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NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: March 5, 1980

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Forwarded to:  
  
Honorable Juan F. Luis  
Governor of the Virgin Islands  
Government House  
Charlotte Amalie  
St. Thomas, Virgin Islands 00801  
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SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)  
A-80-16 through -18

On July 24, 1979, a Puerto Rico International Airlines (PRINAIR) deHavilland Heron crashed at the Alexander Hamilton Airport, St. Croix, Virgin Islands, killing 8 persons and seriously injuring 13 others. During its investigation of the accident, the National Transportation Safety Board found numerous deficiencies in the crash/fire/rescue (CFR) operations and services of the Virgin Islands Port Authority which require immediate attention.

The investigation revealed that, although the accident occurred approximately 70 yards from the airport's fire station, about 3 to 4 minutes elapsed before CFR equipment arrived at the scene. Evidence indicates that of the six firemen on duty, several were in or near the terminal building and arrived at the crash scene on foot after employees from other airlines already had begun rescue operations. Despite their delayed arrival, these firemen ran to the fire station to don protective clothing, while a line mechanic extinguished a small fire, which started in one of the left engines, by using a portable fire extinguisher.

Investigation revealed that there was also a lack of leadership at the accident scene which resulted in confusion. The acting fire chief did not assume control of the numerous ramp personnel. In fact, testimony indicates that this responsibility was informally assumed by an airline employee. Ramp personnel stated that they were not familiar with crash/fire/rescue procedures or with the airport emergency plan.

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At the Safety Board's public hearing into the accident, a local civil defense instructor in emergency medical services testified that no attempt was made at triage and that the captain of the crashed aircraft was transported to a hospital as the sole occupant of the only available airport ambulance. Unfortunately, most of the airport's medical equipment, including two resuscitators, remained in the ambulance when it departed. He further testified that passengers with relatively minor medical problems were transported to the hospital while passengers suffering from more extensive injuries were left behind; passengers who were bleeding were given preference in transportation over those who did not have such outward signs of injury but whose injuries should have been recognized as life-threatening.

The investigation revealed also that communications with supporting organizations, such as the civil defense organization and hospitals, were not adequate and that the first report of the accident was made over the local civil defense radio about 12 minutes after the crash because telephone lines were busy. As a result, outside medical assistance did not arrive on scene until about 25 minutes after the crash. By that time, all the surviving passengers had been transported to hospitals.

Thus, the Safety Board believes that the crash/fire/rescue response to this accident demonstrates a need for improvement in the Virgin Islands Port Authority's preparation for the execution of the airport emergency plan for the Alexander Hamilton Airport, and in the extent and quality of training given to its crash/fire/rescue personnel. The Safety Board also is concerned that these deficiencies may exist at other airports under the Port Authority's control.

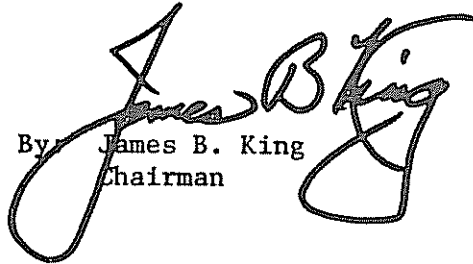
In view of the above, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Virgin Islands Port Authority:

Conduct extensive and frequent training for crash/fire/rescue personnel to insure that each individual understands his duties and responsibilities and insure that training stresses the need for positive leadership which is critical to efficient crash/fire/rescue response. (Class II - Priority Action) (A-80-16)

Expand the provisions of the emergency plans of its airports to provide for the orderly incorporation of the services of line personnel of tenant organizations, and train such personnel. (Class II - Priority Action) (A-80-17)

Establish an emergency communications system that will provide immediate and discrete contact with those agencies to be notified during emergency situations. (Class II - Priority Action) (A-80-18)

KING, Chairman, DRIVER, Vice Chairman, McADAMS, GOLDMAN, and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in these recommendations.

  
By: James B. King  
Chairman