

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Zika-Related Birth Defects Rise In Brazil

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ST. CROIX -- As the Zika threat continues to grow -- the CDC on Tuesday issued an alert warning travelers to stay away from the territory -- new reports emanating out of Brazil's health ministry offered reason for continued concern, but also a glimmer of hope. Above, Geovane Silva holds his son, Gustavo Henrique, who has microcephaly, at a hospital in Recife, Brazil on Tuesday.

On its own, the virus is not normally life-threatening. The most common symptoms include fever and joint pain, and most people who become infected have no symptoms at all.

But according to a New York Times report, Brazil health officials said on Wednesday that reported cases of microcephaly — a rare condition in which infants are born with abnormally small heads — had climbed to 4,180 since October, a 7 percent increase from the previous tally last week.

Before the epidemic, Brazil recorded only about 150 cases of microcephaly a year.

Now, officials say they have begun investigating the cases reported by hospitals, doctors and other medical authorities around the country more closely. So far, 732 cases have been examined. In 462 of them, either no microcephaly was found, or it was caused by something other than an infection, such as alcohol or drug abuse by the mother during pregnancy, a spokeswoman for the Health Ministry said.

The spokeswoman added that congenital infections had caused 270 cases of microcephaly. But in that group, the Zika virus was found in only six infants, the ministry said. The fact that Zika was found in only six infants with microcephaly since October does not mean that Zika is not causing the broad increase in microcephaly cases, said Dr. Artur Timerman, a leading infectious disease specialist in São Paulo. He explained that Brazil's ability to test effectively for Zika remained "very inefficient" because the authorities lack the most up-to-date methods. Dr. Timerman said this meant that tests used in Brazil could generally detect Zika in pregnant women or their infants only during the acute phase of the virus, which lasts about five or six days. Dr. Timerman also said that Brazil's number of suspected cases of microcephaly still pointed to a sharp increase.

"This is clearly still a health crisis on a major scale," Dr. Timerman said, noting that the findings of Brazilian researchers linking Zika to microcephaly were strong enough for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States to warn pregnant women against traveling to countries that are grappling with the Zika virus.

The disease agency has cautioned that more studies are needed to confirm the connection between the Zika virus and microcephaly in infants. But it has said in a report that "the increased occurrence of microcephaly associated with cerebral damage characteristically seen in congenital infections in Zika-virus areas is suggestive of a possible relationship."