Geneva 28 January 2016--WHO Director-General, Margaret Chan, will convene an International Health Regulations Emergency Committee on Zika virus and observed increase in neurological disorders and neonatal malformations.

The Committee will meet on Monday 1 February in Geneva to ascertain whether the outbreak constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

Decisions concerning the Committee's membership and advice will be made public on WHO's website.

Outbreak in the Americas

In May 2015, Brazil reported its first case of Zika virus disease. Since then, the disease has spread within Brazil and to 24 other countries in the region.

Arrival of the virus in some countries of the Americas, notably Brazil, has been associated with a steep increase in the birth of babies with abnormally small heads and in cases of Guillain-Barré syndrome, a poorly understood condition in which the immune system attacks the nervous system, sometimes resulting in paralysis.

A causal relationship between Zika virus infection and birth defects and neurological syndromes has not been established, but is strongly suspected.

WHO action

WHO's Regional Office for the Americas (PAHO) has been working closely with affected countries since May 2015. PAHO has mobilized staff and members of the Global Outbreak and Response Network (GOARN) to assist ministries of health in strengthening their abilities to detect the arrival and circulation of Zika virus through laboratory testing and rapid reporting. The aim has been to ensure accurate clinical diagnosis and treatment for patients, to track the spread of the virus and the mosquito that carries it, and to promote prevention, especially through mosquito control.

The Organization is supporting the scaling up and strengthening of surveillance systems in countries that have reported cases of Zika and of microcephaly and other neurological conditions that may be associated with the virus. Surveillance is also being heightened in countries to which the virus may spread. In the coming weeks, the Organization will convene experts to address critical gaps in scientific knowledge about the virus and its potential effects on fetuses, children and adults.

WHO will also prioritize the development of vaccines and new tools to control mosquito populations, as well as improving diagnostic tests.