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# WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—31 MARCH 2021

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Good Morning and welcome to our press briefing.

This is the last day of the quarter and I want to take this opportunity to take stock of the pandemic in our region since the start of 2021.

Since January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021, there have been over 19.7 million cases reported in the Americas, and we have lost more than 475 thousand persons to COVID-19.

For the past four weeks, we have been reporting around 1 million new cases on average every 7 days. This indicates that transmission is still very active in far too many places in our Region.

The number of deaths also remain high, with more than 34 thousand deaths registered just last week (March 22 to 29). Brazil, Peru, Chile, and Paraguay have been reporting the highest rates.

The recent influx in cases is overwhelming hospitals in several countries. For example, ICU occupancy rates are over 80% in all but two Brazilian states, and Jamaican hospitals are operating well above capacity.

Mortality increases when this happens because patients have difficulty finding the care they need, and health workers are overburdened by tending to too many people at once.

Today, the pandemic is as active as ever, and we have no option but to fight it.

In fact, a few countries in our region, including Paraguay, Uruguay, and Cuba, are experiencing outbreaks in 2021 of greater magnitude than the ones they faced in 2020.

All countries should be on high alert: in this pandemic, complacency leads to more cases.

We urge our Member States to reinforce surveillance and act at the first sign that cases are rising. Don't wait until you are overwhelmed. The risks for your people and health systems are too high.

The past three months have marked a critical phase of the COVID pandemic for our region, and there have been three areas where PAHO has been especially focused.

First, our surveillance network has been significantly expanded to identify and track variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Twenty-one countries are now participating in our COVID-19 Genomic Surveillance Network, giving us a much better picture of the variants circulating in our region.

At least one of the three variants of concern have been identified in 32 countries and territories of the Americas. And we are working hand-in-hand with Member States to increase capacity and improve reporting of these variants. We are also conducting analysis to better understand the real impact of these variants in some of the most highly affected areas.

A technical consultation on variants this week concluded that the message remains the same. It is important to continue and strengthen genomic surveillance, but what we must do to prevent transmission, with or without circulation of variants, is to maintain the public health distancing and control measures that already exist, including vaccination. These measures have not been modified.

Immunization is another high priority topic for PAHO. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, only a handful of countries were vaccinating against COVID-19 in our Region. This picture has changed. As of yesterday, 124 million people have received at least one dose of vaccines in the Americas, and more than 58 million have completed their vaccination schedules. Almost all our Member States are rolling out vaccines. Haiti will soon follow suit as the first shipment from COVAX arrives in the coming weeks.

COVAX shipments have reached many participating countries, enabling us to protect at least some of the populations at greater risk. In an effort coordinated by the PAHO Revolving Fund, more than 2.5 million doses from COVAX have arrived in 17 countries in our region in the last 30 days. This week Guyana, Bahamas, Belize, and Trinidad & Tobago are getting their first shipments.

But as we celebrate progress, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that vaccine supply continues to be our greatest challenge. A large part of this is due to delays in production as manufacturers rush to scale up capacity. But we are also seeing far too many examples of vaccine nationalism, which limits global availability even further.

The current system is hard-wired for inequity and that is not acceptable. Vaccines should be available to all who need them, regardless of where they live.

PAHO remains a champion for equitable vaccine access and we will continue to fight for more supplies until our region is fully immunized.

Vaccines are not the only scarce resource in 2021. As cases have risen, some Member States have faced shortages of supplies that are essential to protect personnel and treat cases.

In the first few months of the year, the availability of oxygen and anesthetic medicine has been threatened by the speed of new cases flooding hospitals in Brazil, Peru, and other places.

This underscores the dire consequences of a pandemic that can quickly overburden our health systems: that even a well-established supply chain is struggling to cope.

Our third area of focus has been to accelerate procurement of drugs and PPEs needed on the frontline. This year alone, PAHO has helped procure more than 3 million units of medical masks for the Region. And we are actively supporting governments every day to find solutions for oxygen and other supply limitations.

As cases rise, we will continue to support countries to secure the PPEs, drugs, and other supplies they need.

As vaccines arrive, we will do our part to ensure they are delivered as quickly and equitably as possible. But we don't have enough vaccines right now to stop active outbreaks. This requires much broader coverage than is possible at this time.

Until then, we must never forget that prevention is always the best option. And we know exactly how to prevent this virus.

PAHO keeps track of, and analyzes, mobility data from Internet and phone companies, and we see time and again that as the population in certain areas leave home more frequently, cases rise.

When holidays come, and people from different households meet indoors, cases rise. As they do when people travel more.

Summer is ending in the Southern Hemisphere, and it is no accident that the vacation season is being followed by a rise in cases in several countries.

Without preventive action, our region could face an upsurge even larger than the last one.

So, let me be as clear as possible. My main guidance for places experiencing surges in transmission can be summarized in two words: Stay Home.

If you can avoid having others over, avoid it. And if you must leave your house, wear a mask, wash your hands frequently and stay away from crowded spaces.

This is a shared responsibility: In a region as unequal as ours, where many rely on informal income, governments must support their people to allow them to stay home.

We all have a role to play in following the public health measures put in place to protect our communities.

This is how we save lives. This is how we beat COVID-19.

Thank you.