

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Vigilant Guard, A Full Scale Disaster Simulation Exercise, Starts On May 15 In USVI

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ST. CROIX -- Over 2,000 National Guard soldiers as well as first responders from around the U.S. mainland will be in the territory next week to participate in Vigilant Guard 2017 -- [a full scale disaster simulation exercises](#) coordinated by the U.S. Northern Command.

The exercise -- of which the VI National Guard and Virgin Islands Emergency Management Agency are lead participants -- 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.

The United States Northern Command, or NorthCom, is tasked with conducting homeland defense, civil support and security operations to defend and secure the United States and its interests. Each year four state governments work with NorthCom to conduct major response drills for emergencies – Georgia, California and New Mexico are the other jurisdictions conducting exercises this year.

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.

"In a major disaster we know that our local responders will be overwhelmed and we will need to reach out to our federal and military partners for life saving resources," Governor Kenneth Mapp said at a press briefing held at Government House here Monday morning. "Overall, the exercise allows us to identify our strengths and our weaknesses and our gaps in emergency response operations."

VITEMA Director Mona Barnes said the agency will activate its siren warning system territory-wide at 8:00 a.m. on May 15 to begin the exercise. VITEMA will also test the territory's emergency alert system with participating broadcast stations. "Those outdoors and within a mile of the siren should hear a prerecorded test message, which will run for approximately one minute," she said.

Brigadier General of the Virgin Islands National Guard, Deborah Howell, said V.I.N.G. has been preparing for Vigilant Guard since 2015. "Every year we participate in some exercise that evaluates our level of readiness performing National Guard domestic operations, but never a national level exercise of this magnitude," she said. The exercise is termed Operation Urgent Shield, and will last until May 17.

Ms. Barnes and BGen Howell have selected 12 exercise objectives that the territory will be evaluated on, among them testing the territory's emergency operations plan; hazardous materials response; exercise interoperable communications system; integrate local, federal, non-governmental and private sector partners; and integrate federal forces.

"You will see folks out and about in uniform," the governor said. "We ask you not to be alarmed, but to recognize that we are strengthening our partnerships with our military and our federal disaster responders to ensure that in the event of actual disaster we are all coordinated with how we will respond."

Mr. Mapp and Lieutenant Governor Osbert Potter will participate in the exercises. The territory's leader will be "strategically placed" to exercise the authority of the Governor's Office as required. Declaring a state of emergency and requesting a Presidential Disaster Declaration are among Mr. Mapp's initial responsibilities as part of the exercise.

Mass search and rescue, evacuation, shelter planning, riot control, response to unknown substances and distribution of emergency supplies are among the drills planned. These exercises and other disaster training will be held at various sites throughout the territory.

Mr. Mapp asked that residents be aware of the drills taking place and to make an effort to show the military and other personnel here for Vigilant Guard 2017 “a warm Virgin Islands welcome.”

“I ask all of the members of the community for their cooperation,” he said.

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