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## WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—30 JUNE 2020

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Welcome and thank you for joining today's briefing.

As of June 29, there have been 5.1 million cases and more than 247,000 deaths due to COVID-19 reported in the Americas.

Our region has reported more COVID-19 cases than any other, but the overall numbers only tell part of the story.

To truly understand the impact of the virus, and to plan more effectively for what must come next, it's important to look beyond regional and national data and focus on the local level.

We often hear about the number of cases in large countries like Brazil, Mexico or the United States without the appreciation of their considerable societal and geographic diversity. In fact, multiple epidemiological curves coexist both within our region and within each country, and public health responses must be tailored to these specific situations.

In Ecuador, the Guayaquil health system was completely overwhelmed at first, at a time that other parts of the country had not experienced the same degree of transmission.

Outbreaks also evolve based on the public health response:

This past week Manaus, in Brazil saw its first day without reporting new deaths from COVID-19, after weeks of dealing with high mortality.

In the United States of America, Washington State and New York are now seeing very low numbers of new cases and deaths, while 27 other states are reporting exponential growth.

Several Caribbean countries and territories were able to curb transmission completely and have reported no new cases for several weeks, but they need to remain vigilant for months to come.

We must take into account this mosaic of situations and work within diverse settings to keep transmission under control. In the absence of a vaccine or effective treatments, the tools we have at our disposal are limited and we have no option but to make the best use of them. Complacency is our enemy in the fight against COVID-19.

Most countries across the Americas have implemented effective public health measures that slowed the spread of the virus and saved countless lives.

But much of our region has been forced to face COVID-19 with one arm tied behind its back so to speak. Many people live below the poverty line or rely on the informal economy, making quarantine measures difficult to uphold for protracted periods. And because our health services are not distributed equally, some communities are far better served than others, and many people do not seek care or choose to go very late in their illness, because they cannot afford to pay.

The personal, social and economic toll of stay-at-home orders has strained our region, and the political pressure to ease restrictions is palpable.

However, the virus cannot be left unchecked. As we are seeing, countries, states and cities that do not embrace preventive measures or relax restrictions too soon can be flooded with new cases.

This forces us to face a hard truth: We must not abandon what works because of fatigue or political pressure. This virus does not work that way. We need to double down on measures that saved lives early on, and to deploy them with more precision than ever before.

We must let data – not passion – guide our actions.

As countries that have controlled the spread of COVID-19 start planning to reopen, timing is going to be very critical. At national or at local level, we must open gradually, taking a phased approach that relies on robust surveillance, data, and expanding testing and contact tracing capacity.

We also must be prepared to adjust course quickly if the epidemiological situation changes. If you have the will to relax preventive measures, you must also have the courage to pull back if infections rise.

National and local governments must let transmission dynamics establish their timeline for reopening. The goal is to flatten the curve and then bend it downwards significantly before relaxing any restrictions. Transmission in your area should be going down in a sustainable way, deaths should be decreasing, and hospital bed occupancy rates should be low.

PAHO works closely with countries and, in many cases, local governments to analyze these trends to help guide their decision making.

The key is to think both nationally and locally and to base decisions on the latest data. The more granular our understanding of where the virus strikes, the more targeted our response will be.

Reopening is not merely suspending travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders; it requires implementing a set of public health measures

to track new cases and build sufficient capacity to detect and control new outbreaks.

These steps include:

- **Ample access to timely testing for every suspected case and their contacts:** We need tests, but we also need test results to be reported quickly to paint an accurate picture.
- **The isolation of cases:** Anyone with symptoms should have the guidance and support needed to reduce the chance of transmitting the disease to others.
- **Contact tracing:** This should be in place wherever possible, anchored to a strong primary health care system that can help reduce the risk of transmission among vulnerable communities.
- **Tracking health system capacity:** We must ensure that the number of hospital and ICU beds remains sufficient to provide care to severe cases.
- **The ample access to information and PPE:** This includes access to PPEs for health workers and training to help them reduce their personal risk.
- **And implement travel measures to limit new infections:** This could include screening travelers, case finding, quarantines and other measures that must be adapted to each context.

We also need to proactively address the inequalities in our region that limit access to health services for so many people. The most vulnerable will need economic and social support to enable them to protect themselves and stop the chain of transmission in our communities.

PAHO has supported countries in every aspect of the response, providing guidance, training, and supplies. Over the past two months we have donated almost 5 million PCR tests to the region and procured

more than 10 million tests on behalf of our countries. We made some 54 shipments of PPEs to 26 countries

The battle is tough, but it's far from lost.

There is still much to be done and our region has the willpower, the solidarity and the tools to bend the curve of COVID-19 and to keep it down.

Let's make the most of the data and public health interventions that we have at hand. The Americas are now the center of the response to this pandemic, and we will rise to the occasion.

Thank you.