

A pittance for Zika, \$600 billion for the Pentagon

Kate Randall
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As the Zika virus threatens a worldwide epidemic, and large areas of the United States are poised to be hit, the US Congress has yet to pass a bill authorizing the large sums needed to fight the virus and the diseases caused by it.

As the virus continues to spread, however, the US House voted on Wednesday to approve a \$602 billion defense policy bill for the fiscal year beginning October to fund the US military. The bill must be reconciled with a version the Senate is expected to consider by the end of May.

Several months ago, the Obama administration requested \$1.9 billion to combat Zika, a figure far below what is needed. The House on Wednesday passed a bill to provide \$622 million (about one one-thousandth of the military budget) to control Zika, and requires that the funds be fully offset by cuts to other spending, particularly the Affordable Care Act.

The Senate voted on Thursday to pass its \$1.1 billion version and proposed to add the cost to the deficit. President Obama has pledged to veto the House bill and has yet to comment on the Senate version.

All of these funding proposals are woefully inadequate to fight the threat of Zika in the US. They express the opposition of the entire political establishment to any serious steps against a virus that overwhelmingly affects the poor and vulnerable. The priority of the ruling class and its political representatives is not the protection and wellbeing of the vast majority of Americans, but funding the gigantic US military apparatus that is deployed throughout the world to prop up dictatorships and to maim and kill civilians.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Protection (CDC) confirmed in March that there was sufficient evidence to establish that the Zika virus causes

microcephaly, a devastating defect in which infants are born with smaller than normal heads as their brains fail to properly develop. Zika is also thought to cause Guillain-Barré syndrome and other autoimmune conditions that are potentially fatal.

Contraction of Zika is more common in areas that lack sanitation and garbage collection, and have pools of standing water where the *Aedes aegypti* and *Aedes albopictus* mosquito species that carry the virus can breed. Homes without window screens and bed netting are also at risk. The virus can also be sexually transmitted.

The Pan American Health Organization reported the first confirmed Zika virus infections in Brazil in 2015. About one million cases of Zika infection are now reported in Brazil, which is in the midst of a devastating economic crisis. The number of babies suspected and confirmed to have Zika-induced microcephaly is in the area of 5,000. The epicenter of the Zika crisis is in the country's Northeast, where 35 million people have no running water and over 100 million lack access to sewage systems.

The CDC has reported mosquito-borne transmission of the Zika virus in Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands and American Samoa. Puerto Rico is reporting about 100 confirmed cases per week, and 945 infections since the island's outbreak began last year, 65 of them pregnant women. Last Friday, the US territory's health department reported the first fetus to develop microcephaly, which was not carried to term.

Puerto Rico defaulted on \$347 million of its debt payments on May 2. Last year, the government cut \$250 million in appropriations for public health, resulting in the closure of hospitals and health care centers and job losses for thousands of public employees. The default will further curb efforts to fight

the spread of Zika.

The virus will undoubtedly move north, beginning with the US South. The National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) looked at 50 US cities where the Aedes and related mosquito species are known to exist. NCAR assessed cities for Zika risk due to temperature, proximity to airports and overall socioeconomic conditions.

NCAR created a map showing potential areas for significant breeding of the Aedes mosquitos throughout the country. Five Florida cities have been identified as high-risk, and cities in Georgia, South Carolina and Alabama also have high-risk cities. Many of these areas have low access to air conditioning and windows with effective screens and greater difficulty accessing clean water.

Moderate risk for Zika has been identified in cities as far north as New York City, and as far west as Oklahoma City.

CDC Director Dr. Tom Frieden told ABC News that there is a “narrow window of opportunity” to tackle the growing Zika threat. “This is an unprecedented problem,” he warned. “We’ve never had a situation before where a single mosquito bite could lead to a devastating fetal malformation.”

Politicians in Washington, however, are unmoved by the potential social catastrophe. The Obama administration’s efforts related to Zika include incentives for the drug companies, offering them expedited approval of new drugs in return for ramping up their research to develop a vaccine to protect against the virus. The pharmaceuticals have previously balked at doing such research, as it is not likely to bring in big profits.

The Zika virus and its horrifying effects, particularly on infants, are born of poverty and social inequality. They can be fought only on the basis of an internationally coordinated campaign, providing the resources to not only rapidly develop and distribute vaccines to fight it, but to eradicate the conditions of poverty and oppression that cause them to spread.

There are more than enough resources to be used to combat Zika and other modern-day plagues, but their utilization is blocked by the capitalist system, which subordinates all such concerns to the profits of a tiny financial oligarchy and its agenda of war abroad and social counterrevolution at home.



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