

Venezuela reports 4,700 suspected Zika cases

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Venezuela has recorded 4,700 suspected cases of people infected by the Zika virus, which is thought to cause brain damage in babies, the health ministry said on Thursday.

The estimate followed thousands of other suspected [cases](#) in Latin America which have raised a world health scare over the mosquito-borne virus.

"We have reports of 4,700 patients suspected of being infected with the Zika virus" based on their symptoms, Health Minister Luisana Melo told reporters.

It was the first such toll from the government in the South American country of 30 million people, which is struggling with an economic and political crisis.

Melo said there were likely far more cases of Zika than the suspected cases so far recorded because most patients do not realize they have the virus since the symptoms are usually mild.

World health authorities suspect that the virus is to blame for a recent rise in the region in cases of microcephaly, a condition in which babies are born with abnormally small heads.

The World Health Organization said Thursday that Zika is "spreading explosively" in the Americas and the region may see up to four million cases.

Venezuela is among more than 20 countries and territories that have reported cases.

Melo said Venezuela had not yet identified any cases of microcephaly linked to Zika.

She said the government was launching a program to eliminate the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, the insect that carries Zika and other tropical fevers.

Melo insisted the authorities were equipped to treat the disease, despite recent shortages of medical supplies due to the country's severe economic crisis.

She added that Venezuela had also recorded 90 cases of Guillain-Barre syndrome, a neurological disorder that can cause paralysis or even death.

That disease has also been linked to Zika but Melo said there was so far no evidence to link the cases in Venezuela with that virus.

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