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REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUROPE
BUREAU RÉGIONAL DE L'EUROPE
REGIONALBÜRO FÜR EUROPA
ЕВРОПЕЙСКОЕ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЕ БЮРО

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Dear Madam,

Zika virus disease is an emerging viral disease transmitted by *Aedes* mosquitoes that is spreading in the Americas and the Caribbean, following the first cases reported in Brazil in May 2015. As of 30 January 2016, 25 countries and territories in the Americas have reported confirmed Zika virus cases. In addition, viral circulation has been documented in Africa, Asia and the Pacific Islands. Imported cases have been reported in Europe, the United States of America and non-endemic countries of Asia.

The arrival of the virus in some countries of the Americas, notably Brazil, was associated in November 2015 with a steep increase in the birth of babies affected by microcephaly and in cases of Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), a poorly understood condition in which the immune system attacks the nervous system, sometimes resulting in paralysis. A causal relationship between Zika virus infection and birth defects and neurological syndromes has not been established but is strongly suspected.

Declaration of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern

In response to this, on 1 February 2016, the WHO Director-General, following the advice of the International Health Regulations (IHR) Emergency Committee, declared that the recent cluster of microcephaly and neurological disorders in Latin America and the Caribbean constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) under the IHR (2005), on the basis of a strong suspicion of a causal link between this cluster of disorders and Zika virus disease.

The combination of a broad geographical distribution of mosquito species that can transmit the virus, the absence of immunity against it and a lack of vaccines and rapid and reliable diagnostic tests raise concerns about the spread of Zika virus disease globally.

The risk to the WHO European Region

As Zika virus disease continues to spread in the WHO Region of the Americas, the risk of Zika-infected travellers entering Europe increases. Imported cases have been reported in several European countries.

During the winter, the risk of Zika virus transmission in Europe is extremely low. While *Aedes* mosquitoes – the same mosquitoes that spread dengue and chikungunya – are present in several European countries, especially in southern Europe and the Mediterranean area, the current climatic conditions are not suitable for their activity.

With the onset of spring and summer, the risk of Zika virus disease transmission in Europe will increase as mosquitoes find better breeding grounds in warmer climates.

WHO recommends the following measures to European Member States:

As there is no vaccine or treatment for Zika virus disease, we must protect the European Region by stopping the disease at its source. I urge you to act early in a coordinated way to:

- enhance vector surveillance and control strategies, especially in places where the vector is present or might expand. This includes community engagement in eliminating mosquito breeding sites and planning for source reduction and adult mosquito control measures;
- inform those at risk, especially pregnant women and people travelling to high-risk areas, about the appropriate personal protective measures to prevent mosquito bites;
- enhance surveillance for early detection of Zika virus and potentially linked complications such as GBS or microcephaly;
- ensure laboratory capacity to detect Zika virus infections and other related diseases, either nationally or through WHO reference laboratories;
- step up research to understand Zika virus disease and develop diagnostic tests and vaccines;
- ensure the rapid and timely reporting and sharing of information of public health importance relevant to this PHEIC; and
- strengthen collaboration between health authorities and the transport sector to ensure disinsection of aircraft arriving from affected areas.

Based on available evidence, WHO does not recommend travel or trade restrictions related to Zika virus disease. As a precautionary measure, national governments may make travel recommendations to their own populations, based on their assessments of available evidence and local risk factors. It is paramount that people travelling to high-risk areas, especially women who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant, protect themselves from mosquito bites.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe offers you its full support by:

- providing guidance on integrated vector control strategies;
- facilitating the shipment of samples to WHO collaborating centre laboratories or the delivery of diagnostic tools for local testing; and
- advising on risk communications.

I wish to thank you warmly for your support and, at the same time, call for your intensified efforts. Now is the time to prepare and to reduce the risk of Zika virus disease spreading to your populations.

Yours very truly,



Dr Zsuzsanna Jakab
WHO Regional Director for Europe

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