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

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

Over the last week, the Americas reported over 800,000 new COVID infections and 18,000 COVID-related deaths – the lowest COVID figures in over a year.

We have reason to be optimistic, but we must remain vigilant.

Across North, Central and South America, COVID infections and deaths are decreasing, with a few exceptions. Belize is reporting a sharp jump in COVID-related deaths and Paraguay saw a doubling of COVID cases in the last week.

Many of the Caribbean's larger islands are seeing downward trends – including Cuba, which for months has been managing a large COVID outbreak.

But some smaller islands are just now reaching their first pandemic peaks: Saint Kitts and Nevis, Barbados, Anguilla and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines are now reporting their highest number of COVID infections and COVID-related deaths.

That's why it's critical that countries continue to implement public health measures like mask wearing, social distancing, and limiting large gatherings to bring these outbreaks under control – especially as many countries are still struggling to expand vaccine coverage.

Today, nearly 44% of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have completed their COVID immunization course.

Thanks in large part to vaccine donations, made bilaterally or through COVAX, today, twice as many people in Latin America and the Caribbean are fully vaccinated against COVID than in August of this year.

And while our region has done a great job at accelerating immunization coverage over just a few months, more than half of people in Latin America and the Caribbean remain unprotected.

In Guatemala, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Jamaica, Nicaragua, and Haiti – less than 20% of people have been fully vaccinated.

But the good news is that over three million more doses will arrive in our region through COVAX this week. And deliveries are expected to pick up in these final months of the year so we can continue to address one of the biggest challenges affecting our region: vaccine inequity.

But today, as leaders around the world head to Glasgow for the COP26 conference, I want to talk about the biggest long-term threat to our public health: climate change.

The health of our planet and the health of our people are interlinked.

Around the world, more than 12 million deaths every year are associated with environmental risk factors.

High temperatures and air pollution have led to a rise in cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Wildfires and droughts have led to crop failures that have not only impacted the livelihoods of our agricultural workforce, but also increased food insecurity in our region.

Extreme weather and rising temperatures have changed our ecosystems and displaced people from their homes, often forcing humans to infringe on natural habitats and animals to move to more hospitable conditions. This has led to a rise in vector-borne diseases like Zika and Chagas. And Dengue, which typically follows a seasonal pattern, is being detected outside of its normal cycle as temperatures have warmed and as wet seasons have prolonged.

And these episodes are increasing in scale and frequency.

A child born today is expected to experience twice as many wildfires, nearly three times as many droughts and floods, and nearly seven times as many heatwaves over their lifetime compared to a person born in 1960.

Our health systems will be challenged by these threats, and the same health systems have the prime responsibility to “do no harm” and reduce their environmental footprint. That’s why we’re encouraged that – for the first time ever – health is taking center stage at this year’s climate summit.

Ahead of the Summit, PAHO has launched an Agenda for the Americas on Health, Environment, and Climate Change that offers countries a plan of action to reduce the burden of environmental risks on the health of our region. I want to emphasize three points from this plan.

1. The first is the importance of collaboration.

Climate change is a health issue just as it is a sociopolitical and economic problem. That is why we need these sectors to work together to build more comprehensive preparedness plans that address the health impacts of climate emergencies.

To better anticipate and prevent future threats, health and animal surveillance as well as climate and environment information systems should be integrated to build more robust early warning systems for future crises.

2. The second point I want to make is that countries must invest in their health systems.

As we've seen throughout the COVID pandemic, the success of our responses rests on our health systems' ability to adapt and to expand to meet people's needs. So, countries must invest in their health systems so they have the staff, training, and resources to face future climate risks.

But health systems should not just be robust, they should also be resilient.

PAHO has been working with Member States in the Caribbean to build safer, greener, climate-resilient facilities that can continue to function in the face of changing climate and extreme events – like hurricanes and rising sea levels.

3. But this brings me to my third point: health must be part of the solution.

The health sector itself is a large contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, with estimates suggesting it may be responsible for 5 to 10 percent of carbon emissions worldwide. We can improve by lowering carbon emissions from energy, heating, and cooling operations of health care facilities, and we can adapt our health systems by building greener facilities and by lowering emissions at every stage of our supply chains from production to transportation.

Climate change is a real and long-term threat that should be addressed through lasting solutions.

Extreme weather events that result in health emergencies are just one of the risks we face. Scientists have long warned us that left unaddressed, climate change would transform our environment, our food systems, and our living conditions, all of which have potentially devastating consequences for our health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered a snapshot of how unprepared we are for such a disruptive event.

But today, we have an opportunity to build on the lessons from the COVID pandemic to prevent future crises and to strengthen our ability to respond to them when they arrive.

We hope our leaders will seize the moment.