

WHO declares global emergency over Zika virus spread

By JAMEY KEATEN and MARIA CHENG
Associated Press

GENEVA — The World Health Organization declared a global emergency over the explosive spread of the Zika virus, which has been linked to birth defects in the Americas, calling it an “extraordinary event” that poses a public health threat to other parts of the world.

The U.N. agency took the rare step despite a lack of definitive evidence proving the mosquito-borne virus is causing a surge in babies born with brain defects and abnormally small heads in Brazil and following a 2013-14 outbreak in French Polynesia.

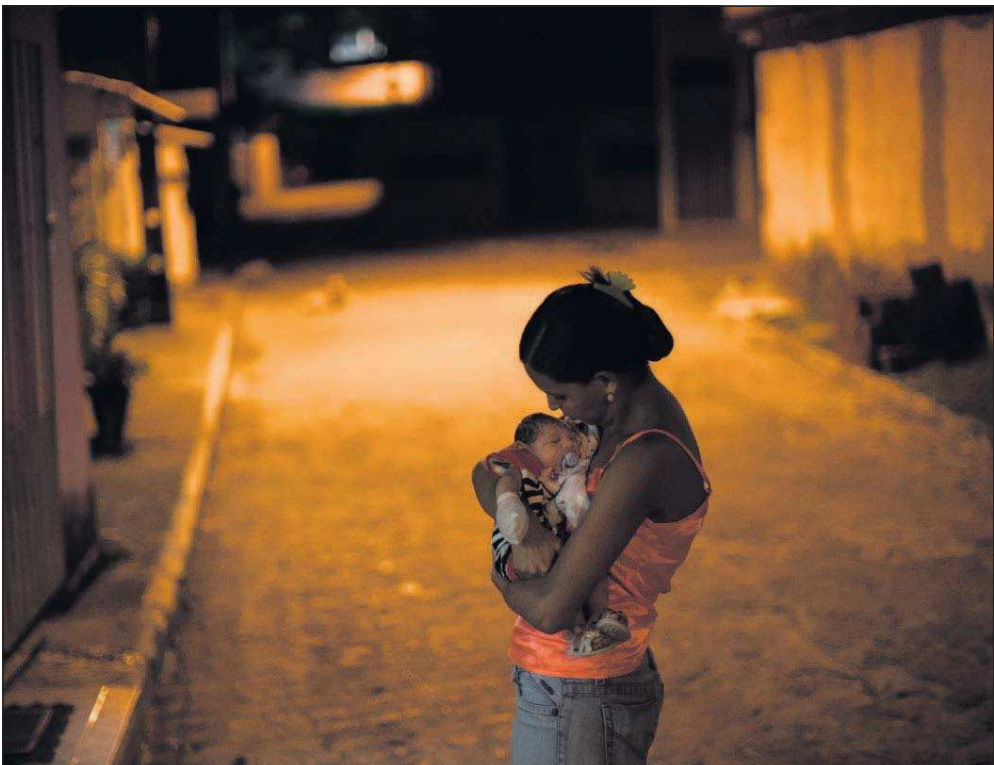
Monday’s emergency meeting of independent experts was called in response to the spike in babies born with microcephaly in Brazil since the virus was first found there last year. Officials in French Polynesia also documented a connection between Zika and neurological complications when the virus was spreading there two years ago, at the same time as dengue fever.

“After a review of the evidence, the committee advised that the clusters of microcephaly and other neurological complications constitute an extraordinary event and public health threat to other parts of the world,” WHO Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan said.

WHO, which was widely criticized for its sluggish response to the 2014 Ebola crisis in West Africa, has been eager to show its responsiveness this time. Despite dire warnings that Ebola was out of control in mid-2014, WHO didn’t declare an emergency until months later, after nearly 1,000 people had died.

“If indeed, the scientific linkage between Zika and microcephaly is established, can you imagine if we do not do all this work now and wait until the scientific evidence comes out?” Chan said. “Then people will say, ‘Why didn’t you take action?’”

WHO estimates there could be up to 4 million cases



Daniele Ferreira dos Santos holds her son Juan Pedro, who was born with microcephaly, outside her house in Recife, Pernambuco state, Brazil. Santos was never diagnosed with Zika, but she blames the virus for her son’s defect and for the terrible toll it has taken on her life.

of Zika in the Americas in the next year, but no recommendations were made to restrict travel or trade.

“It is important to understand, there are several measures pregnant women can take,” Chan said. “If you can delay travel and it does not affect your other family commitments, it is something to consider.”

“If they need to travel, they can get advice from their physician and take personal protective measures, like wearing long sleeves and shirts and pants and using mosquito repellent.”

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control has advised pregnant women to postpone visits to Brazil and other countries in the region with Zika outbreaks, though officials say it’s unlikely the virus could cause widespread problems in the U.S. On Monday, health officials added four more destinations to a list that now includes 28 locations, most of them in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The last time WHO declared a public health emergency was for the devastating Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which killed more than 11,000 people.

Similar declarations were made for polio in 2013 and the 2009 swine flu pandemic.

Such emergency declarations are meant as an international SOS signal and usually trigger increased money and efforts to halt the outbreak, as well as prompting research into possible treatments and vaccines. There are currently no licensed treatments or vaccines for Zika.

WHO officials say it could be six to nine months before science proves or disproves any connection between the virus and babies born in Brazil or elsewhere with abnormally small heads.

Zika was first identified in 1947 in Uganda but until last year, it wasn’t believed to cause any serious effects; about 80 percent of infected people never experience symptoms. The virus has also been linked to Guillain-Barre syndrome, which causes muscle weakness and nerve problems.

Michael Osterholm, an infectious diseases expert at the University of Minnesota, said it was still unclear how Zika had evolved since it first emerged in Africa, but that even minor genetic changes might have major consequences.

“It could have just been some point mutation (in the virus) that has now made a big difference,” Osterholm said, adding it would likely take years to curb the mosquito populations capable of spreading Zika — and before local populations gain enough immunity for the number of cases to fall.

Jimmy Whitworth, an infectious diseases expert at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said we might soon see babies born elsewhere with malformed heads as the virus becomes entrenched in other countries.

“It could be that we’re getting the strongest signal in Brazil,” he said. “But having these cases occurring and pinning it to Zika is tough.”

Whitworth said it was important for WHO to act quickly, despite the lack of definitive evidence that Zika is responsible for the surge in microcephaly cases.

“For situations like this, you have to essentially have a ‘no regrets’ policy,” he said. “Maybe this will be a false alarm when more information is available months later, but it’s serious enough on the evidence we have right now that we have to act.”

Zika symptoms and disease

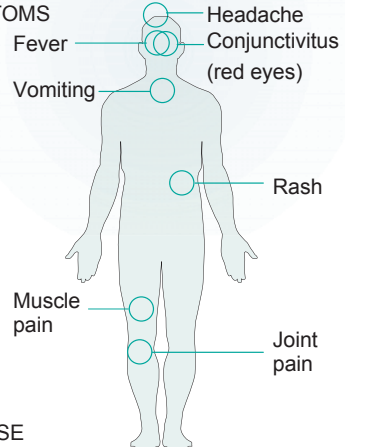
Severe illness requiring hospitalization is uncommon in adults, but there have been reports in Brazil of serious birth defects linked to Zika.

MOST COMMON SYMPTOMS

■ About 1 in 5 people infected with Zika virus become ill, that is develop Zika.

■ The illness is usually mild with symptoms lasting for several days to a week.

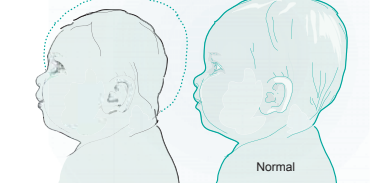
■ Severe disease requiring hospitalization is uncommon.



DOES ZIKA VIRUS CAUSE BIRTH DEFECTS?

There have been reports of a serious birth defects including microcephaly, linked to Zika. Until more is known, health experts recommend pregnant women consider postponing travel to areas where Zika is being actively transmitted.

Microcephaly is a condition where a baby’s head is much smaller than expected. It can occur because a baby’s brain has not developed properly.



What you need to know about Zika

The spread of the Zika virus and the lack of vaccines or treatment are of great concern.



HOSPITALIZATION IS UNCOMMON

- The illness is usually mild with symptoms lasting for several days to a week.
- Symptoms typically begin 2 to 7 days after being bitten by an infected mosquito.
- Watch for fever with joint, muscle, or eye pain, or a rash.



PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Protect yourself and your family from mosquito bites, including:

Children	Clothing	Home	Repellent
Cover crib, stroller with mosquito netting.	Treat shoes, socks, clothing with permethrin.	Use screens on windows and doors. remove standing water.	Reapply insect repellent every few hours.

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention AF

Denver in store for its first big snowstorm of the season

DENVER (AP) — A weather system that blew in from California left air travelers stranded on Monday and dumped steady snow on the Denver area in what is expected to be the first big snowstorm of the season.

Snow also was falling in parts of Wyoming, New Mexico and Arizona, and it’s expected to spread into Iowa after voters have gathered for the state’s presidential caucuses.

About a third of the flights at Denver airport were canceled before the snow picked up around midday. Up to about a foot of powder could fall along Colorado’s heavily populated Front Range region by the time the storm moves out Tuesday and across the Plains.

The evening commute went smoothly for most drivers in the Denver area, and many roads were open around Colorado. Plows were expected to be deployed Monday night as temperatures drop and accumulations increase.

Between 3 to 4 feet of snow is possible in the state’s southwestern mountains, which typically get slammed by storms moving out of the Pacific.

Possible blizzard conditions could complicate candidates’ plans to leave Iowa on Tuesday, when snow was also likely in Nebraska, South Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin.



Tri Lakes Battalion Chief Jamey Bumgarner works at the scene of a jackknifed truck that had all southbound lanes of I-25 north of Colorado Springs, Colo. blocked for more than an hour Monday. Snow also was falling in parts of Wyoming, New Mexico and Arizona.

UN envoy declares ‘official beginning’ to Syria peace talks

GENEVA (AP) — Syrian peace talks gained a small measure of momentum Monday with the U.N. special envoy formally declaring the start of indirect negotiations, even as the opposition spokesman accused Russia of producing a “new Hitler” in Moscow and supporting another Hitler in Damascus.

Staffan de Mistura, the U.N. envoy, is now working to keep a wobbly process alive and compel world powers who helped set the stage for the talks to do more to bring about a cease-fire in a five-year Syrian civil war.

De Mistura said the mere arrival of a delegation from the main Syrian opposition group, the High Negotiations Committee, at the U.N. offices in Geneva

was enough to allow him to declare the talks formally open. He previously met with a government delegation on Friday.

“We are actually listening with attention to the concerns of the HNC, and we are going to tomorrow discuss and listen to the concerns of the government,” de Mistura told reporters after Monday’s meeting.

But HNC spokesman Salem al-Mislet’s comments highlighted just how far apart the two sides are and how much bad blood de Mistura will have to overcome. Al-Mislet’s criticism on Russian President Vladimir Putin is of the harshest since Russia began an air campaign in Syria four months ago backing President Bashar Assad’s troops. Government forces have taken dozens of towns and villages in recent weeks under cover of Russian airstrikes.

Sheriff: Fugitives had outside aid, kidnapped cab driver

SANTA ANA, Calif. (AP) — Three inmates who pulled off an intricate getaway from a California jail had outside help from a man who slipped them escape tools and gave them a ride to safety before they kidnapped a taxi driver at gunpoint and held him captive for a week while arguing over whether to kill him, authorities said Monday.

The details emerged at news conferences by prosecutors and the Sheriff’s Department that answered many of the remaining questions surrounding the escape and eight-day manhunt that ended with the capture of all three fugitives.

Hossein Nayeri, who was awaiting trial on charges of torture and kidnapping, planned the escape for five months before co-conspirator Bac Duong was booked into Central Men’s Jail in Orange County in December and helped with an outside contact, sheriff’s Capt. Jeff Hallock said.

Jonathan Tieu, who was awaiting trial on a gang-related murder charge, also joined the plot, authorities said.

“This took a while,” Orange County Sheriff Sandra Hutchens said. “To defeat these security systems, to defeat these metal grates, to defeat these 1-inch bars, it took some time.”

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