NEWS

Obama presses Congress to agree to Zika funding

Michael McCarthy

Seattle

After meeting with health officials on 1 July, US President Barack Obama has called on Congress to back a bill to fund the US response to the Zika virus disease outbreak before it breaks for its seven week summer recess.

“We have to get the money from Congress over the next two weeks to make sure that we can begin to develop the effective vaccines, the mosquito abatement tools, the state emergency response dollars so that all of us are safe and we’re not seeing families dealing with tragedies that can last a lifetime,” Obama said. US health officials were “fairly confident” that they could develop an effective vaccine against Zika, Obama said, “but that requires research money.”

Obama had requested \$1.9 billion (£1.4bn; €1.7bn) in emergency funding in late February, but legislation has been stalled in Congress. Last week, Republicans, who control both the House of Representatives and Senate, sought passage of a bill that would have provided \$1.1bn for Zika funding.

But Democrats blocked the legislation on a procedural vote, arguing that the legislation had been loaded with unacceptable, partisan riders. These included substantial funding cuts to other health programs, restrictions of funding for contraceptive services, weakening of pesticide regulations, and a measure that

would block a ban on displaying the Confederate flag at military cemeteries.

Both sides have accused the other of playing politics, and the Republican leadership has said that it will bring the bill up again this week, without amendment. Democrats, on the other hand, say that Republicans will compromise rather than be seen as failing to act in the face of the crisis. Congress reconvenes on 6 July and is expected to stay in session until 15 July, when it will adjourn until after 5 September.

As of 29 June, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has had more than 2026 reports of Zika infections in US territories, predominantly from Puerto Rico, and 935 cases in US states. To date, all the infections in the US were acquired abroad, except for 13 that were acquired through sexual contact with a partner who had been infected while abroad.

Infection with the mosquito borne virus during pregnancy can cause severe fetal defects, including microcephaly. As of 23 June, the CDC has received more than 500 confirmed cases of infections in pregnant women in the US and its territories. Most of these pregnancies are ongoing, but seven infants have been born with birth defects, and there have been five pregnancy losses with birth defects.