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U.S. Virgin Islands and Federal Partners Gear Up for 2023 Atlantic Hurricane Season

Hurricane Season / **Published On May 31, 2023 05:39 PM /**

Staff Consortium **May 31, 2023**

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Home destroyed by Hurricane Irma in 2017. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

To bolster preparedness for the upcoming Atlantic hurricane season, the Government of the Virgin Islands and federal partners engaged in a week-long series of response and initial recovery exercises and functional drills last week, according to a joint release issued Wednesday.

The exercises were designed around a scenario of a Category 3 hurricane impacting the Virgin Islands overnight, with participants establishing a unified command supported by federal resources from Emergency Operations Centers on St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John, and FEMA facilities.

“The drills have provided us a platform to assess our capabilities and make crucial adjustments to ensure our territory's readiness ahead of the hurricane season,” said Governor Albert Bryan Jr.

FEMA’s Virgin Islands Caribbean Area Office Coordinator, Mark A. Walters, praised the dedication of the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) and the local government. Walters emphasized the importance of individual and family readiness, urging residents to make a disaster plan and prepare emergency kits.

The exercises concluded a nearly six-month planning effort and integrated lessons from previous response efforts, addressed territorial resource gaps, and identified necessary federal resources to respond to potential hazards.

Notable activities included evacuation sheltering and points of distribution functional drills on St. Croix and St. Thomas, which involved several organizations including the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services, VITEMA, FEMA, the American Red Cross, the Virgin Islands Department of Education, and local voluntary organizations.

The V.I. Department of Human Services led the setting up of evacuation shelters and points of distribution, with FEMA staff participating as disaster survivors and observers.

FEMA also conducted training on joint preliminary damage assessments for the Individual and Public Assistance Programs, an important component for potentially qualifying for a major disaster declaration from the president.

The comprehensive weeklong exercise, which involved more than 300 participants at 10 different sites, concluded with a briefing to Governor Albert Bryan Jr. at Government House on St. Croix. Territorial agencies reported on their preparedness for the hurricane season and discussed ways to address potential challenges.

Future activities, scheduled for June and July, will focus on corrective actions for response and initial recovery areas. These will include operational integration exercises, social media simulation exercises, airfield assessments, drills on operating in degraded communication environments, patient evacuation tabletop exercises, and continuity of operations workshops for governmental agencies.

The exercises aim to strengthen the ability of territorial and federal partners to respond quickly and effectively to potential disasters during the 2023 hurricane season.