
PAHO DIRECTOR'S REMARKS MEDIA BRIEFING MAY 12

Let me wish each of you a good afternoon and thank you for joining.

As of yesterday, the region of the Americas has reported 1,74 million cases of COVID-19 and more than 104,000 people have died from the disease.

We are deeply concerned with how rapidly the pandemic is expanding. It took our region three months to reach 1 million cases, but less than three weeks to nearly double that number.

During the last week, 266,269 additional cases including some 20,000 additional deaths were reported in the region of the Americas, representing an 18% relative increase in cases and 23% relative increase in deaths compared to the previous week.

Between May 4 and May 11, more than 96,000 additional cases including 5,552 deaths were reported in South America. That represents a 45% relative increase in cases and a 51% relative increase in deaths, compared to the previous week. In South America, health systems in large urban centers like Lima and Rio de Janeiro are quickly becoming overwhelmed. We are also witnessing a similar impact of COVID-19 on big cities across the Amazon basin.

When transmission is high in areas that function as regional hubs, neighboring areas are then quickly affected – as people move through roads and rivers – impacting smaller towns and remote communities, including indigenous areas, where access to health care is challenging.

PAHO continues to coordinate the response across countries, but we call on national and local health authorities to work even more closely together to contain the spread of the virus and support health systems capacity.

Several nations, including some in our region, have shown that the caseload can be contained with strong surveillance and detection, coordinated public health and preventive action, contact tracing and surge of the health system capacity.

While we remain in this dangerous stage of the pandemic, financial resources are needed to help people cope with the economic impacts of staying at home or being out

of work; and this is vital to keeping the virus in check and reducing the duration of this crisis in each country.

As COVID-19 is having an economic impact, the disruptions caused by COVID-19 have shaken our economies to their core. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) estimates our region will contract by 5.3% this year - the biggest drop in over 100 years and it is even worse than the great depression.

The value of exports is expected to fall by 15%, impacting many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that rely on exporting commodities. Tourism has been greatly affected, further impacting the economies of Caribbean countries.

The sharp rise in unemployment across the region has already pushed families into poverty and more will follow. It is forecasted that 29 million more people will find themselves below the poverty line, the majority of which will be women.

Heads of State and Ministers of Health and Finance all face the same dilemma: how to keep their people safe while also protecting the livelihoods of families and communities. It's a difficult balance to strike but I'd say not an impossible one.

Strong economic activity requires people to feel safe and confident in the future. Just as poverty and social vulnerability are barriers to accessing services and staying healthy. We can't isolate or pit one set of solutions against the other, or we will fail on all fronts.

This pandemic has forced us to address three emergencies at the same time: health, social and economic emergencies and to be successful, we need a joint approach.

Countries must support their economies while building strong social protection networks and embracing evidence-based public health measures that are essential to saving lives.

Only when countries have controlled transmission will they be in a position to implement a well-planned, cautious transition period. During this time, countries should continue to focus on health – strengthening surveillance systems, monitoring health services and rapidly responding to any resurgence of the virus – while also devising ways to stimulate our region's economy and address poverty.

We see a path to recovery in which the health sector is central, both as a guide on how to keep people safe, and as a foundation for economic growth and wellbeing.

Countries are realizing that we must work together to strengthen pharmaceutical, vaccine and medical device supply chains in addition to our food systems. We also need

to explore regional investments in manufacturing these fundamental tools and to reduce our dependency on imported products.

And It is in this context that ECLAC and PAHO will be working together to shape a new model where resilient health systems and universal health coverage are viewed as key to economic growth and social protection.

PAHO is in close dialogue with the IMF, IDB, the World Bank and others to help coordinate the economic response in the Americas and to ensure that future investments are based on the best evidence available to guide public health decision making.

We are here calling for a new paradigm, one in which the health of the people is at the foundation of a nation's wealth.

COVID-19 reminds us that when we invest in health systems, we keep our people safe and our economies strong. When we guarantee access to health services for everyone, we reduce inequality and build more resilient societies.