

Brazil, Texas state hospital reach deal on Zika vaccine

February 11 2016, by Joshua Goodman

Brazil has signed an agreement with a Texas research hospital to develop a vaccine against the Zika virus, the country's health minister said Thursday, adding the goal is for the vaccine to be ready for clinical testing within 12 months.

Minister Marcelo Castro said at a news conference that the government will invest \$1.9 million in the research, which will be jointly conducted by the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston and the Evandro Chagas Institute in the Amazonian city of Belem—two facilities specializing in study of mosquito viruses.

He said the Health Ministry also has reached vaccine partnerships with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and is looking to work with pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline because of its role developing a vaccine against Ebola after a deadly outbreak in West Africa in 2014.

Brazil's Zika outbreak has become a public health crisis since researchers here linked the mosquito-borne virus to a surge in a rare birth defects compromising infants' brains. The connection has yet to be scientifically proven, but the CDC has pointed to strong evidence of a link between the two and called on pregnant women to avoid travel to 26 countries and territories in the Americas with active outbreaks.

Brazilian officials have previously said any vaccine for Zika could take as many as five years but Castro on Thursday said he was more

optimistic, saying that it could be ready for distribution within three years.

As part of a stream of foreign researchers and regulators arriving to the South American nation in the coming days, representatives from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration will meet with their Brazilian counterparts to ensure that clinical testing of the vaccine can take place as quickly and smoothly as possible.

"This isn't just Brazil's concern; it's the world's concern," he said.

While Castro said the government's main focus now is on quickly developing a vaccine, reports about the virus' evolution continue to emerge.

On Thursday authorities reported a third adult death in Brazil with possible links to Zika: a 20-year-old woman who died last April in Rio Grande do Norte state after being hospitalized with a severe respiratory problems.

Castro said doctors had been perplexed by the death, which occurred before the Zika outbreak had been discovered and was originally classified as a result of pneumonia. But test results made known this week confirmed traces of Zika in the woman's blood.

"We're still studying this in greater detail," Castro said, cautioning that it's impossible to know what role, if any, Zika caused in her death that the death, which was reported to the WHO.

Castro said World Health Organization chief Margaret Chan is expected to visit Brazil on Feb. 23 to help coordinate the government's response with other agencies around the world. An initial delegation of 15 researchers from the CDC was slated to arrive in Brazil on Friday, he

added.

In a separate news conference, Defense Minister Aldo Rebelo said some 220,000 members of Brazil's Armed Forces would be taking part in a nationwide effort on Saturday to educate the population on how to eliminate mosquito breeding in and around their homes.

Rebelo said the troops will go door-to-door to hand out pamphlets and would not enter people's homes or apply insecticide. He said the troops required further training on how to use insecticide, adding that just over 3,000 so far have been trained on how to use the products.

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