

Venezuela doctors fume at official silence on Zika

January 27 2016, by Hannah Dreier And Jorge Rueda

Venezuela's medical community is demanding the government publish statistics about the Zika virus and warning that the South American country, which borders nations that are hotbeds of the illness, could already be facing an epidemic.

Venezuela's Ministry of Health has so far limited itself to confirming the presence of the mosquito-borne illness suspected of causing birth defects. It used to publish weekly data on all epidemic diseases, but stopped making those statistics public last year.

Meanwhile, other Latin American countries are stepping up mosquito eradication efforts and officials in some, including neighboring Colombia and Brazil, have been so concerned that they have recommended women consider postponing pregnancies.

"The Ministry of Health must be the first to issue warnings about the existence of a [public health threat](#); they cannot be the last one to speak," said Jose Oletta, who was formerly Venezuela's [health](#) minister and now works with the Network to Defend National Epidemiology.

"We already have a weakened [health care](#) system, which tends to make these problems spread more rapidly. Add to that the lack of information and it's a perfect storm."

Zika, which is spread by the same mosquito that transmits dengue and yellow fever, hit Brazil last year at the same time the country saw a

sudden, dramatic jump in cases of microcephaly, in which people are born with unusually small heads. Investigators are also studying a possible link to Guillain-Barre syndrome, which can cause temporary paralysis.

Brazilian officials estimate that there have been hundreds of thousands of Zika cases there. Colombia says it has seen more than 16,000 suspected or confirmed cases and expects that number to multiply.

The Venezuelan Society of Public Health has chastised the socialist administration for remaining silent. It said a study by non-governmental organizations that sought reports of fevers found a rise in cases of acute fever in the past six months that could correspond to 400,000 cases of Zika here.

"Data is an essential tool for controlling this new health problem and to guiding [public health](#) measures," the organization said in a statement.

Medical professionals in this highly polarized country tend to lean toward the opposition and many blame the socialist administration for widespread shortages of [medical supplies](#) and a worsening brain drain that has deprived the country of specialists and young doctors.

On Tuesday, the opposition-controlled Congress declared that Venezuela was in a humanitarian health crisis stemming from a lack of medical supplies, crumbling hospitals and high turnover within the government administration. Lawmakers accused the administration of hiding information about Zika and another mosquito-related illness, chikungunya.

Health Ministry officials reached by telephone declined to comment.

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