

# U.S. charities worry about impact of Zika spread in impoverished Haiti

**By Tom Tracy**

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - U.S.-based charities with humanitarian projects in the Americas worry the spread of the Zika virus could lead the fragile nation of Haiti to experience a spike in the kind of birth defects associated with Zika virus outbreak underway in Brazil.

First identified in Africa and more recently in Latin America, the Zika virus disease is caused by a virus transmitted by Aedes mosquitoes, producing short-term mild fever, skin rashes, conjunctivitis, muscle and joint pain, malaise or headache, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

By last September, reports of an increase in the number of infants born with a serious birth defect of the brain called microcephaly in Zika virus-affected areas began to emerge, and it is thought that the Zika virus can be spread from a pregnant woman to her fetus.

Dianne Jean-Francois, Haiti and Dominican Republic country director for the New York-based Catholic Medical Mission Board, said her agency was aware of more than 130 Zika cases including eight pregnant women and several staff persons working with the mission board's projects in southern Haiti.

"The lack of education, information, the number of people living (in slums) and the degree of stagnant water all over the place is the ideal place for the mosquito to breed, increasing the likelihood of the transmission of Zika," said Jean-Francois, a physician.

She said the Catholic Medical Mission Board is promoting simple Zika prevention measures - similar to malaria and dengue preventative safeguards - along with local fumigation efforts to reduce the mosquito population as the reports of Zika grow in Haiti and the Caribbean.

"It will be very difficult," Jean-Francois told Catholic News Service. "All we can do with the small resources we have is to provide education outreach wherever we work, to urge people to protect themselves but to explain the possible consequences and be honest about it."

Several reported cases of Zika infection in the U.S. are thought to have originated with individuals who recently traveled to Haiti and Latin America, and as of mid-March at least one U.S. charity that spoke with CNS said it believes a member of its

U.S. staff was confirmed to have had a case of Zika.

The World Health Organization notes that most people infected with Zika virus do not get sick or develop symptoms, and that in rural societies such as Haiti the problem is likely underreported or misdiagnosed.

It is suspected that sexual transmission of Zika virus from a male partner also is possible, prompting another layer of concern for pregnant or soon-to-be pregnant mothers. It is not known how long Zika remains present in men who are infected, according to the CDC.

The Connecticut-based Haitian Health Foundation, which has been working in Haiti since the early 1980s at the invitation of the local Missionaries of Charity, said it planned to meet soon in the U.S. with its Haiti country administrator to discuss the Zika crisis and other matters.

The nondenominational agency has some 180 staff working in mostly rural health clinics and healthcare outreach efforts across the Haitian countryside.

"Really all we can do is a lot of (Zika) education but different facts keep coming out about Zika, so we are trying to read about as much as we can, said Marilyn Lowney, executive director of Haitian Health Foundation.

She added that it is her understanding that one or two cases of possible Zika-related microcephaly may have already been identified in Haiti but that it is too early to know if more significant cases of birth defects associated with Zika will emerge later this year.

"If babies start to be born with defects there would be panic," Lowney said. "Everybody is mobilized: we created a brochure with information (about Zika) and we can refer people to maternal waiting home so if someone is having a problem pregnancy our health agents can send those mothers to a place for high risk pregnancy."

Currently, no vaccine exists to prevent Zika virus disease. The way to prevent Zika is by avoiding mosquito bites, according to the CDC. The agency also said the mosquitoes that spread Zika virus bite mostly during the daytime, and those same mosquitoes also spread the dengue and chikungunya viruses.

The CDC is working with Brazil to study the possibility of a link between Zika and Guillain-Barre syndrome, in which a person's own immune system damages the nerve cells, causing muscle weakness, and, sometimes, paralysis.

In Florida, James Cavnar, president of Cross Catholic Outreach, which has extensive projects in Haiti and which in 2014 received the endorsement of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, said Cross staff and volunteers are not curtailing their work or travels in Haiti as a result of Zika. But they are following CDC guidelines that pregnant women avoid travel in active Zika zones.

Cavnar said travel or work in Haiti has for some time required any number of

precautionary measures against malaria, dengue and Chikungunya - all mosquito-borne infections - that would likewise help protect against Zika infection.

Some Cross staff in Haiti and at least one U.S.-based staff person have reported experiencing suspected Zika infections, Cavnar said.

"It is a bit like dengue: fever, joint pain but a number of people have had prolonged joint and muscle pain. All of our staff who got it after a week to 10 days were pretty well fine but some of the missionaries who are older and already have health challenges had longer difficulties," he told CNS. "It has been taken seriously in Haiti because of that debilitating effect."

Theresa Patterson, executive director of the Tennessee-based Parish Twinning Program of the Americas, said her agency's Visitation Clinic in Petite-Riviere-de-Nippes in Haiti's southern region, has made Zika prevention a top priority.

"We have been trying to get (anti-mosquito agents) DEET and Permethrin donated, and in our Easter mailing we are asking for support to purchase DEET, Permethrin and mosquito netting (Bednets)," Patterson told CNS.

"We not only wish to provide these for the staff, but also make them available for distribution through our midwives," she said.

In addition, Dr. Tisha Shea, a Parish Twinning board member from Indiana, has personally printed and laminated CDC education posters regarding Zika and what preventions should be taken and for distribution in Haiti, according to Patterson.

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