
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—24 JUNE 2020

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Good afternoon and thank you for joining for this briefing.

Nearly half of all COVID-19 cases globally can be found in the Americas. As of June 23rd, there have been more than 4.5 million COVID-19 cases and 226,000 deaths reported in the region, and unfortunately these figures continue to climb.

Across Mesoamerica, the virus continues to circulate widely in almost all the countries. There is now widespread transmission in most of Central America. In South America this weekend, Brazil surpassed one million COVID-19 cases, joining the United States as the only other country in the world with cases in the seven digits.

The Caribbean is faring better but with hot spots on the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, as well as within the Guyanese shield.

Last month, I announced here that our Region had become the new epicenter of the pandemic. I am sorry to say that since then, cases of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean have now tripled from almost 690,000 in May 23rd. to more than 2 million today.

Yesterday, we concluded a productive meeting of PAHO's Executive Committee, in which we took stock of the pandemic's toll in our region and looked ahead to the collective actions needed to overcome this crisis.

While the recent increase in cases is extremely concerning, we have averted an even greater tragedy thanks to the early adoption of public health measures, which have helped protect health systems and save lives in many countries.

But sustaining these measures has not been easy, particularly given their economic and social impact. Now, governments are under pressure to ease restrictions for economic and political reasons, even while transmission is increasing.

In the absence of effective treatments or a widely available vaccine, we expect that over the next two years in the Region of the Americas we will experience recurring COVID-19 outbreaks, which may be interspersed with periods of limited transmission.

We must be realistic about the future: all of us must adjust to a new way of life and redefine our sense of normal.

The question is no longer "How do we go back to the way things were before?" but rather "How do we move forward and build a sustainable and effective outbreak response?"

Resolution

This week, our Member States discussed a resolution that seeks to balance the triple threat this pandemic presents to the health of our people, to our social welfare and to our national economies. Their recommendations are not only relevant to the crisis we face today, but also chart a course to navigate the next 24 months of the pandemic.

In the face of a fast-changing pandemic, leadership will make or break our response. Now is the time for leaders to reach across political divisions and geographic borders to rally the support for a response that is commensurate to this unprecedented crisis.

Each country will need to adjust and coordinate their COVID-19 response based on increasingly detailed data. Governments will have to make decisions, considering simultaneously health, economic, and social indicators. This will allow health officials to understand where transmission is accelerating, and which groups are at greater risk so as to better target their efforts.

Flexibility will be key, and public health measures, as well as social protection efforts, will need to be reviewed regularly to minimize the impact of the virus in our societies.

The provision of social, financial, and fiscal protection, especially in communities heavily dependent on informal economies is critical.

We will not overcome this crisis without addressing the needs of the most vulnerable: those most likely to fall sick and the least likely to receive care, such as indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, the urban poor and migrant populations. If we neglect them, we run the risk of the next two years looking like the past few months. And this should not happen.

To support effective decision making, we will need timely and reliable data about the virus's spread within cities, throughout provinces and across countries. This information is vital to help governments identify new outbreaks early and adapt responses in the face of changing scenarios.

While an active risk of transmission remains, we must also prioritize early detection of suspect cases, laboratory testing, contact tracing and quarantine as the foundation of a targeted and sustainable strategy to control COVID-19. This is now more important than ever. But ensuring this happens at the level and to the scale that our Region needs will require investment in human resources, supplies, improving surveillance, as well as the development and rapid adoption of new tools.

We must also continue to strengthen our health systems, which are our strongest defense against COVID-19 - today and in the future. PAHO's recommendation of public health expenditure benchmark of at least 6% of GDP is more relevant now, more than ever. And from all public health investments, at least 30% should be allocated to the first level of care.

If we allocate resources to primary health clinics, hospitals, laboratories, grow our health workforce, invest in essential public health, and expand our stockpiles and supplies, we can stay ahead of the pandemic and save lives.

This will also lay the groundwork for the timely and equitable rollout of future vaccines and treatments.

We must not forget that, as challenging as things have become, this Region has in the past made some of the most momentous achievements in public health: The elimination of small-pox, poliomyelitis, measles, rubella and congenital rubella syndrome. These milestones were only attained thanks to coordinated responses to shared regional challenges - exactly what we need to tackle COVID-19 today.

COVID-19 will only be defeated through concerted regional cooperation and action. Though we rejoice when one country successfully flattens its COVID-19 epidemic curve, the risk of reemergence will always remain unless we flatten the curve regionally and globally.

PAHO is committed to continuing to serve the people of our region with the guidance and support they have long relied on to ensure that together, we can defeat this common enemy. Thank you.