

# PAHO/WHO Director's Remarks – Press Briefing April 7, 2020

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Good morning and thank you very much for joining us.

As of April 6, there have been 384,435 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Americas, and 11,270 people have lost their lives. In just seven days, we witnessed cases and deaths more than double in our region. The pandemic is accelerating rapidly, and I urge governments to prepare and respond at the same speed.

The number of new COVID-19 cases and fatalities is rising, and we expect it to continue to rise in this region. As I mentioned last week, the situation is going to get worse before it gets better, and all of us need to be prepared for more difficult weeks ahead.

As more and more people become sick, the brave men and women who care for them are put at greater risk. Of those affected by COVID-19, many are health workers.

When a health worker gets sick, it takes a toll on them and their families. And it also impacts the ability of our health services to cope and respond under pressure. A pandemic like COVID-19 would overwhelm any health system, but its impact on those without sufficient health workers will be devastating.

Today is World Health Day, a time to acknowledge and celebrate doctors, nurses, midwives and the many other people working to keep our communities healthy. I've been moved by the spontaneous demonstrations of support for health workers at the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic, as people around the world cheer them from balconies and windows.

This is the kind of solidarity I'm always talking about, and we're going to need more of it in the days and weeks to come. Our health workers deserve our recognition, our praise and our gratitude. Above all, they deserve to be able to protect themselves while they do their jobs.

Shortages of the most basic protective equipment leave doctors, nurses and other frontline workers dangerously vulnerable as they care for COVID-19 patients. Limited supplies of gloves, medical masks, respirators, goggles and gowns can lead to a wave of preventable infections among health workers and threaten our ability to cope with the pandemic.

Countries must work together to ensure that supply chains are able to deliver protective equipment to the hospitals and health centers who need it most. Solidarity

and coordination among countries will be essential to ensure we make the most of the limited supplies available.

Now is not the time to hoard and stockpile. It is a time for easing export restrictions and embracing flexible regulations that enable access in the places that will be hardest hit in the next few weeks. Governments and the private sector should also seek innovative solutions to boost production and repurpose industrial capacity to expand supplies.

As national governments revise guidelines on the use of face masks, one thing remains unchanged: it is essential that we reserve professional-grade protective equipment, and especially face masks, for the health workers that need them most.

We must also care for our health workers through support networks that allow them to preserve their mental and physical health. We must celebrate them for the heroes they are and protect them from stigma. We should encourage and admire our health workers, not fear and disrespect them.

PAHO is committed to work with our member states to protect and support our region's health workers.

For the past three months, our teams have engaged in advance planning with health authorities to prepare for the challenges of caring for COVID-19 patients.

We have developed technical guidelines and trained national staff on the reorganization of health services, particularly for triage, isolation and intensive care of patients.

PAHO has also advised countries regarding stocks of medical supplies and personal protection equipment (PPEs), and has shipped PPEs to 35 countries and 1 territory, and COVID test kits to 25 countries.

As a health worker, it is my honor to lead an organization of health workers who have experience supporting communities in every corner of the Americas.

It is as a health worker that I'd like to share some thoughts addressed to my peers all over the region:

My friends, the days ahead will be some of the hardest of our professional lives. We face a pandemic that is spreading faster than any of us could have imagined, and it's going to test our systems and our capacity more than they've ever been tested before.

We are counting on you. On your ability to thrive under pressure, to respond to challenges and to fulfill your commitment to the people we serve.

We cannot overcome this pandemic without your courage and dedication. Please take care of yourselves, seek support and speak up when you need help and resources. From PAHO, we will work tirelessly to give you the support you need in this time of crisis.