

Zika outbreak spreads in Panama

February 18 2016

The mosquito-borne Zika virus has spread in Panama beyond a remote coastal area it was previously confined to, with a new case detected in the capital, the health ministry said Thursday.

Deputy health minister Miguel Mayo announced the spread of the disease, bringing to 65 the number of diagnosed cases of Zika infection in Panama.

Sixty-four of the cases were in the Comarca region, along Panama's Caribbean coastline, which is predominantly inhabited by the indigenous Guna Yala people.

The latest case was found in Tocumen, in the eastern part of Panama City that includes the country's international airport, which is the busiest in Central America.

Authorities are trying to determine where the Tocumen patient contracted the disease, with suspicion it might have been transmitted in the Comarca strip or in neighboring Colombia.

Panama this week issued a health alert for the entire country to combat Zika, which is strongly suspected to be behind a spike in birth defects in Brazil.

The disease, carried by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, has spread to 34 countries, most of them in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Officials in Panama are evaluating whether to use genetically modified males of the mosquito to decimate its population, however that is seen as a very costly option.

In 2014, a test of tinkered-with mosquitos in a rural town showed the number of Aedes mosquitos dropped 93 percent.

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