
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—09 JUNE 2020

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A warm welcome to you and let me thank you for joining us again.

The Americas remain at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19.

As of June 8, we have more than 3,3 million cases reported in the Region of the Americas, more than any other region around the world. Today we are home to nearly half of all COVID-19 cases.

Unfortunately, many areas are reporting exponential rises in cases and deaths, and we are concerned by data showing that the virus surging in new places, places that had previously seen a limited number of cases.

In Meso America, case counts are rising in Mexico, Panama, and in Costa Rica, where we are seeing increased transmission around the Nicaraguan border.

In South America, the virus continues to spread aggressively in Brazil, Peru and Chile. We're also seeing in Venezuela that cases are now mounting faster than at any point during the country's outbreak.

In the Caribbean, cases are on the rise in Haiti, and after more than a month without a new case, Suriname reported a spike this past week.

Social distancing and stay-at-home-orders have been challenging for all of us. But in the absence of a vaccine or more effective treatments, they are critical steps to keep us safe during this pandemic.

It is equally important for countries to test, treat, trace contacts and isolate patients. Without this combined approach, our efforts will have limited impact and we face the risk of a rebound in cases.

Today, I wish to draw attention to Climatic factors affecting the response to COVID-19.

As our region works together to contain the spread of COVID-19, we must start planning now for a formidable challenge that could make our situation worse: That is the weather.

In South America, our response to the pandemic will be impacted by the arrival of winter, while hurricane season will complicate our efforts in North and Central America, and especially in the Caribbean.

Let me start with how winter presents challenges for countries with rising COVID-19 cases.

We don't have data showing that temperature or humidity influence the spread of COVID-19. But we do know that winter fuels respiratory infections—like seasonal influenza and pneumonia—that can rapidly spread in colder climates and as more people gather indoors to stay warm.

This is a problem for patients because respiratory illnesses leave them at greater risk of severe COVID-19 infection. It's also a challenge for strained health systems that will have to cope with the dual burden of a coronavirus pandemic and a spike in other respiratory illnesses. It does not help that the similar symptoms will make diagnosing COVID-19 even harder.

As countries strengthen surveillance for COVID-19, they must simultaneously monitor influenza cases.

Early vaccination to prevent severe cases of flu is more critical than ever—particularly for high-risk groups like health workers, the elderly and people with chronic conditions. These same groups are also at high-risk of coronavirus infection.

We have encouraged countries to adapt seasonal flu vaccination campaigns to fit current social distancing measures. Many countries have embraced this approach and introduced innovative methods of immunization that minimize the risk of COVID-19. This includes offering vaccines outside of health facilities in empty schools, pharmacies or drive-thru posts in supermarkets.

We've been encouraged that 14 countries in our region have begun to immunize 90 million people against seasonal influenza. More than half of the target population has already been vaccinated – a testament to the preparations and diligence of governments in the region.

PAHO is helping countries secure the necessary doses of vaccines to reach this goal. Through the Revolving Fund, we pool resources to purchase vaccines for Member States in an effort to expand access, to guarantee quality and to secure better prices.

This year, the Fund helped secure 24 million flu vaccine doses. Virtually all of it has already been delivered to countries conducting campaigns, despite the added logistical hurdles that we're all facing in transporting essential supplies during the pandemic.

As we move north across our region, countries in the Caribbean, Central America as well as the Eastern and Southern coasts of the United States are bracing for what many experts believe could be one of the worst hurricane seasons on record.

More unprecedented still is the prospect of responding to a hurricane amid a pandemic.

As storms ravage towns and communities, they decimate sanitation systems, they contaminate water supplies and fracture the delivery of health care – three lifelines that are critical to containing the spread of COVID-19.

For countries in the path of a storm: I remind you that PAHO is here to help you prepare and will be ready to support you in the event of an emergency.

Now is the time to review national hurricane response plans and conduct simulation exercises to ensure your disaster and COVID-19 responses are aligned. We should also plan for potential disruptions to the care of critically ill patients and refine evacuation plans.

PAHO has already issued guidance to manage emergency shelters, including precautions to minimize the spread of COVID-19 by designating distinct zones to allow for social distancing, regularly disinfecting high-trafficked areas and swiftly isolating individuals who show signs of illness.

We are working to provide emergency response supplies throughout our region, and to secure critical facilities like laboratories, and quarantine and isolation centers so diagnosis and treatment for COVID-19 can continue even under difficult circumstances.

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed our region to the limit. Our communities and health systems are under duress, and our collective efforts are laser-focused on containing the virus.

Preparing for winter and hurricane season is a critical part of this fight. We must take action today to safeguard our progress and mitigate the spread of the virus during this time.

And that means redoubling our efforts to control the spread of COVID-19, so that we reduce the dual burden the approaching winter and hurricane seasons might bring.

It also means strengthening health infrastructure by hiring surge staff and expanding reserves of essential supplies and protective equipment. This will help ensure the work done to prepare for COVID-19 is reinforced to address these seasonal threats.

The Americas region is no stranger to natural disasters or seasonal health outbreaks. Indeed, our experience navigating these challenges has fueled our resilience in the fight against COVID-19.

We must rely on that experience now more than ever, just as we must rely on regional solidarity and partnerships. Our history shows that if we work together, we can overcome the worse.

And this time is no different. Thank you.