

'Sexual transmission' of Zika reported in US

> WHO launches global response unit

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WASHINGTON: The first known case of Zika virus transmission in the United States was reported in Texas yesterday by local health officials, who said it likely was contracted through sex and not a mosquito bite, a day after the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared an international public health emergency.

The virus, linked to severe birth defects in thousands of babies in Brazil, is spreading rapidly in the Americas, and WHO officials on Tuesday expressed concern that it could hit Africa and Asia as well.

Zika had been thought to be spread by the bite of mosquitoes of the *Aedes* genus, so sexual contact as a mode of transmission would be a potentially alarming development.

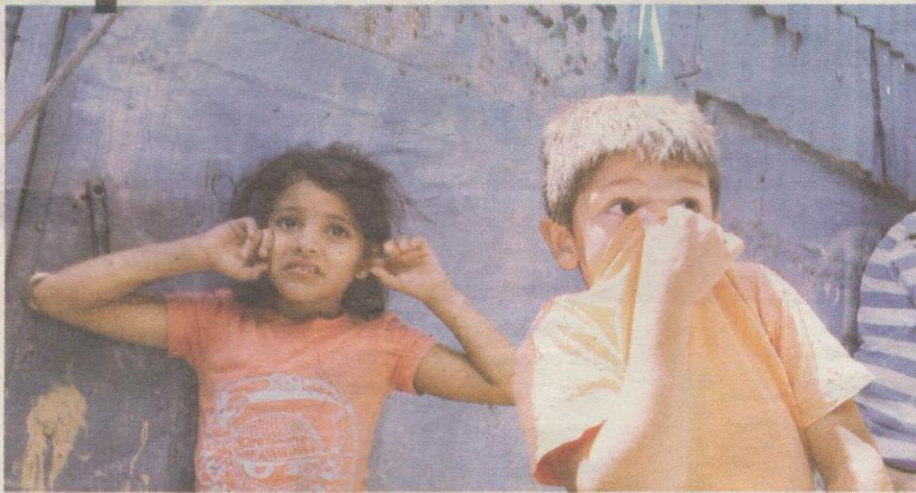
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed it was the first US Zika case in someone who had not travelled abroad in the current outbreak, CDC director Dr Tom Frieden wrote on Twitter.

However, the CDC has not investigated how the virus was transmitted.

After this case, the CDC advised men to consider using condoms after travelling to areas with the Zika virus.

Pregnant women should avoid contact with semen from men exposed to the virus.

The Dallas county department of health said on Twitter that the person was infected through sexual contact with someone who had travelled to Venezuela.



Children cover their nose and ears as a health worker fumigates in La Carpio slum to help control the spread of mosquito-borne Zika in San Jose, Costa Rica on Tuesday.

The person infected did not travel to the South American country, county health officials said.

The Texas department of state health services was slightly more cautious in its assessment, saying in a statement: "Case details are being evaluated, but the possibility of sexual transmission from an infected person to a non-infected person is likely in this case."

County authorities said there were no reports of the virus being transmitted by mosquitoes in the Texas county.

Previously, international health officials had noted one US case of possible person-to-person sexual transmission.

But the Pan American Health Organisation said more evidence was

needed to confirm sexual contact as a means of Zika transmission.

WHO has said the virus could infect four million people in the Americas and on Tuesday launched a global response unit to fight the virus.

"Most important, we need to set up surveillance sites in low- and middle-income countries so that we can detect any change in the reporting patterns of microcephaly at an early stage," WHO's director for maternal, child and adolescent health Dr Anthony Costello said in Geneva.

Twenty to 30 sites could be established worldwide, mainly in poor countries without robust healthcare systems, Costello said. - Reuters