

Zika-hit nations should allow access to contraception, abortion: UN

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The United Nations on Friday urged countries hit by the dangerous Zika virus to let women have access to contraception and abortion.

The UN human rights office said the South American [countries](#) now urging women to hold off getting pregnant over Zika fears had to offer them the possibility of controlling their fertility.

"How can they ask these women not to become pregnant, but not offer... the possibility to stop their pregnancies?" spokeswoman Cecile Pouilly told reporters.

Many of these countries are conservative Catholic and have very restrictive abortion and contraceptive laws.

An exploding number of cases of Zika virus—believed to cause a condition called microcephaly in which babies are born with abnormally small heads—have prompted several countries and territories in Latin America to warn women to avoid getting pregnant.

But UN human rights chief UN rights chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein said this warning meant little in countries that ban or heavily restrict access to reproductive health services like contraception and abortion.

"The advice of some governments to women to delay getting pregnant ignores the reality that many women and girls simply cannot exercise control over whether or when or under what circumstances they become

pregnant, especially in an environment where sexual violence is so common," Zeid said in a statement.

"In situations where [sexual violence](#) is rampant, and sexual and reproductive [health services](#) are criminalised, or simply unavailable, efforts to halt this crisis will not be enhanced by placing the focus on advising women and girls not to become pregnant," he said.

Instead, he insisted that governments must "ensure women, men and adolescents have access to comprehensive and affordable quality sexual and [reproductive health](#) services and information, without discrimination."

This, his office pointed out, includes contraception—including emergency contraception—maternal healthcare and safe abortion services.

"Laws and policies that restrict ([women's](#)) access to these services must be urgently reviewed in line with [human rights](#) obligations in order to ensure the right to health for all in practice," Zeid said.

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