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# WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—10 FEBRUARY 2021

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

This past week, the Americas reported nearly 1.6 million new cases of COVID-19 – virtually half of all new global cases, indicating that we are still being heavily impacted by the pandemic.

However, after many weeks of increases in COVID cases and deaths, we are starting to see improving trends in some of the more heavily affected countries, including the US and Brazil. There are also positive signs in Panama, Costa Rica, Chile and Argentina.

This is cause for hope, but not yet for celebration.

The number of COVID deaths continues to escalate across the Americas, a sign that many health systems remain overwhelmed, particularly in those places that carry a heavy burden of COVID-19 infections.

Central America, especially parts of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, are reporting a rise in cases over the past two weeks, as is the Amazon region along the border between Brazil, Colombia and Peru.

The Caribbean is experiencing a significant rise in infections, particularly in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Barbados, and St. Lucia.

COVID transmission is very dynamic and affects countries and subregions differently, -- thanks in part – to the control measures we put in place.

This is the nature of the pandemic: Transmission increases every time we let our guard down and disregard preventive measures that have been proven to limit the spread of this virus.

A well-coordinated response that employs the full range of public health measures is still our best hope of stopping transmission in the short term.

When a virus circulates, it mutates and adapts. This is not rare. It is an expected - biological feature of viral outbreaks.

The more a virus spreads, the more likely that variants will emerge.

So, it is not unexpected that a virus as widespread as COVID-19, which is circulating all over the world, has resulted in numerous variants appearing since the beginning of this pandemic.

Most of these variants have very few implications for transmission or severity of disease.

Occasionally, a few of these variants may change how the virus behaves, and these variants must be closely monitored. We call these “variants of concern.”

Today, I will address these “variants of concern,” sharing what we know about them, and how we can monitor and address them in the Americas.

Although some of the variants are commonly referred to by the place where they were first detected – like the UK, Brazil, and South Africa – their circulation is not restricted to these places.

We expect that the WHO will rename some of the variants to avoid stigmatizing countries in which they were first identified.

We have identified the three main variants of concern circulating in the Americas. At least 19 countries in our region have reported at least one variant of concern, although PAHO is analyzing and updating this data continuously.

Evidence is beginning to suggest that some of these variants, such as the ones first detected in Brazil and the United Kingdom, may be more easily passed on from one person to the next, accelerating a rise in COVID cases.

While we don’t yet have the full picture, it is starting to become clearer. Each new variant of concern must be monitored closely to detect any changes in how it behaves and spreads and to ensure adequate measures are in place to control it.

There is no reason for alarm, but for attention. And I want to emphasize three important points.

*1. Our response to the pandemic must be guided by evidence, not speculation.*

That’s why PAHO works closely with some of the best scientists in the world, many of whom happen to be based in our region. There are outstanding research teams working on the ground in places like Manaus, Brazil, who are focusing on this issue and providing us with information as swiftly as they can.

*2. Responding to the variants of concern requires widespread collaboration so new information is quickly identified and responses can be adapted as needed.*

That's why PAHO's surveillance network is keeping a close watch on today's variants of concern and working closely with similar efforts around the world.

PAHO's Regional Genomic Surveillance Network has increased our ability to sequence virus samples by 50% since the beginning of this year. At least 11 countries in our region can sequence virus samples and detect the presence of variants.

We are also counting on our two reference laboratories, based in Chile and Brazil, which are receiving viral samples from across our region and supporting a network of national labs.

We must stay focused in improving our capacity for surveillance, so we can keep track of trends, including variants of concern.

3. *So far, the evidence on these variants does not change the fundamental aspects of our pandemic response.*

Our recommendations to prevent this virus remain the same: uphold strong surveillance, limit gatherings, and practice social distancing, frequent hand hygiene and mask wearing.

All of these are still necessary and work against COVID-19, in all its forms.

By continuing to adopt these practices – even after we are vaccinated – we can not only limit the spread of today's variants but prevent new ones from emerging tomorrow.

Let me finish by reminding you that PAHO is a strong believer in the lifesaving power of vaccines.

Based on the evidence we have now on the variants of concern, we are confident that our growing portfolio of COVID-19 vaccines remains useful and will guide us through the end of this pandemic.

Our trust remains unabated.

We have at our hands a whole generation of effective vaccines to prevent infection and, especially, severe disease. Down the line, we may need to adapt our strategies, but we will continue to rely on these vaccines.

The challenge now remains to ensure these vaccines are distributed quickly and fairly across our region, starting with those who need them most.