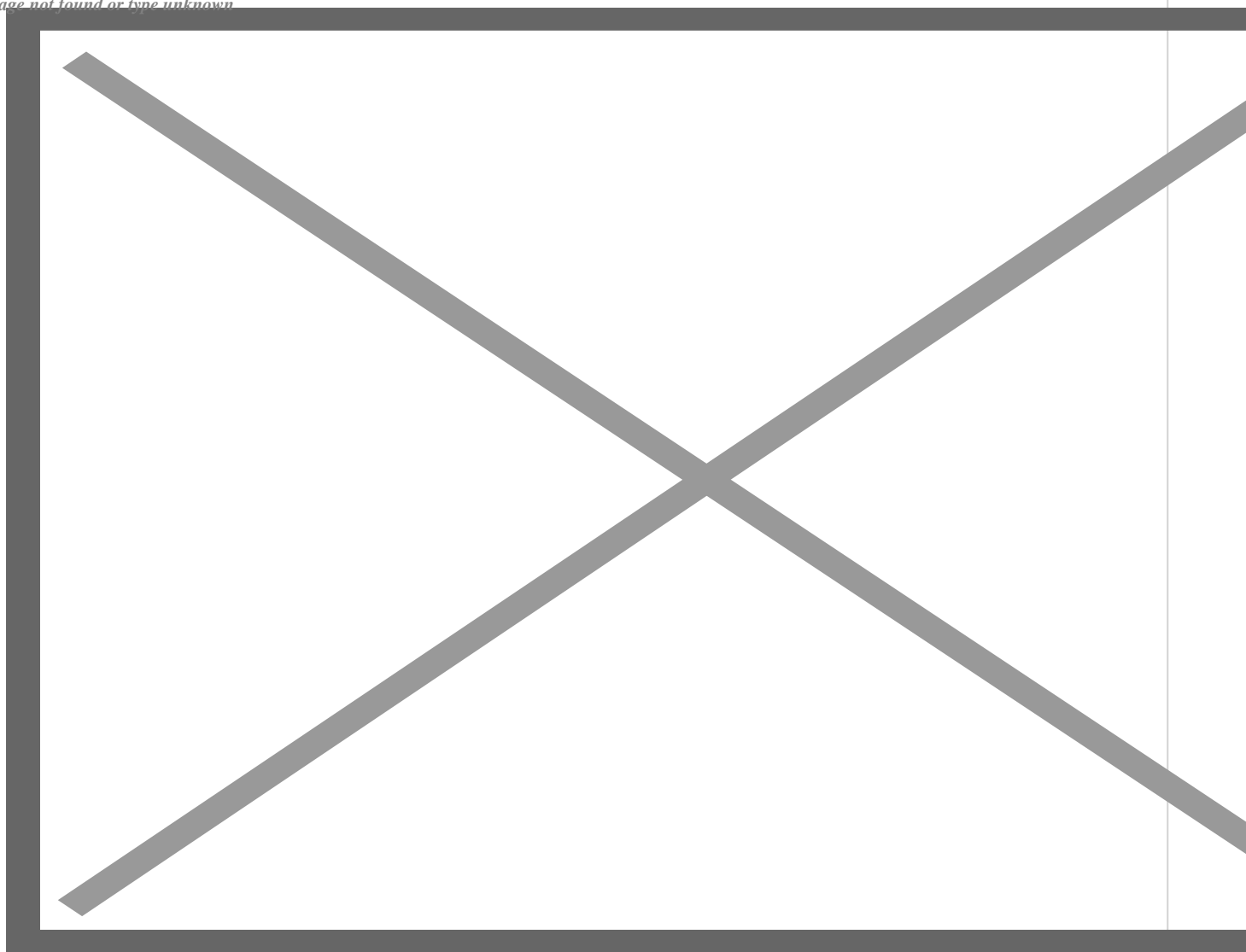


India's Kerala state on alert after Zika virus detected

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In the middle of a pandemic that is tearing India apart, a pregnant woman found to be infected with Zika virus, while 13 other suspected cases are being investigated

New Delhi, July 9 (RHC)-- Authorities in India's southern Kerala state have issued a statewide alert after a case of the Zika virus was confirmed, officials said. A further 13 suspected cases were being

investigated, state's Health Minister Veena George said on Friday.

A 24-year-old pregnant woman was found to be infected with the mosquito-borne disease and was undergoing treatment at a hospital in Thiruvananthapuram city. Samples from the 13 suspected cases have been sent for further investigation to a lab in Pune, the Kerala minister added.

Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable and can transmit the infection to their newborns which can result in life-altering conditions such as Guillain-Barre syndrome, a rare auto-immune disease. It can also cause birth defects such as microcephaly, which causes babies to be born with a smaller head due to abnormalities in brain development.

Zika is mostly spread through the bite of the Aedes mosquito but can also be sexually transmitted, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The virus was first discovered in monkeys in Uganda's Zika Forest in 1947 and has caused several outbreaks across the world in recent decades.

No vaccines or anti-viral drugs are available as prevention or cure. The World Health Organization declared it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in 2016. Symptoms include fever, skin rashes, conjunctivitis and muscle and joint pain, but deaths are rare.

Officials said the infected woman in Kerala showed symptoms including fever, headache and rashes before being admitted to a hospital, where she safely delivered a baby on Wednesday. Health teams have been assigned to the area to monitor for any further cases.

India also saw Zika outbreaks in 2017 and 2018, with hundreds of cases reported in western Gujarat and Rajasthan states, as well as the central state of Madhya Pradesh, but the latest infection is the first in Kerala.

The state is currently battling a surge in COVID-19 cases, with more than 13,000 infections reported on Friday, more than a third of India's 43,393 daily cases recorded on the day.

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