

Chikungunya Virus In the Americas

Oct. 4—While the world's attention is focused on the Ebola epidemic in Africa, it is not the only sudden epidemic borne of conditions of economic breakdown. An excruciating mosquito-borne illness that arrived in the Americas less than a year ago, is leaping from the Caribbean to the Central and South American mainland, and has infected more than 1 million people. Cases have also emerged in the United States.

While the disease, called Chikungunya, usually is not fatal, 100 deaths have been recorded so far, and the epidemic has overwhelmed hospitals, cut economic productivity, and caused its sufferers days of pain and misery. And the count of victims is soaring.

In El Salvador, health officials report nearly 30,000 cases, up from 2,300 at the beginning of August, and hospitals are filled with people with the telltale signs of the illness, including joint pain so severe that it makes it impossible to walk.

Venezuela reported at least 1,700 cases last week and the number is expected to rise. Neighboring Colombia has around 4,800 cases, but the Health Ministry projects there will be 700,000 by the end of the year. Brazil has now recorded the first locally transmitted cases, which are distinct from those involving people who have contracted the virus while traveling in an infected area.

Hardest hit has been the Dominican Republic, with half the cases reported in the Americas. According to the Pan American Health Organization, Chikungunya has spread to at least two dozen countries and territories across the Western Hemisphere since the first case was registered in 2013.

Chikungunya has been around for a while. It was first identified in Tanzania in 1952 and has bedeviled Africa and Asia. No explanation has been provided for why it has suddenly appeared in the Western Hemisphere.

About a dozen cases have been confirmed as originating in Florida, spurring concern that this may be the beginning of the type of explosive growth seen elsewhere from a disease that has no vaccine or cure. According to Walter Tabachnick, the director of the Florida Medical Etymology Laboratory, it is likely that Chikungunya will infect 10,000 in Florida alone.

Medical and environmental experts are debating how best to quell the Florida outbreak before it takes off. In the Caribbean and Latin America, authorities have been spraying pesticide and encouraging people to remove water containers where mosquitoes tend to breed. Conditions vary widely in the region, but economic conditions have caused a shortage of insect repellent and pesticide sprayers. In the United States, the most effective pesticides are banned.

While it is too early to project how many will get sick or whether Chikungunya will become endemic, past outbreaks have affected as much as 30% of a population. In acute cases, the pain caused by the virus is debilitating for months.

—*Debra Hanania-Freeman*