

WORLD

Swine flu strikes Brazil

ALERT: Zika-hit nation may face H1N1 virus outbreak in run-up to Olympic Games

SAO PAULO

BRASIL, the country hardest hit by the Zika virus and undergoing a political tussle, is facing another health problem with the Olympics it is hosting just months away: a swine flu outbreak.

The outbreak of Type A of the H1N1 virus has killed 46 people in less than two months in Brazil. That was 10 times the figure for all of last year, the Health Ministry said.

In Rio de Janeiro, which will host the Games from Aug 5 to Aug 21, a first fatality was reported on Thursday by healthcare authori-

ties. Through March 19, 305 cases were reported throughout the country, compared with 141 in all of last year.

A large majority — 260 cases, 38 of them fatal — were reported here, the economic and financial engine of the now struggling South American powerhouse.

People have been waiting in line for more than three hours outside hospitals to get vaccinated.

In Brazil, the H1N1 virus has normally appeared in recent years between May and July when temperatures are cooler. But this year it has caught health authorities by surprise as it began in February.

It is not clear why, but doctors said it stemmed from Brazilians who travelled to the northern hemisphere in the first months of the year.

A major H1N1 outbreak sparked a World Health Organisation pandemic alert in June 2009, after the virus emerged in Mexico and the United States.

The epidemic killed 18,500 people in 214 countries. The alert was

lifted in August 2010.

Since late last year, Brazil has been at the epicentre of the Zika virus crisis. The virus has been blamed for birth defects in babies born of women infected with the virus, which is carried by mosquitoes.

On the political front, the Supreme Court on Thursday handed former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva a victory by ruling against returning a corruption investigation involving the ex-leader to a judge he accused of unfairly targeting him.

The court voted 8-2 to take over the case, effectively removing the investigation into Silva from judge Sergio Moro, the lower court magistrate spearheading a corruption case centred on state-run oil company Petrobras.

Moro, a judge from the provincial backwater of Curitiba, has risen to prominence over the past two years while presiding over the Petrobras investigation that has ensnared some of Brazil's richest businessmen and top public figures from

across the political spectrum.

But he was accused of partisanship earlier this month after ordering police to take Silva in for questioning in connection with the Petrobras case.

Silva's supporters said Moro was waging a crusade against the former leader and fear he could order Silva detained, a step the Supreme Court is thought much less likely to take, at least in the short term.

The full court has not yet taken up appeals of a separate injunction that prevented Silva from taking office as President Dilma Rousseff's chief of state, a post that would give him greater legal protection.

Under Brazilian law, only the Supreme Court can authorise the investigation, detention and indictment of cabinet ministers and legislators.

Silva's appointment has remained in limbo for weeks, pending a decision by the Supreme Court. The former president, who served from 2003-2010, has denied all wrongdoing. **Agencies**