

Health experts warn that Zika virus will infect millions worldwide

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Health experts are warning that it is only a matter of time before the Zika virus spreads substantially around the world, with the World Health Organization estimating that the number of cases could reach between three and four million just in the Americas, with 1.5 million in Brazil, the epicenter of the epidemic.

Tourists, particularly women of childbearing age, are being advised not to travel to countries where mosquitoes carry the virus. Around 40 million people travel to and from the US and countries that have been affected by the Zika virus, and officials warn that hundreds of thousands will be infected.

While the summer Olympics in Brazil are still months away, the virus is a concern for tourists and athletes traveling there this summer. The virus is believed to have originated in Latin America, where poverty and poor sanitation have worsened the spread of the disease to pandemic levels.

Last Friday, Brazil reported a nearly 50 percent jump in cases of dengue fever over a three-month period in January. Scientists are worried because the fever is carried by the same mosquito that carries the Zika virus, indicating that efforts to fight the spread of the disease have not been effective.

Marcos Lago, an associate professor of infectious diseases and pediatrics at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, told the *Washington Post*, “We will probably have a dengue epidemic. And this dengue epidemic will be accompanied by a Zika epidemic.”

The Brazilian Health Ministry reported 74,000 “probable” cases of dengue from January 3 to January 23, an increase of almost 50 percent from the same period in January 2015, which saw a record number of cases. The disease along with Zika and another disease called chikungunya, are spread by the same mosquito, the *Aedes aegypti*, which lays its eggs in standing water. This mosquito was also responsible for the spread of yellow fever, which was first eradicated in the mid-1950s in Brazil.

In a pathetic attempt at damage control, Brazilian

President Dilma Rousseff and other government ministers visited the homes of ordinary Brazilians in Rio to educate the population about the virus. The deeply unpopular president, who is facing impeachment proceedings, has mobilized 220,000 troops to combat the virus ahead of the summer Olympics.

The kind of public education campaigns being initiated by the Workers Party (PT) government have little hope of stemming the spread of the disease, which is facilitated above all by endemic poverty and unprecedented levels of social inequality.

The lion’s share of Zika cases has been seen in Brazil’s Northeast, the country’s most impoverished region. Only 21 percent of the houses there are connected to sewage lines and three out of ten lack access to treated water. Last week, the government’s minister of cities acknowledged that nationwide, nearly half of the population lacks access to sewage networks. Needless to say, in the poorer areas there is little air conditioning and few houses have screens on doors and windows.

Brazil has faced a pandemic of Zika cases that the government has blamed on a huge rise in the number of babies born with microcephaly, a congenital defect that leads to abnormally small heads. This deformity causes severe neurological impairment that can lead to infant death or leave children mentally incapacitated for their entire lives.

Lúcia Noronha, a pathologist at the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná and one of the researchers who established the ability of the virus to pass through the placenta to the fetus, warned of the potentially catastrophic implications of the epidemic.

“We are facing a very grave threat,” she said. “Brazil is a continental nation, with a climate that is propitious for the multiplication of the vector, as well as a young population with many women at the age of fertility. We run the risk of having an enormous contingent of children with malformations, at a gigantic social and economic cost.”

Although the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have yet to establish

a definite link between microcephaly and the Zika virus, many scientists think they are connected. Brazil first confirmed the disease in May 2015 before it rapidly spread across the continent.

The number of dengue cases in Brazil rose from 600,000 in 2014 to 1.6 million in 2015, according to government statistics. As many as 1.5 million may have caught the Zika virus in 2015 and nearly 21,000 have cases of chikungunya, which causes fever and joint pains.

Anandasankar Ray, associate professor of entomology and the director of the Center for Disease Vector Research at the University of California at Riverside also told the *Washington Post*, “If there is a spike of all three of them, it could mean the mosquito is becoming more efficient.”

According to the WHO, dengue cases have spread significantly around the world with the reported number of cases in the Americas, Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific growing from 1.2 million to 3 million from 2008 to 2013.

Marcelo Castro, Brazil’s health minister told the Associated Press that officials were “absolutely sure” that the Zika virus was connected to the microcephaly cases and rejected criticism that the government was too slow in handling the pandemic. Castro said the half-year gap between the outbreak of the virus and the spike in birth defects was not coincidental.

Brazil would typically report 150 cases of microcephaly a year, but since October there have been 5,079 cases reported. Of these cases, 462 have been confirmed and 765 have been discarded. At least 41 of the microcephaly cases have been linked to Zika.

A top official from the World Health Organization said that a vaccine for the virus was 18 months away. At least 15 companies have been identified as possible candidates in the search for the vaccine and most have only just started working. Although the virus was first discovered in 1947, there has been little progress in creating a vaccine since there is no profit in treating a disease that only affects those living in poor, third world countries.

Not only Brazil, but also Colombia has been heavily affected by the Zika virus as well as cases of Guillain-Barré syndrome, which can cause paralysis. While health officials have been cautious in establishing a link between the two, people are already starting to panic. In Cúcuta, Colombia, there are 27 cases of paralysis, with 27,000 cases of Zika across the whole of the country.

Dr. Marco Fonseca, a neurosurgeon in Cúcuta didn’t rule out environmental factors in the cases of paralysis but suspected a change in the virus, calling it “Zika-plus. A mutation.”

In Puerto Rico, the CDC reported a rise in Zika cases from

a single case involving an 80-year-old late last year to almost 30 confirmed cases at the end of January. Officials expect the number of cases to rise in the coming weeks and months because the A. Aegypti mosquito is prevalent throughout the island.

The CDC declared recently, “the risk to Puerto Rico is significant.” The governor of the island, Alejandro García Padilla, declared a public health emergency last week because of the increase in Zika cases.

The economies of Latin America are feeling the impact of the virus, which comes on top of an already worsening outlook. Brazil has seen a contraction of 3.71 percent in 2015, and is expected to contract 3.21 percent this year. The country’s inflation rate was 10.67 percent in 2015, the highest in 13 years. Puerto Rico is in a state of bankruptcy and the economy is on the verge of collapse.

Venezuela, which is facing enormous unrest because of its economic crisis, has seen three people die from the Zika virus. The newspaper *Correo Del Orinoco* reported 319 confirmed cases of the virus.

In the United States, Maryland confirmed its first case of the disease joining its neighbors in D.C., Delaware, and Virginia, with at least one confirmed case of the Zika virus each. The US has seen at least 60 cases of Zika, most of them in the south.

Although there are two advanced vaccine efforts underway, from the US National Institutes for Health and the Bharat Biotech International Limited from India, it will be many months before they are able to conduct large-scale test trials. Trials for a vaccine in the US could start before the end of summer but full approval could take years.

Most vaccines take at least two decades to develop. The relatively accelerated process was only made possible in the aftermath of the 2014 Ebola pandemic which forced the WHO to put in special procedures to fast-track vaccine creation.



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