

First Thai babies diagnosed with Zika-linked microcephaly (Update)

September 30 2016

Thai health authorities on Friday said microcephaly in two babies was caused by the Zika virus, in what is believed to be Southeast Asia's first confirmed cases linking the sickness and the birth defect.

The announcement could affect Thailand's key tourism industry, one of the kingdom's few economic bright spots under junta rule, with many Western governments warning pregnant women against non-essential travel to Zika-affected areas.

"Two of the three infants (tested) had microcephaly due to the Zika virus," Wicharn Pawan, a disease control official at the Health Ministry told AFP.

The ministry later said tests remain inconclusive as to whether the third infant's condition was connected to Zika.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) this week said any confirmed link in Thailand would be the first identified in Southeast Asia.

Zika causes only mild symptoms in most, including fever, sore eyes and a rash.

But pregnant women with the mosquito-borne virus risk giving birth to babies with microcephaly—a deformation that leads to abnormally small brains and heads.

There is no cure or vaccine for the virus, which has infected more than 1.5 million people in nearly 70 countries since last year, according to WHO, with Brazil the hardest hit.

While Zika has been present in Southeast Asia for years, there has been an uptick in the number of recorded cases in the region in recent months.

The WHO has however noted that the rise in detection also comes in conjunction with heightened surveillance.

On Friday it urged Southeast Asian countries to strengthen measures aimed at preventing, detecting and responding to the virus.

But it praised the reaction in Thailand where "authorities have been active in detecting and responding" to Zika, according to Dr Poonam Khetrupal Singh, WHO's Regional Director for Southeast Asia.

Tourism fears

This week Thailand's health ministry said it was monitoring 36 pregnant women infected with Zika, three of whom recently gave birth to babies with microcephaly.

Thai virologist Praset Thongcharoen said Friday that "4.3 infants per 100,000", are born with microcephaly in Thailand, twice the global average.

The condition can also be caused by Down syndrome and other infections during pregnancy such as German measles and chickenpox.

Scientists warned this month that the world should prepare for a "global epidemic" of microcephaly as Zika takes root in new countries.

Tourism has buttressed Thailand's otherwise stagnant economy and authorities have been eager to reassure locals and visitors that the country is not experiencing a Zika epidemic.

Authorities are spraying areas of Bangkok prone to mosquito infestations and say they are on top of the issue.

But Friday's news could deliver a blow to Thailand's "teflon" reputation as a tourist haven.

The industry, which is expected to account for some 17 percent of Thailand's GDP this year, has swiftly bounced back from coups, violent street protests and bomb attacks in the past.

Before the Thai test results were announced, the United States' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a travel advisory urging pregnant women to "consider postponing nonessential travel to Southeast Asia countries with reports of Zika virus".

The news comes just one day before the start of "Golden Week", an annual Chinese holiday that sees a flood of tourists descend on neighbouring Thailand.

The kingdom is hoping to receive 33 million visitors this year, boosted by surging numbers of visitors from China.

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