
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS — 29 SEPTEMBER 2021

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A very good morning and my thanks that you are joining in today's press briefing.

Last week, the Americas reported nearly 1.5 million new COVID infections and more than 26,000 COVID related deaths – more than any other region globally.

In North America, Canada is witnessing a rise in COVID infections and deaths. In the USA cases have been declining during the last week; however, deaths have been increasing. During the same period Mexico has reported a decrease in transmission.

While larger Caribbean islands like Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic are seeing decreasing trends, most small islands of the Caribbean are experiencing just the opposite. Hospitals in Saint Lucia are reporting staff and oxygen shortages as hospitalizations continue to rise. And in Bermuda, like in many other countries and territories, burnout among health care workers remains a concern as hospitals are overburdened with COVID patients.

Most countries in Central and South America – except Belize – are continuing to see infections drop, although COVID deaths are up in Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru.

Vaccines as you know have the power to save lives and to change the course of the pandemic, so today I want to offer an update on immunization efforts in the Americas.

More than a billion COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered in our region. And 35% of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

But importantly coverage isn't uniform.

While Canada, Chile, Uruguay, and Puerto Rico have fully vaccinated over 70% of their populations, ten countries and territories in our region have yet to reach 20% of their populations. And in Haiti, fewer than 1% of people have been protected thus far.

Most countries continue to have limited access to vaccines, so we are encouraged by announcements made at last week's Global COVID-19 Summit, where world leaders pledged an additional 850 million COVID vaccine doses, and where President Biden announced that the U.S. itself will donate an additional half a billion vaccines to low and lower-middle income countries, bringing the total U.S. donations to over 1.1 billion doses.

At that summit, I told participants that overcoming this pandemic rests on having the tools to prevent, detect and treat COVID-19, and that we must expand global vaccine production by leveraging the expertise and capacity of regions like our own.

Meanwhile, vaccine donations remain the fastest way to support countries in our region.

PAHO has helped COVAX deliver 50 million doses to our region—including nearly 14 million donated doses—and we have the capacity to quickly scale this support, so we urge countries not to delay their donations as lives hang in the balance *today*.

Indeed, PAHO is doing everything that it can to accelerate vaccinations in our region.

Over the next few months, PAHO will work closely with COVAX to deliver tens of millions of doses to our region – many of which are allocated for countries with low vaccine coverage – like Jamaica, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

Our technical and procurement teams have been working closely with these countries to help them prepare health workers and health systems so they can absorb and administer these vaccines quickly.

For example, we are on the ground in Haiti helping the country make the most of the vaccines it has on hand and working with the Haitian governments and international partner NGOs to plan for additional allocations of vaccine supply in the coming months. Special attention is also focused on uptake of vaccines in the areas affected by the earthquake.

Looking ahead, we must use all possible strategies to access more doses.

Our Revolving Fund is in advanced discussions with vaccine manufacturers to purchase additional COVID vaccines on behalf of our Member States, to complement bilateral deals, donations, and doses that they are receiving via the COVAX mechanism.

We are very happy to share that we have reached an agreement with Sinovac and have begun accepting orders that will be ready for delivery this year, and we are expecting to sign new agreements in the coming days to buy vaccines that have Emergency Use Listing approval from other suppliers for 2021 and 2022.

But administering vaccines requires more than just doses.

Today we need more syringes as vaccination campaigns ramp up. PAHO has already secured over 150 million syringes for our Member States, and the Revolving Fund is working to finalize shipments for the rest of 2021 and to consolidate country demand requirements for syringes and safety boxes for 2022.

As we address these immediate gaps, PAHO is also working to expand our region's manufacturing capacity to build a more sustainable and dependable supply of vaccines and medical technologies.

Latin America and the Caribbean have imported nearly all the medical products that they've used in the COVID response, and today we're paying the price as we continue to face delays in production.

But our region has the capacity and expertise to lessen our dependence on global suppliers.

After reviewing more than 30 proposals, an external and independent committee of experts selected two projects – the public producer Bio-Manguinhos Institute of Technology on Immunobiologicals at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation in Brazil, and the private company Sinergium Biotech in Argentina – to receive technical support from PAHO and WHO to accelerate the development and production of mRNA vaccines, that is the same technological platform that is used by Pfizer and Moderna, to do that in Latin America and the Caribbean.

This is a strategic initiative because mRNA technology can also be used to develop other virus vaccines for relevant public health problems in our Region such as Zika, Dengue fever and others. Both of these institutions that were chosen have a long track record of vaccine manufacturing and will build on this legacy to protect people across the region from the threat of COVID and from future health risks. All vaccines that will be produced under this initiative will be available to all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean through PAHO's Revolving Fund benefiting the entire Region.

Of course, there are many steps to making vaccines, so we are also inviting public and private pharmaceutical manufacturers that can develop and produce essential components for the mRNA vaccines to become a part of this regional platform. Applications are open until October 15th, and we encourage suppliers across our region to apply.

And finally, we are counting on the support of Member States, financing institutions and others to prioritize investments in our regional supply chains.

Because while expanding regional pharmaceutical manufacturing will require significant investment, the cost of inaction is simply too high, and we cannot go it alone.

So once again, I urge countries, institutions, and partners across our region to work together so we can overcome this pandemic faster and be stronger and more resilient when the next crisis strikes.