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## WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—8 DECEMBER 2021

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Good morning and thank you once again for joining today's press briefing. Over the last week, there were over 782,655 new COVID-19 infections and 10,950 COVID-related deaths reported in the Americas.

In North America, cases are increasing in Canada and parts of Mexico, such as Baja California.

In the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago continues to experience jumps in COVID cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. Other, smaller islands like the Cayman Islands are also witnessing increases in COVID infections.

Except for Panama, Central America is experiencing a steep decline in COVID infections.

In South America, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia continue to see a steady increase in COVID cases. While Ecuador, Chile and Argentina are reporting a drop in COVID infections.

PAHO is monitoring the spread of the Omicron variant in our region.

Omicron has already been detected in several countries including Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Mexico, and the United States, although it's just a matter of time before the variant circulates in more countries.

The arrival of a new variant doesn't necessarily mean that things will be worse, but it does mean that we must be extra-vigilant in the short-term.

Research is ongoing to better understand Omicron's behavior and the potential risks for our region.

In the meantime, we must not forget that we are already dealing with the Delta variant, which is highly transmissible.

That's why it's important that countries continue to leverage the full package of public health measures that have proven effective against this virus, including hand washing, mask wearing and social distancing. And that people get vaccinated when it's their turn.

Vaccines remain a critical tool to reduce hospitalizations and deaths and to limit the appearance of new variants. So today I want to offer an update on vaccination efforts in our region.

So far, 55% of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated against COVID.

And while this number is a testament to the efforts of countries in the region that have been working hard to secure and deliver the doses they need to protect their populations, there are still too many people who remain unvaccinated.

20 countries in our region have yet to reach the WHO's year-end 40% vaccination coverage target.

And while we expect that some of these remaining countries will get there in the next few weeks, Guatemala and several Caribbean islands – like Haiti, Jamaica, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines – remain far behind.

At the current pace, as many as 6 countries may not meet the 40% year-end target.

Let me assure you that PAHO is doing everything that it can to accelerate vaccinations in our region.

This week, more than 1.6 million doses are being delivered to countries in our region, completing a total of 72 million doses so far, and we expect more doses to arrive in the coming days.

In the short term, we are racing to get people protected from this virus. But COVID will require a long-term strategy, especially as we learn more about the duration of protection, the impact of the vaccine on different age groups, and the behavior of new variants.

PAHO's vision is to ensure access to COVID vaccines for everyone who is eligible in our region.

To fulfill that vision, we need to use our proven and sustainable mechanisms to secure vaccines now and for years to come.

The PAHO Revolving Fund is a mechanism with a 40-year legacy that purchases all routine vaccines for 42 countries and territories in the Americas, including COVID vaccines. For example, this year, we are completing the delivery of 34.8 million doses of seasonal influenza vaccines for 33 countries.

Leveraging on this legacy, we will continue to facilitate access to COVID vaccines on behalf of countries in our region, to complement the doses they've already secured via COVAX, through donations or directly from manufacturers.

This year, the Revolving Fund has already purchased for our Region more than \$1 billion dollars' worth of all routine vaccines, including COVID-19, and we expect to buy even more as countries place their orders.

PAHO has secured deals with AstraZeneca, Sinovac and Sinopharm, and we expect to have mRNA vaccines in the portfolio as well.

We're currently reviewing orders for next year and it's not too late for countries to request additional doses.

By using our Revolving Fund, countries are guaranteed access to quality-assured vaccines at fair prices through a transparent mechanism. Countries can also benefit from the Fund's credit line, and they can save the time and effort it would take to negotiate individually, manage orders, and oversee the international logistics of deliveries.

As we secure these doses in the short term, PAHO is also investing in the future by advancing the development of mRNA hubs in Argentina and Brazil to enhance this region's ability to manufacture vaccines.

As vaccine supplies improve, countries must however not forget the most vulnerable.

PAHO has been working with countries to organize immunization campaigns to reach populations in rural, remote, and harder-to-reach areas, such as in border communities where a clinic or doctor may be many kilometers or even days away. Countries are also working to reach those without easy access to transportation to health services in urban areas.

Vulnerable groups like our indigenous peoples, the elderly and those with existing conditions that leave them at higher risk of severe COVID should be first in line for COVID vaccines.

Unfortunately, this is not the case in some countries, for a variety of reasons.

In several countries where overall vaccine coverage is high – like in Anguilla, the United States and Bermuda – vaccination coverage among people over the age of 60 is lower than other groups, so many elderly people remain unprotected.

In other countries, where vaccinations are further behind, like Jamaica, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, vaccinations are underway for everyone, so many young, healthy people are being protected before elderly populations.

This lack of prioritization is perilous because it keeps our elderly vulnerable and our health systems at risk. That is why we urge countries to ensure high coverage within their vulnerable groups *first*.

As we near the end of the year and countries are deploying more doses to reach the WHO's year-end targets, we continue to make a call for equity and preparedness.

We need a reliable supply of doses so that our COVID vaccination campaigns do not widen the inequities that have long divided our region.

And countries must prioritize and accelerate vaccine rollout because we just cannot afford to leave anyone behind.