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# REGION: UCR scientists take aim at Zika virus

*The insect specialists are creating new ways to stop mosquitoes and the spread of viruses.*

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By SUZANNE HURT / STAFF WRITER  
*Published: Feb. 3, 2016 Updated: Feb. 4, 2016 12:29 p.m.*



KURT MILLER, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

## ABOUT ZIKA

**What:** The virus, which may be linked to birth defects, is usually transmitted through mosquitoes. Symptoms can include fever, rash, joint pain or red eyes.

**Where:** Zika outbreaks are occurring in 26 countries and territories in the Americas, three Pacific islands and a country off Africa.

**California:** Six travelers, including one in L.A. County, have returned with Zika since 2013. No Inland Zika cases have been reported.

The UC Riverside labs of Anandasankar Ray and Omar Akbari may seem far removed from the Brazilian cities where health officials fear the mosquito-borne Zika virus may be to blame for thousands of recent birth defects.

But in the wake of the World Health Organization on Monday declaring Zika outbreaks in Latin America to be a global public health emergency, those entomology labs could play integral roles in thwarting the dreaded tropical virus.

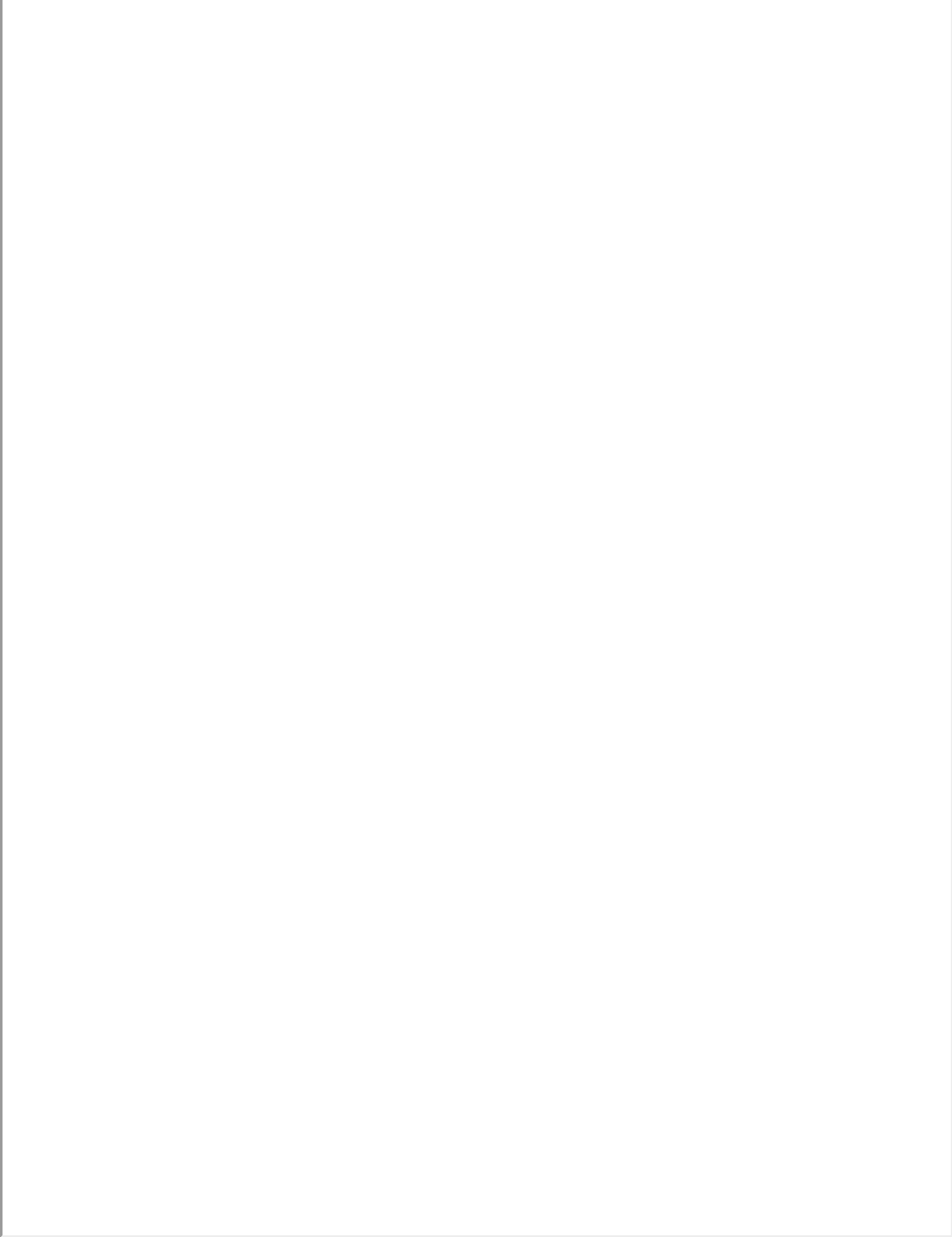
Ray and Akbari are leading research at the university’s world-renowned entomology department to help slow the spread of Zika.

“Zika has become a major issue,” Akbari said. “We think we can potentially combat it in this alternative way.”

The virus is suspected of causing 3,670 cases of abnormally small heads, or microcephaly, in Brazil.

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Traditional options for fighting Zika include developing vaccines or drugs to treat the symptoms, eliminating the mosquito or using repellents to stop the mosquitoes from biting.

A molecular biologist, Akbari has begun a novel genetic-based approach, developing gene technologies to build Zika-resistant lab mosquitoes that can be released into the wild and mate with others to pass on resistance to the virus.

Ray, director of the Center for Disease Vector Research, is building affordable, natural repellents based on smells mosquitoes don’t like. They may help stop Zika and other viruses. He’s also part of a cross-disciplinary project that would use drones to set and retrieve smarter, cheaper mosquito traps that could prevent disease epidemics.

**STRONGER MOSQUITOES**

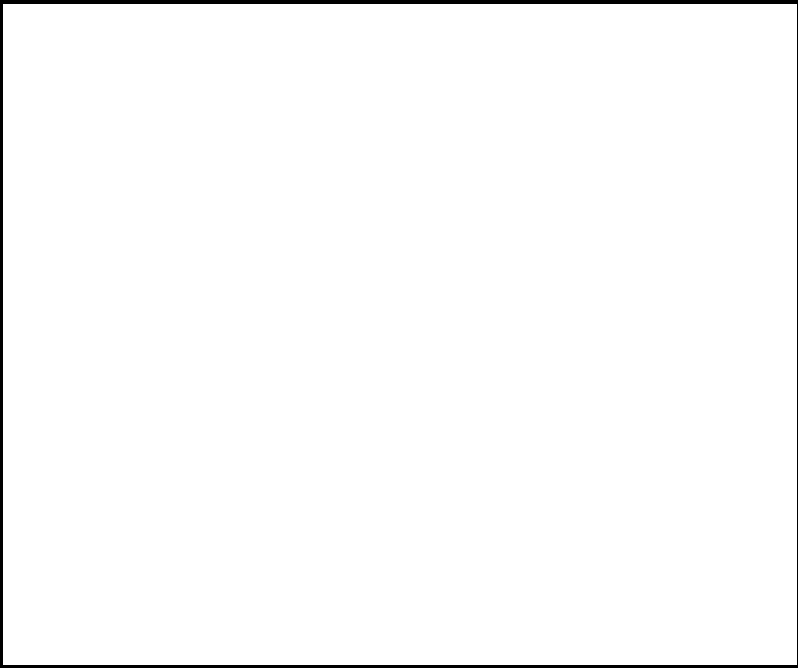
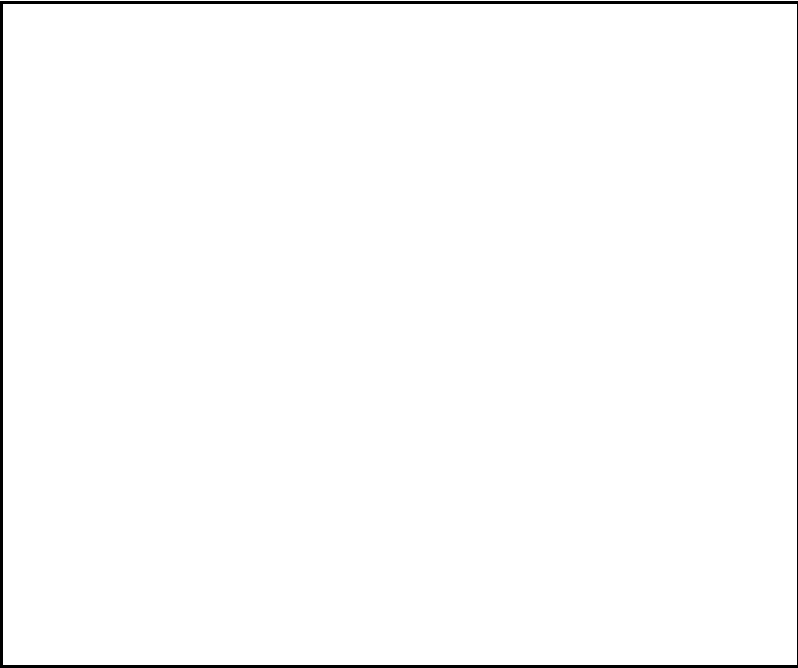
Inside Akbari’s lab in UCR’s Boyce Hall, an insectary is kept at a warm 80 degrees.

On Tuesday, Feb. 2, Aedes aegypti mosquitoes – the primary mosquito species to carry Zika – perched or floated slowly inside 35 mesh and plastic cages. Cups with small

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amounts of water held squirming larvae or moist paper towels bearing tiny black mosquito eggs.

Akbari wants to use his molecular biology skills to tackle the Zika problem from a different angle. He’s working on genetically altering mosquitoes to make them resistant to the Zika arbovirus and finding a way to spread those genes through mosquito populations.

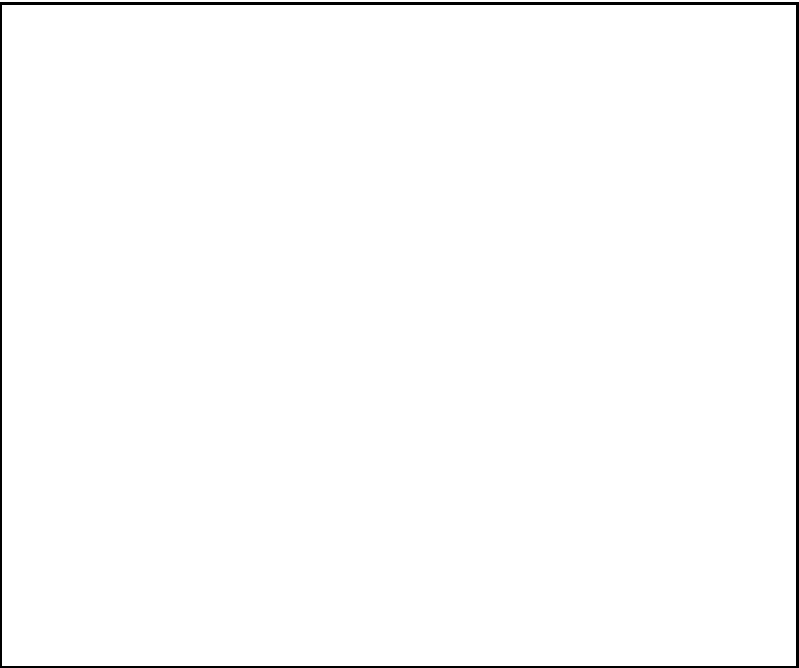
Akbari is seeking newly announced National Institutes of Health funding for his two-part project to battle Zika.


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