



Director's Remarks – Press Briefing March 31, 2020

Good afternoon and thank you for joining.

- Over the past week, the COVID-19 pandemic in the Americas has intensified, affecting the lives of more people in more communities each and every day.
- In the Region of the Americas as of March 30, there have been more than 163,068 confirmed cases and 2,836 people have lost their lives. Our region has entered a new phase, with many countries reporting community transmission. The pandemic in the Americas is going to escalate and get worse before it gets better – just as we've seen happen in other regions around the globe.
- But, despite the challenges ahead of us, there are reasons for hope – which should encourage us to act now. I'd like to share a few with you today.
- **First, we have faced threats before.** The Pan American Health Organization has been working with the people and countries of the Americas to fight deadly diseases and to control outbreaks for almost 120 years. Our region has been polio-free for 25 years; we were a leader in eradicating smallpox; and we are making steady progress towards eliminating malaria. I believe we can stand up to COVID-19.
- Over the last 40 years, many of our member countries have developed health systems and a health workforce that is prepared to deal with serious

challenges, even in a context of inequality and limited resources. The importance of strong and resilient health systems based on PHC has never been more evident. Indeed, COVID-19 will put our health systems and services to the ultimate test.

- We are already hard at work with governments across the region to strengthen our public health response. All PAHO's country offices are supporting member-states to plan, prepare and respond to COVID-19, working around the clock with national health staff. Additionally, PAHO has scaled up capacity building to ensure that countries can quickly use the resources available to respond to this outbreak. Last week, we convened the national regulatory authorities to discuss how we could better leverage information and resources to ensure the safety and quality of medical products, especially tests.
- **The second reason for hope is that we still have a window of time to act.** There are steps every country can take to slow the spread of the virus, to reduce the impact on health systems and save lives. But only if we act now. What we do today will determine the capacity of our health systems to save lives tomorrow.
- Countries need to make domestic investments now to strengthen their health systems and services, building resilient health systems that have the capacity to detect, respond, and surge capacity to address the threat, while at the same time ensuring the provision of health services for all those that need them.
- I cannot emphasize enough that countries must take urgent action to prepare hospitals and health facilities for what is coming: an influx of COVID-19 patients that will need hospital space, beds, health professionals and medical equipment. Governments at the national and local levels should organize health systems based on the assumption that their areas

will be affected. This virus has not and will not be stopped by borders drawn on maps.

- Countries need to protect their health personnel as never before. They must be trained on how to avoid infections, have access to adequate supplies of protective equipment for the long-haul. It is also our duty to protect them and care for them, as they will be on the frontlines of this battle.
- Countries need to decide what social-distancing measures that they need to be implemented and how and for how long. These include cancellation of mass gatherings, school and business closures, teleworking, and voluntary or legally mandated stay-at-home measures. Such measures might seem drastic – but they are the only way to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed by too many sick people in too-short period of time. Measures should be implemented as soon as possible after a determination of the transmission scenario. Based on the experience of countries in Regions other than the Americas, it seems prudent to plan for the implementation of measures for, at least, two to three months.
- Without solid evidence on effective treatments and no available vaccine at hand, social distancing and other aggressive preventive measures remain our best bet to prevent the most severe consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in our region. This moment demands bold and compassionate leadership.
- It will not be easy, and we know we will be asking people to adapt to an extraordinary situation that is impacting everything in their lives. But let me emphasize this one more time: this pandemic is serious, and we need to do everything in our power to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on our peoples. And the best time to do that is now, before hospitals and health workers get overwhelmed.

- **The third reason for hope and for action is that we have each other.**
- Although many of us are spending time apart to protect ourselves and others, we are connected like never before. We share this challenge and we also will share the solutions.
- What happens in the coming weeks will highly depend on our joint efforts, on working and acting together, even if physically apart. Solidarity in our region has never had deeper meaning than it does today. The only way out of this situation will be if everyone does his/her part, while supporting others.
- Countries must work together – sharing resources, expertise and making joint decisions that accelerate access to health services, promote research and innovation, and increase our ability to cope. PAHO will continue, as it always has, to help facilitate these exchanges between countries. We are guided by two pillars: the scientific evidence driving the global response to COVID-19 and the solidarity that has made us stronger over the past 120 years.
- We need to combine our solidarity with the best possible science to ensure that the actions we take are commensurate to the scale of this pandemic. It is science and solidarity that will empower all of us in the Americas to control the spread of COVID-19, care for those that get sick and ultimately save many lives.