

Remarks Following a Briefing on Zika Virus Response and Prevention Efforts
July 1, 2016

I just had an opportunity to get the most recent briefing from the Department of Health and Human Services, the CDC, and NIH about the situation involving Zika. And so I wanted to speak to the press just briefly about it and the American public.

As all of you know, there has been an enormous spread of Zika throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and Puerto Rico. We have not yet seen cases that were transmitted on the continental United States, but we do know that the mosquitoes that carry the Zika virus exist on the continental United States.

We also have seen that in Puerto Rico, Zika has spread rapidly. And Dr. Frieden and members of the CDC who have traveled there have seen that the incidence of the cases of Zika—not just among the general population, but among pregnant women—has been spiking. So it is absolutely critical for the United States Government, working in concert with other governments in the hemisphere, to be pushing hard right now to get this situation under control.

Now, the good news is that for the most part, Zika is not a type of disease like Ebola, where it's life threatening. It is—in some cases, folks may not even have symptoms that are significant. But what we do know is, is that if pregnant women are infected it can have severe consequences for the fetus and a child that's born and has been impacted by the Zika virus.

So we have been issuing guidelines in terms of folks who are of childbearing age, who are thinking about starting a family. We know that men can transmit Zika through their semen if they are infected. And so we have issued a range of guidelines about how to approach this problem.

But the most important thing that we can do right now is to actually reduce the incidence of Zika. We can issue precautions for travel to areas that have Zika. We can give people guidelines in terms of how to deal with it if they get infected. But this is actually something that we could reduce the risks if Congress does the right thing and allocates the dollars that are needed right now to get the job done.

In a briefing by Dr. Fauci, at the NIH, the good news is, is that we feel fairly confident that we can develop a effective vaccine for Zika. And that would help a whole lot of people and allow us to get out in front of this problem before it's in the continental United States. But that requires research money. And in order for a vaccine to be widely available it has to be tested to make sure it's safe; it has to be tested to make sure that it is effective.

And we're beginning right now on a whole bunch of promising pathways to get those tests done so that in fairly short order we might have a vaccine available and people wouldn't have to worry about this. The problem is, right now that that money is stuck in Congress. And we have not seen the House and the Senate come together in a sensible way to put forward the dollars that we have requested that have been budgeted to get the job done.

So what I want the American people to understand is that I expect Congress to get this funding done before they leave for vacation, before they adjourn. That's part of their basic responsibility. We put forward a budget request of \$1.9 billion. We didn't draw that figure

from the clouds; it was based on the assessment of our scientists and our experts in terms of what was going to be needed for basic mosquito abatement and vaccine development and making sure that we've got the proper diagnostic tools so that we can respond effectively to protect the health and safety of the American people.

And that request has been up there for quite some time and has gotten caught up in politics. And we've seen people trying to attach legislation on a bunch of unrelated topics to this funding. It's been politics as usual rather than responding smartly to a very serious public health request.

So just to summarize, number one, we have put forward guidelines in terms of travel to areas that have Zika, and we are recommending that pregnant women or women of childbearing years who are thinking about being pregnant or individuals who are traveling to Zika-infected areas, male partners who want to make sure that they're not infecting their spouses or their partners, that they have to take a look and see whether they're traveling in the right places. That's point number one. And you can go to the CDC website in order to find out how you can protect yourself. Stay informed and protect yourself during this summer.

Point number two is, we have a crisis right now in Puerto Rico surrounding Zika, and we have to obtain the resources to make sure that we are engaging in mosquito abatement and providing the kind of basic health services to reduce the effects of Zika in Puerto Rico. And at a time when Puerto Rico is already going through a tough time and its public health infrastructure is being strained because of budget constraints and debt problems, it's especially important that we're responsive to the millions of American citizens who live there.

And keep in mind that there's a lot of travel back and forth between Puerto Rico and the continental United States. So this is not something that, ultimately, may end up just being isolated there. That's point number two.

And point number three: We have to get the money from Congress over the next 2 weeks to make sure that we can begin to develop the effective vaccines, the mosquito abatement tools, the State emergency response dollars so that all of us are safe and we're not seeing families dealing with tragedies that can last a lifetime.

This is just common sense. And this is not the time to play politics. There are going to be all kinds of negotiations up on Capitol Hill around budget items for the remainder of the year, and that's to be expected; that's what happens during budget negotiations. But when there are emergencies, when there are public health emergencies, when we know that we have the chance to prevent serious tragedies in the lives of families and protect the health and safety of our populations—and particularly our children—then those politics need to be set aside.

So Congress should not leave, should not adjourn until they have this done. And I want all the American people to know that we have a chance of developing a vaccine quickly that will help a lot of people as long as Congress, over the next few weeks, does its job. Okay?

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:50 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Anthony S. Fauci, Director, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Also participating in the briefing was Secretary of Health and Human Services Sylvia Mathews Burwell.

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