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Taiwan and Hainan at Risk of Zika Spread, Scientist Warns

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By KEITH BRADSHER MARCH 9, 2016

HONG KONG — Taiwan and the southern Chinese island province of Hainan are at greater risk than anywhere in mainland China of having locally transmitted cases of the fast-spreading Zika virus, according to a prominent virologist.

Taiwan and Hainan both have populations of the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which is believed to be the main carrier of Zika. The virus has infected 1.5 million people in Brazil alone in recent months, while also spreading throughout most of South America, Central America and the Caribbean and into Mexico, said Dr. Peter Piot, the director of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and co-discoverer of the Ebola virus.

The rest of southern China, including Hong Kong, has a different kind of mosquito, *Aedes albopictus*. That mosquito may also be able to carry Zika but is probably less efficient at transmitting it to people, Dr. Piot said in Hong Kong on Tuesday.

The northern two-thirds of China, including big cities like Shanghai and Chongqing, lie farther north than the usual range of either mosquito, according to a map that Dr. Piot presented as part of a videotaped speech at the Foreign Correspondents' Club. But the disease might also spread through sexual transmission farther north, he warned.

Mosquito season has barely begun in China this year, limiting the risk so far.

Zika has been linked to a steep increase in Brazil in the number of cases of microcephaly, a condition in which babies are born with abnormally small heads. While the precise link of Zika to microcephaly has not yet been conclusively established, the virus has been found in fetal brain tissue and amniotic fluid, Dr. Piot said.

"I would say beyond all reasonable doubt it is caused by" the Zika virus, he said.

About one in 4,000 people with Zika may also be stricken with Guillain-Barré syndrome, which causes temporary paralysis. Some patients may end up requiring life support.

The National Health and Family Planning Commission in Beijing has disclosed 12 cases of people carrying the Zika virus so far, all of whom were said to have acquired the disease while traveling outside China. The first case was in Jiangxi Province, a man who was identified as having the disease on Feb. 9 and was declared to be fully recovered on Feb. 14.

Since then, seven cases have been confirmed in Guangdong Province and four in Zhejiang Province. Taiwan has disclosed one case of Zika, in a traveler who returned from Thailand.

According to the Hong Kong Department of Health, there have been no cases of Zika yet in the territory. Dr. Malik Peiris, a virologist at the University of Hong Kong best known as a co-discoverer of the virus that causes sudden acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, said that Hong Kong could easily end up with a case from someone returning from an area with infections.

“It is not at all surprising that we might have a returning traveler” with the disease, he said.

Dr. Lo Yi-chun, the chief medical officer of the Taiwan Centers for Disease Control, said that Taiwan’s sole case so far had been a young Thai man who arrived at a Taiwan airport in January and was immediately detected there as having a fever. He was tested and found to have the Zika virus but was allowed to go to his home in central Taiwan and recover there, because it was not mosquito season and the area where he lived did not have *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes, Dr. Lo said.

Taiwan had a severe outbreak last year of dengue fever, a similar virus that is also carried by *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes. Taiwan had 43,784 cases of dengue last year, almost all of them from local transmission, and most of them in southern Taiwan.

Because of that experience, Taiwan has been particularly wary of Zika and looking for ways to make sure that local mosquitoes do not become infected. Anyone arriving with a fever at a Taiwan airport or seaport from areas with Zika cases — the Caribbean, Central America, South America, Thailand, the Maldives and the Philippines — will be required to have a blood test to determine whether they have Zika, dengue or a third, similar virus, Chikungunya.

Although the Thai man was not quarantined, “if the case happens in southern Taiwan, I think we’ll have more mandatory efforts to quarantine,” Dr. Lo said. “It’s case by case.”

Even before Zika became a threat, Taiwan was already laying plans for stepped-up mosquito surveillance and prevention this year, so as to reduce the risk of another big dengue outbreak.

Dr. Piot said that Zika could become a threat in places like Africa and Asia where vectors like certain mosquitoes are present. “If it can happen in Latin America,” he said, “I don’t see why it can’t happen in other parts of the world.”

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