

Costa Rica calls 'preventive' emergency over Zika

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Costa Rica has declared a "preventive" emergency in nearly half the country over the spreading Zika virus to speed up the fight against the mosquito carrying the illness, the presidency said Friday.

The decree, signed late Thursday by the health minister, Fernando Llorca, applies to 31 of Costa Rica's 81 administrative regions and gives authorities wider powers in terms of financing and personnel to curb mosquito populations.

The Zika virus is strongly suspected to be linked to an outbreak of birth defects in northeastern Brazil that resulted in hundreds of babies with abnormally small skulls and brains.

It has spread throughout much of Latin America, including to Costa Rica, a Central American nation with beaches and jungles that attracts more than a million US tourists a year.

This week, the country reported its first two cases of locally contracted Zika, in the northwestern province of Guanacaste.

Communication Minister Mauricio Herrera told AFP that "the situation is under control right now," but that the decree was issued to boost officials' ability "to prevent an epidemic."

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