

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 17, 2016

Dr. Margaret Chan
Director-General
World Health Organization
Avenue Appia 20
1211 Geneva 27
Switzerland

Dear Dr. Chan:

As you know, the 2016 Olympic Summer Games are scheduled to be held this August in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the epicenter of the Zika virus. The Zika virus is associated with pediatric microcephaly and brain damage, and studies have also linked it to adult conditions like Guillain-Barre syndrome and acute disseminated encephalomyelitis. Nearly two million people in Brazil alone have contracted Zika since its initial outbreak last year, and the Brazilian Ministry of Health reports that there have been more than 4,000 confirmed and suspected cases of microcephaly linked to Zika, a severe increase over previous years. In addition, scientists have also indicated that the strain of Zika in Brazil is more dangerous than previous Zika outbreaks that have occurred elsewhere in the world.

Travelers to Zika-infected countries not only put themselves at risk for the disease, they also put their own communities at risk if they live in a region that hosts the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito, the known vector that carries the virus. Anyone carrying the virus in regions of the world where the *Aedes Aegypti* lives could cause localized outbreaks. According to recent reports, Zika could spread to nearly 50 cities in the United States where the *Aedes Aegypti* lives by June.

That is why, with an estimated 10,000 athletes from as many as 200 countries, and 500,000 spectators from around the world traveling to Brazil, I have serious concerns about the potential for the Olympics to greatly accelerate the global outbreak of the Zika virus.

Earlier this year, the WHO characterized the Zika outbreak in Brazil as an “extraordinary event,” and a public health threat to other parts of the world. But your organization has not made any statements that I am aware of relative to the safety of holding the Olympics in Brazil this August.

This week, Dr. Amir Attaran of the University of Ottawa, writing in the Harvard Public Health Review, presented a compelling argument as to how the Olympics will dramatically speed up the spread of the Zika virus throughout the world.

Given Dr. Attaran’s recommendations, I believe it is imperative that the WHO commission a comprehensive evaluation of the public health risks associated with the Games being held in Brazil and publish the findings without delay.

The WHO has been a tremendous leader so far in the response to the Zika virus. Your organization should be commended for taking swift action earlier this year to declare the Zika outbreak a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern". The steps being taken by the WHO, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Institutes of Health are aiding the global response to improve the surveillance, detection and treatment of the disease. But all of the efforts underway to prevent Zika are at risk of being undone if the Olympic Games spurs a global outbreak.

Thank you for your urgent attention, I look forward to the WHO's findings on this most serious matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeanne Shaheen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator