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# WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—11 NOV 2020

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11 NOVEMBER 2020

Good afternoon and thank you for joining today's press briefing.

Over the last week, there was an average of 150,000 daily cases of COVID-19 reported in the Americas.

Since the start of the pandemic, almost 22 million people have been infected with COVID-19 in our region, and more than 660,000 have died as a result of the virus.

While these figures point to a still surging virus, the situation differs depending on where you look within our region. The Americas are not one uniform place, so it's worth digging a bit deeper to uncover major trends.

In North America, COVID-19 cases are steadily climbing as most states in the U.S., parts of Canada and some states of Mexico, including the capital, experience spikes in cases.

In fact, the U.S. continues to report record-breaking numbers of COVID-19 cases, and we expect it will soon surpass 10 million COVID-19 infections.

However, as we look further south, some countries and regions are doing better than others.

In the Caribbean, thanks to effective disease monitoring, countries like the Bahamas took swift action, including robust contact tracing, to prevent the spikes reported in recent weeks from blossoming out-of-control.

And with the exception of Belize, Central American countries are also seeing a steady decrease in COVID-19 cases due to ongoing control measures.

In South America, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay have kept transmission under control and flattened their epidemic curves. And cases in Argentina, which experienced a peak of transmission in September and October, are now decreasing thanks to improved coordination between the provinces.

Regardless of the shifting dynamics in different parts of the region, the virus remains a threat and is still cutting too many lives short.

The situation in Europe should serve as a cautionary tale to the Americas. It proves that even after controlling COVID-19 infections, countries are still vulnerable to a resurgence of the virus.

It also shows that shifting from total lockdowns, as we saw in the early days of the pandemic, to lifting all restrictive measures, as was the case during the summer vacation in Europe, is both unsustainable and ineffective at controlling this virus.

Here at PAHO, we have stressed since the pandemic began that the virus will affect different places in different ways. And that each country, each city and each community would need to adjust its public health response accordingly.

The mosaic of different scenarios I just described is evidence of that.

However, after nine months of living with COVID-19, we also know what works. And the more time that passes, the more proof we have that when countries apply certain best practices, they can successfully slow the virus's transmission.

Today, I am going to reiterate those best practices and spotlight how they have helped certain countries in our region maintain control over the virus.

*First, countries must have robust disease surveillance systems that can detect rises in COVID cases everywhere from metropolitan centers to remote areas.*

Surveillance data is the instruction manual that countries must use to fine-tune their responses based on how the virus is spreading.

Effective surveillance systems allowed Chile to bounce back after unprecedented spikes earlier this year by tailoring its public health measures, locality by locality.

Thanks to strong laboratory surveillance systems, Caribbean countries have been disciplined about imposing restrictions and tightening public health measures when there have been new infections, while also keeping tourism afloat.

Smaller Caribbean nations have done this exceptionally well, particularly in the Eastern Caribbean.

*Second, countries must prioritize contact tracing to limit the spread of the virus.*

Contact tracing must be part of all response plans and should be adjusted according to the pattern of transmission – from sporadic cases, to clusters, to community transmission.

Argentina, Costa Rica, and Jamaica are just a few countries that are doing this particularly well.

*Third, countries must rely on their primary health care systems as the foundation of their COVID-19 response.*

By prioritizing primary health care, some states and municipalities in Canada and Brazil were able to adjust their health workforces to meet growing demand when cases increased and to provide care when and where people needed it most.

And through its strong universal health coverage system, Cuba and Costa Rica also ensured that COVID-19 care was never out of reach.

*Finally, countries must prepare for the worst by having surge medical teams on call for emergencies.*

Most countries across our region formed emergency medical teams to provide surge capacity when needed. We saw this in Uruguay and Peru, where internal teams were deployed to virus hot spots to care for patients and relieve the burden on local clinics and hospitals. In the Americas more than 165

emergency medical teams were deployed domestically by the countries, enabling health services to expand by almost 17,000 inpatient beds and 1,500 critical care beds, which have been crucial to saving lives in remote areas.

These best practices show us that keeping the virus under control requires both constant commitment and proactive adjustments to ensure our national responses reflect changing trends.

Throughout this pandemic, PAHO has been working to continually reassess our public health guidance based on the latest evidence and lessons learned.

With PAHO's input, the WHO has also issued updated guidance so countries can implement and effectively adjust public health measures against COVID-19.

While the best practices I spoke of today remain unchanged, the guidance offers a practical guide to help countries decide which measures to implement and how long, based on how the virus spreads and the characteristics of their health systems.

We are hopeful that countries will be better able to tailor their responses to their individual needs as their caseload changes overtime.

We have long said that as we await an effective vaccine and better treatments against COVID-19, countries should expect to see a series of recurring outbreaks, so they would always need to be ready to act.

The key has always been to ensure that our public health responses are adaptive to the moment. Only then can we guarantee that a few new cases don't develop into full-blown outbreaks.

With this evidence-based approach and by employing the best practices we outlined today, we are confident that countries can stay ahead of the virus.