

BIRTH DEFECTS JUMP 20-FOLD IN ZIKA-HIT MOMS

WASHINGTON: Pregnant women infected with the Zika virus last year were 20 times more likely to bear children with birth defects than those who gave birth prior to the epidemic, US health officials said Thursday. Researchers for the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention compared birth outcomes prior to the Zika epidemic's outbreak in 2015 - using data from three US state registries - to those of mothers infected by the virus in 2016. The defects included microcephaly - a crippling deformation that leads to babies having very small brains and heads - as well as poor cranial development, neural tube defects and other brain or eye abnormalities. The study found that those defects were seen in about three live births per 1,000 in 2013 and 2014.

But in 2016 abnormalities were found in some 60 infants and fetuses per 1,000 when their pregnant mothers were infected by Zika. Among infected women, the virus was also responsible for 48 percent of miscarriages and 66 percent of premature births, with fetuses frequently suffering from neural tube defects or other brain abnormalities in early stages of development. —AFP

SATELLITE SHIFTS COURSE TO AVOID MARS MOON

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida: A NASA science satellite orbiting Mars was forced to make a rare evasive maneuver to avoid a collision next week with one of the planet's two small moons, the U.S. space agency said on Thursday. Flight controllers at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, commanded the MAVEN spacecraft, which is studying Mars' vanishing atmosphere, to fire up its engine on Tuesday to boost its speed by about 1.3 feet per second (0.4 meters per second).

The acceleration was necessary to slightly shift MAVEN's orbit and steer the satellite clear of the Martian moon Phobos, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said in a statement. —AFP

IN KENYA, FAIRER SHARING OF RIVERS HELPS KEEP PEACE

NAROK, Kenya: Kelena Ole Nchoe hopes efforts to share river water in the Ewaso Nyiro South basin in Kenya's Rift Valley will help avoid the violence that has erupted elsewhere between herders and farmers as a drought crisis shrinks pasture. But he is sure there will be competition for water in the near future. Ole Nchoe is the chair of 12 associations for water users along the Enkare Narok tributary, south of Nairobi, which strive to use the scarce resource wisely, complementing the work of nine groups on the main Ewaso Nyiro River. Together they cover a 188-km stretch that flows into Lake Natron near the Kenya-Tanzania border.

On each river, there is a center that trains and supports the associations' members, hosting private and community farms and carrying out water conservation activities. Ole Nchoe said the centers advise farmers not to cultivate crops near the river but to plant trees along its banks instead. This helps prevent soil erosion that will eventually block the river with sediment and alter its course, inconveniencing people downstream.

Fair sharing of natural resources is key to keeping the peace among communities that depend on the river, he added. "When using the river, you must be mindful of other people who are also using it - including wild animals - or else there will be trouble," he said. With the backing of the associations, funded by the Dutch government, farmers have adopted techniques to keep the land near the river well-watered and healthy, ranging from bee-keeping and irrigation

to tree planting. Communities have also constructed small dams to collect and retain rainwater, and carried out work to preserve springs along the Ewaso Nyiro River, such as erecting fences.

Chemical Contamination

Daniel Naikuni, a farmer who belongs to one of the Enkare Narok associations, is worried about declining water volumes, as well as rampant pollution of the river near Narok town. "People are doing horticulture cultivation along the river and are spraying the crops with chemicals that get into the river," said the testicular cancer survivor. "This poses a health threat to the people downstream." Other people are releasing raw sewage into the river at night since the town does not have a sophisticated sanitation system, he said. Chemicals contained in both farm waste and sewage expose residents to diseases, he added.

The centres educate farmers about the importance of leaving a 15-m gap between their cultivated land and the river on which to plant trees, Naikuni said. They are also discouraged from using generators to pump water from the river and from building furrows on their land. Instead, the recommendation is to start using drip irrigation. Tago James, a member of the Naroosura association, said he uses this kind of precision irrigation, together with greenhouses, to cut water use and help protect the Ewaso Nyiro River.

Any drop in water levels could lead to conflicts between people and wildlife as animals move onto homesteads in

search of water, he warned. Peter Tajeu, vice chairman of the Olkiramatian conservancy in Narok County, some 130 km south of Nairobi, said the Ewaso Nyiro River is a lifeline for both wild animals and livestock. Animal watering points have been constructed along the river as it flows towards Lake Natron a few kilometres away, he said. These watering points prevent vegetation on the banks being destroyed by animals, helping protect wetlands and swamps in the semi-arid area of Magadi, he explained. Other efforts include tree-planting and keeping charcoal burners at bay.

Confiscated Pumps

Julius Muriuki, who manages the Ewaso Nyiro South centers for the non-profit African Conservation Centre, said farmers along the rivers need to be offered new sources of income to deter them from intensive cropping and animal rearing, which drain water from the river. Alternative activities include bee-keeping, feeding animals in one place - known as zero-grazing - and greenhouses, he said. However, if farmers are prevented from cultivating their land, they could resort to poaching and other vices, he warned. Those who want to continue growing crops should start water harvesting projects for irrigation and drill wells away from rivers, he added. "Any time the Ewaso Nyiro River dries up in Magadi, residents say people in Naroosura have taken our share, water is becoming a scarce resource and soon the Ewaso will be depleted," said Muriuki. — Reuters

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THE LEADING INDEPENDENT DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF

Dr. Fahad Al-Mukhaizeem
د. فهد علي المخيزيم
Consultant Pediatrician استشاري أطفال
M.B. Bch. FRCPC. FAAP. PEM

Al-Jabriya - Block 1A - St. 1 - Mazaya Building - 15th Floor - Clinic B - Tel.: 22269369 - Fax: 22269368