

ZIKA VIRUS**Catholic leaders: No abortion or contraception for Zika virus****Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga. (Bob Roller / CNS)****By Inés San Martín***Vatican correspondent* | February 11, 2016

ROME — In the teeth of pressure for the Catholic Church to relax its ban on contraception and abortion in response to the explosive growth of the Zika virus — and the possibility that it endangers fetal development — most Church leaders in Latin America are holding the line.

That pressure has accelerated in recent days ahead of Pope Francis' Feb. 12-17 trip to Mexico, where the first local transmission of Zika was reported last November.

The spread of the virus has led to debates about contraception and abortion in several Latin American countries hit hardest.

In Brazil, bishops urged leaders and residents not to panic. The crisis, they said, “is no justification to defend abortion This shows a total lack of respect for the gift of life.”

Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras, coordinator of Pope Francis' group of

nine cardinal advisors, denounced the idea of “therapeutic abortions,” telling the newspaper [La Tribuna](#) that “Therapeutic means curative, and an abortion doesn’t cure anything, it takes innocent lives away.”

Bishop Rigoberto Corredor of the diocese of Pereira in Colombia, the country with the 2nd-most cases after Brazil, took a similar stand. And in Peru, Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani of Lima described those who want to legalize abortion in countries affected by Zika as “Herods with a tie and the budget of a public office,” a reference to a Biblical story about a king who killed infants. “The defense of life is a fundamental principle of natural law,” he said.

There may not be a consensus on contraception, however: Last week, Cardinal Odilo Scherer of Sao Paulo said the use of condoms was a “personal choice” that is different from abortion because it doesn’t “involve a formed life.”

The Zika virus is spread mostly by infected mosquitos, but can also be transmitted through sexual contact, and researchers have recently detected “active” Zika cells in saliva and urine.

It is believed to be especially dangerous to women during the end of their first trimester of pregnancy, a critical stage in the development of the central nervous system. But it is extremely difficult for doctors to detect such damage, even several months later, so granting women access to legal abortions based on an ultrasound diagnosis of microcephaly would do little to alleviate the risks of giving birth to a child with severe impairments. Brazilian activists want women who have been diagnosed with Zika to be able to terminate a pregnancy on that basis alone.

Several governments in Latin American nations where abortion is essentially banned have responded to the crisis by urging women to postpone pregnancy. But the availability of contraceptives is limited, especially in rural Latin America, and church authorities in the heavily Roman Catholic region oppose their use.

UN health officials have projected as many as 4 million infections in the Americas this year.

Uruguay and Cuba are the only nations in Latin America where abortion is legal and widely available. Other countries allow it in cases of rape, incest, or when a mother’s life is in danger.

In Chile, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, the procedure is completely banned. All four have reported cases of Zika, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Other nations in Latin America, including Colombia, permit abortions in cases where the mother’s health is in danger or a fetus displays signs of a severe deformity. In Brazil, abortion is allowed if the woman has been raped, her life is in danger, or the fetus has anencephaly where part of its brain or skull is missing.

Pressure for the Church to revisit its position in light of the virus has come from multiple quarters.

“ [The crisis] is no justification to defend abortion This shows a total lack of respect for the gift of life. ”

– *Brazilian bishops*

United Nations human rights officials have urged governments in the region to make abortion services available to infected women.

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services must include contraception – including emergency contraception – as well as maternal health care and safe abortion services.

Activists in Brazil, Colombia, and other nations say they will press lawmakers to act as swiftly as possible to ease rigid restrictions on abortion as Zika proliferates.

Tewodros Melesse, director of the **International Planned Parenthood Federation**, told Deutsche Welle that Zika “has to be fought with better access to contraception and safe abortion, as well as with measures against mosquitoes.”

Catholics for Choice, an abortion rights group in the United States, has called on Francis to “act now and respect the consciences and reproductive rights of women in Latin America.”

“What the Catholic faithful recognize is that abortion, like contraception, is part of the continuum of women’s health care,” said John O’Brien, the group’s president. “The Zika virus is highlighting an issue that was already critical.”

A growing concern among pediatricians is that Zika could inflict harm to developing brain tissue in other, less obvious ways than microcephaly.

That condition could be the “tip of the iceberg” of a series of neurological problems, some of which might not show up in the brain scans used to spot microcephaly, and might not even show up for years to come, said Isabel Madeira, president of the state pediatrics society in Rio de Janeiro.

These could include epilepsy, behavioral problems, and mental retardation, said Heloisa Pereira, a leading pediatric neurologist in Rio.

“It could be that these children are born with a normal head size, but manifest other problems later in life,” Pereira said. “We don’t know because we haven’t had the time to monitor their development. We are confronting something new.”

But Dr. Carlo V. Bellieni, an Italian neonatologist and a bioethicist who serves as secretary of the Bioethics Committee of the Italian Pediatrics Society, warned against acting too hastily.

“There is no way to know before birth the degree of functional damage,” Bellieni told Crux. “So while a justified prudence, alarm, and prevention is needed, excessive alarmism may be unfair until we know the actual data, as we do not know yet the actual

level of brain damage that babies born from Zika-infected mothers experience.”

As an example, the doctor said that 40 years ago, there was great alarm in the Italian town of Seveso after a case of toxic pollution.

“A massive campaign in favor of abortion took place,” he said. “Many women aborted, but fetal autopsies were almost always negative for malformations correlated to the toxin.”

Dr. Rafael Pineda, an Argentine gynecologist, said abortion is not the solution because so far, the relation between the spike in microcephaly and Zika hasn’t been proven, with only 4 percent of cases directly tied to the virus.

“The World Health Organization didn’t study the problem when it started in Africa two years ago,” Pineda told Crux. “The CDC in Atlanta, the entity that gives the norms for diagnosis and treatment for infectious diseases, doesn’t know what to say.”

The Catholic Church isn’t the only institution skeptical about contraception or abortion as a remedy. Fernando Llorca Castro, health minister of Costa Rica, rejected the possibility of encouraging abortion for pregnant women infected with the virus.

Both Bellieni and Pineda agree that rather than a broader abortion policy, a serious campaign against mosquito infestation is necessary, as well as funding to develop a vaccine.

Bellieni claimed that liberalizing access to abortion would be an alibi for national governments to avoid the expense of eradication and prevention.

“Opening gates to the easiest and quickest solution, which doesn’t resolve the problem, would be less expensive and more rapid,” he said, “but [is it] more human?”


Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.

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