
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—27 JANUARY 2021

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

In the Americas, over 44 million people have been infected with COVID-19 – including more than two million over the last week.

In North America, the U.S. is continuing to report the highest number of cases in our region. Mexico is reporting a rise in infections, with some regions of that country – seeing tripling cases over the last few weeks. There is also growing pressure on hospital capacity throughout North America. In some states of the U.S., nearly 80% of ICU beds are being used to treat COVID-19 patients, with similar rates in many Mexican states, just as some areas of Canada are reaching hospital capacity.

In the Caribbean, larger islands, like Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba, are seeing an increase in infections. Smaller islands, like Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and St. Lucia are seeing a rapid acceleration of cases with infections growing by more than 25 percent over the last week.

By contrast, most countries in Central America – except for Honduras and Guatemala – are seeing a decrease in COVID-19 infections over the previous week.

Further south, Colombia has had the highest increase in cases of COVID-19 in South America. Cases are growing in Paraguay and Chile, even as they're decelerating in Argentina and Uruguay. While hospitalizations are on the rise throughout much of the region, including in Colombia, Chile and Peru, the situation in Brazil is particularly worrisome. Nearly three quarters of all ICU beds in many Brazilian states –from the northern regions of the Amazon to the southern border with Uruguay – are being used to treat COVID patients, and many patients in the city of Manaus await hospital and ICU beds, as rising cases challenge the health system.

Over the course of the last year, we've seen this pandemic change from a localized outbreak to a historic global pandemic.

It started nearly a year ago on January 30, when WHO declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern, an announcement that would set off the alarm for this virus in every corner of the world.

Today, we mark another tragic milestone in our region: over one million people in the Americas have now died from complications of COVID-19.

We've lost more people to this virus than the entire population of many cities in most of our countries.

One million people with hopes, dreams and a future cut short. One million mourning families – many unable to say goodbye – who will feel their absence forever.

The scars and the lessons of this pandemic will stay with us.

While the weight of this loss is incalculable, today I want to shine a spotlight on what this loss has meant to our region and highlight those most affected by this tragedy.

We should start with our health workers – our heroes - who have cared for every patient that has been hospitalized for this virus.

Throughout the last twelve months, our health workers have made extraordinary personal sacrifices to care for patients who have fallen sick. They've worked harder – under more grueling circumstances – than ever before. Many have risked their own lives and those of their families to care for those who are sick, and their heroic efforts have saved many COVID patients.

Although there's limited data, we know that more than a million health workers in our region have become sick with COVID-19 and at least 4,000 – most of them women – have died as a result, affecting our ability to respond to this public health threat.

Each of these people has a face, a name and story. In their honor, I'd like to recognize someone who we've lost to this pandemic.

Dr. Rosemary Costa Pinto – or Dr. Rose as she was best known – was the charismatic leader of the leading public health agency in the Brazilian state of Amazonas, which has been severely impacted by the pandemic over the last few weeks.

She was a PAHO partner, a local leader, and a lynchpin in the pandemic response, impacting the lives of millions in her region.

Unfortunately, Dr. Rose fell sick and died from the virus she had been dedicated to controlling.

Today, we celebrate her life and we thank the millions of health workers still on the frontlines of this virus, who are saving lives every day. Their countless sacrifices will not be forgotten.

This pandemic has ushered in a mental health crisis, as we've been shaken by fear, depression, isolation, and loss that is made especially acute as we mark this grim milestone.

While we're all shouldering more stress, some groups, like people living with disabilities or mental health and substance abuse disorders, have been especially hard-hit.

Paradoxically, while mental health support has been more important than ever, it's also been more out of reach.

Data from 29 countries in our region found that nearly all of them experienced disruptions in mental health services, with significant disruptions reported in more than a quarter of participating countries.

Many of the one million people we've lost to this virus were breadwinners whose families depended on them for food and shelter.

Today, 16 million more people are living in poverty, compared to when the pandemic started – and millions of others at risk of falling deeper into poverty – in the wake of this virus.

And as a result, millions of families are at risk of going hungry – a challenge that is made more complicated by rising food prices.

This pandemic has brought a triple crisis throughout our region as it has ravaged our health systems, fractured our social protection, and destabilized our economies.

The loss of one million people from this virus should serve as an urgent call that we must do more to protect ourselves and each other from getting sick. This includes strong calls to action to reinforce the public health measures that are needed now in each of the places that are seeing outbreaks.

We need to redouble our efforts to reduce the number of new cases of COVID-19 and subsequent deaths. For example, Chile has lowered the transmission curve by implementing a successful "Health Residences" strategy, providing temporary housing for people diagnosed with COVID-19 as well as close contacts and suspect or probable cases, who cannot quarantine effectively at home.

As COVID vaccines are rolled out over the coming months, we need health systems to track vaccinations and prioritize those most at risk of severe illness, like the elderly and our health workers so we can reduce demand on our hospitals.

We owe a great debt to our frontline health workers, so I've been pleased to see that in countries where vaccinations are underway, doses are being prioritized for health workers, with similar plans across other countries that will roll out vaccines soon.

Broad access to vaccines represents our way out of this pandemic, but while supplies are limited, we need to focus on preventing new infections now to keep the virus under control.

While we will feel the impacts of this crisis for years to come, today we face what it means to have lost one million men and women to this virus. As we remember the life of Dr. Rose and all those who have been taken from us, let us do everything possible to reduce the toll of disease and death from the COVID-19 pandemic.