."

The Vigilant Guard Initial Planning Meeting (IPM) is set for Wednesday and Thursday, June 22 and 23, at the VING's SFC Leonard B. Francis Readiness Center at Estate Nazareth on St. Thomas. During the IPM, participants will be briefed on the Vigilant Guard exercise program and on the exercise goals and objectives. The remainder of the IPM will involve the participants breaking into working groups to begin the formal exercise planning.

Exercise objectives include: establishing a staging areas for incoming federal and military resources; triage and pre-hospital treatment; mass casualty operations; hazardous material response; local mass care housing and human service operations; evaluating local evacuation and shelter plans; mass search and rescue; medical evacuation operations; interoperable communications; and integration of territorial and federal government agencies, non-governmental organizations and the private sector.

The VI National Guard will also exercise the Adjutant General's Joint Task Force dual-status command, meaning Howell will have oversight of not only VING forces but also other National Guard and Active Duty resources sent to support the territory. Approximately 2,000 National Guard soldiers representing several states are expected to participate in Vigilant Guard 2017.

"This is one of the largest exercises to be conducted in the US Virgin Islands and it's important that participants, particularly in the local government, maximize the opportunity to evaluate their plans," said Mona Barnes, VITEMA Director. "That's the only way for us

to know what needs to be addressed. Ultimately, our goal is to be able respond effectively and efficiently, to prevent the loss of life and damage to property.”

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Feature Image: Airmen from the California and Arizona National Guard combine to form a Fatality Search and Recovery Team on Nov. 4, 2011, during the 2011 Arizona Statewide Vigilant Guard Exercise in Phoenix. (Photo by Spc. Edward Siguenza)

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