
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—15 JUNE 2022

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A very good morning and thank you for joining us for today's press briefing.

COVID cases have been rising in the Americas for the past eight weeks. Last week, our Region reported more than 1.2 million new cases, a relative increase of 11 percent as compared to the previous week, and 4,069 new deaths, a 19.4 percent increase.

In North America, the United States saw a 2 percent increase in hospitalizations and a 4.2% rise in ICU admissions for the seventh week in a row. Mexico reported over 31,000 cases, a 71 percent increase

In Central America, over 27,000 new cases were reported, a 32 percent decrease compared to the previous week and a reversal of some seven weeks of rising cases. Deaths also decreased by 36 percent.

In South America, cases increased by 20%, with over 417,000 new cases reported. Seven countries reported increases in weekly deaths.

And weekly cases in the Caribbean increased by 3.7 percent, while deaths decreased by 19 percent compared to the previous week. In the 22 countries and territories with available data, nine countries reported increases in COVID-19 hospitalizations.

Of the 34 countries and territories with available data, COVID-19 hospitalizations increased in 15 of them over the prior week, and ICU admissions rose in 10 countries and territories.

Our health systems are coping because the majority of people in the Americas are vaccinated against the virus, and therefore better protected against severe disease and death.

However, too many people remain unvaccinated – and they are at much greater risk of needing a hospital bed or even dying from COVID-19. The demands on health services for ambulatory care for long COVID are another factor that our countries must take into consideration.

We have the tools to protect people against severe disease or death from COVID-19.

The middle of the year is fast approaching, and we must take stock of how far we have come towards the WHO global target of reaching 70% of eligible people in every country.

Sixteen countries and territories in our Region have met this target thus far.

Several others are close. Colombia, Bermuda, and El Salvador have all reached at least 65% of their people and could accelerate coverage in the next few weeks.

During Vaccination Week in the Americas alone, participating countries delivered 12 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines alongside their campaigns for routine immunizations.

We should celebrate this progress, but really we have no time to lose.

Twenty-four countries are still working towards the 70% coverage target, and 11 countries and territories have yet to reach 40% coverage.

We have enough vaccines to protect everyone, including the most vulnerable to COVID-19. Since the start of COVAX in 2021, PAHO's Revolving Fund has delivered over 142 million vaccines to countries in the Americas.

Thanks to the commitment of donors and national governments, we now have the supplies and financial and technical support to help countries reach the 70% target - and even go beyond it.

Our priority now should be turning vaccines into immunity, ensuring that the doses that we have are making it into people's arms and saving lives.

For this we need to be focused and strategic.

It is crucial that countries redouble their efforts to protect those most at risk.

Vaccinating the elderly, pregnant women, immunocompromised persons, and health professionals protects them and our health systems from the worst of this pandemic.

As cases rise, protecting the most vulnerable becomes more important than ever. However, public health measures are being cut back in some countries, and the emphasis of offering COVID-19 vaccines to everyone is waning.

I hereby call on country leaders in our Region to focus their resources and capacity to reach the unvaccinated.

For this, we will need to tailor efforts to address the concerns that still surround vaccines.

Overwhelmingly, data show that countries now administer booster doses far more frequently than they deliver primary series doses. This means that more people who completed their primary series are getting their boosters, but those that haven't yet received any doses remained unvaccinated.

It is worth repeating that the vaccine is safe and effective. Over the past 2 years, we have delivered more than 1.88 billion doses safely into arms in our Region alone and we have an effective regional surveillance system to identify and review serious reactions post-vaccination. We have found very few of these events. The overwhelming majority of vaccinated persons experienced no adverse effects and now enjoy protection against COVID-19.

Health departments and their teams need to collaborate with communities to monitor trends and rumors, collect information on attitudes and beliefs and use that information to inform their outreach strategies.

We must start thinking differently about new ways to promote vaccines, develop tailored strategies that address specific concerns in areas where the coverage is poor, and to deliver these messages in a context of openness and cultural sensitivity.

And this includes finding creative ways to deliver vaccines close to home.

When we first rolled out vaccines, they were being delivered in grocery stores, at schools, and even at the local square or in marketplaces.

Now, some countries are scaling back these vaccination centers.

It is important for us to continue to use our resources wisely and try to reach people where they are, especially in the most vulnerable populations.

And lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic is not a short-term problem. Countries must integrate COVID vaccination into their routine national immunization programs.

The latest Essential Health Services survey conducted by PAHO showed that routine immunizations were heavily disrupted by the pandemic, and that many countries had difficulties maintaining other routine health services. Also, with COVID-19 vaccination activities, the duties of immunization staff multiplied exponentially, and Governments did not hire enough experts to manage them all.

Fighting COVID is now part of our routine. We are at a moment of the pandemic where we need to take the long view.

We must integrate COVID vaccination efforts into our national immunization programs so that we have robust services in place to deliver routine vaccines, to expand COVID coverage and to better prepare for future emergencies.

This virus is not going away anytime soon, and recent cases of monkeypox and acute hepatitis show that we must respond quickly when there is a new risk on the horizon.

Our health systems are only as strong as the workers that power them. Building more resilient health systems must include investing in the people that keep them up and running.

During the pandemic, many positions in national immunization programs were overstretched as new needs arose, as resources and people were redirected towards the emergency response. Today, our Region faces a shortfall of 600,000 public health workers.

To face the long haul with COVID, recover from two years of disruptions and stay prepared for what the future will bring, we will work to support and train the necessary healthcare providers, program managers and program staff that are so badly needed.

Now is the time for countries to take everything we have learned from the response to the pandemic, and commit to investing in stronger, more resilient health systems.