On Saturday, March 19, 2016, the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, GA, USA, announced that research has established beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Zika virus, currently widespread in Brazil, is being carried by human vectors. While the CDC is not ruling out endemic sources of Zika that can be transmitted by certain mosquitoes, the overwhelming weight of the evidence suggests that human carriers are far more responsible for epidemics of the Zika virus than mosquitos alone.

Responding to this information later on Saturday, President Dilma Rousseff of Brazil, where the most notorious Zika outbreak has taken place, announced an immediate closing of its borders to all travelers from Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. President Rousseff explicitly excluded Cuba from this travel ban because of its historically effective medical system. Opposition groups in Brazil immediately denounced President Rousseff’s announcement, calling it a distraction designed to shift attention from recent ongoing corruption investigations.

On Sunday, March 20, 2016, Haiti announced it was expelling all Brazilian military forces in Haiti, accusing Brazil of being the source of Haiti’s current problems with Zika. Jamaica and the Dominican Republic announced they would be suspending diplomatic relationships with Brazil because of its unilateral action. The United States hinted it would be re-examining its visa requirements for Brazilian citizens, although it was not instituting a travel ban at this time.

In a surprise announcement later on Sunday the 20th, the governments of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, and Venezuela, all of which share national borders with Brazil that are in tropical zones, jointly announced they were immediately closing their borders with Brazil in order to thwart any possible flow of the Zika virus from Brazil into their respective nations. Additionally, they have discussed requiring all Brazilian nationals who have been resident a year or less to leave their countries.

Faced with these responses to the CDC’s announcement regarding human vectors for the Zika virus, Brazil appealed to the OAS and the Pan American Health Organization to take action to reduce the social and commercial impact of these border closings, and to assist in eradicating pandemic conditions of the Zika virus wherever they are in the hemisphere. Costa Rica immediately seconded that appeal, indicating its support for discussion and action regarding the crisis, in both its medical and economic aspects.

Accordingly, H.E. Sir Ronald Sanders, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Antigua and Barbuda to the OAS, currently Chair of the Permanent Council, convened a meeting of the Council for late Monday afternoon, March 22, 2016. While Ambassador Sanders noted the need for verification of actual conditions, his announcement emphasized that the OAS and PAHO need to take appropriate action as quickly as possible.