

In wake of quake, seismic experts address residents' questions, fears at lecture

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ST. THOMAS — A week after a small earthquake and several aftershocks rattled the Virgin Islands, seismic experts on Thursday evening had a message: Don't panic. Don't worry too much. But be prepared.

About three dozen residents turned out at the University the Virgin Islands for a lecture, Earthquakes in Paradise. Sponsored by UVI and the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency, the presentation's featured speaker was Christa von Hillebrandt, director of the Puerto

Rico Seismic Network. The lecture was teleconferenced to UVI's St. Croix campus.

Von Hillebrandt sought to dispel some myths about earthquakes. In the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, they are not associated with volcanoes. They have nothing to do with hurricanes or with the weather at all.

And unlike hurricanes, earthquakes simply are not predictable.

"They've occurred in the past, and they're going to keep happening," von Hillebrandt said.

Earthquakes here occur in two areas. To the north of the islands, where the Caribbean and North

America plates meet, is the most common location. Last week's earthquakes occurred in an area known as the Virgin Islands Basin, the deep trench between St. Thomas and St. Croix where the earth is very slowly pulling apart, causing occasional tremors.

Residents need to know what to do as an earthquake is taking place. VITTEMA Director Harold Baker urged the public to remember the most basic safety tip: "When you feel a tremor, just drop, cover and hold," he said.

That means get under a table, desk or similar piece of furniture to protect

yourself from falling objects. Hold on to the table legs so that you remain under it even if it moves.

If you are driving when a tremor hits, pull to the side of the road and stay in your car until the earthquake ends, Baker said.

Most earthquakes here will be under water, and large ones can cause a tsunami, von Hillebrandt warned. Any time a major earthquake hits, residents should seek higher ground, she said.

The largest temblor last week, at magnitude 4.5, was not enough to cause a tsunami.

After a major 1867 earthquake

occurred in the Virgin Islands Basin, a 20-foot tall wall of water hit both St. Thomas and St. Croix, killing about 20 people and stranding a large Navy warship on Strand Street in Frederiksted.

A 20-foot wave is the largest that is likely to form from an earthquake here, von Hillebrandt said, so damage and flooding would be limited to the near-shore areas.

But the damage there could be severe. Because water is 1,000 times more dense than air, a 5-foot tsunami can cause as much damage as the 155 mph winds from a Category 5 hurricane, she said.