
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—16 JUNE 2020

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Good morning and thank you for joining us today

As of June 15, there have been more than 3.8 million cases and almost 203,600 deaths from COVID-19 reported in the Americas. We are fast approaching 4 million cases and the epidemic is still accelerating in the region.

Our region is diverse: we have a mosaic of scenarios across and within countries. For example, in the United States, cases and deaths have fallen in some of the hardest hit areas, like New York, but are on the rise in Florida and Texas. Currently, the United States accounts for 54% of all cases in the Americas.

Brazil has 23% of all cases and 21% of all deaths in our region. And we are not seeing transmission slowing down. That is the cases in almost all countries in Latin America and a few in the Caribbean are rising.

While the majority of infections in the region are reported in big cities, where economic inequality and population density fuel transmission, our data show a concerning trend towards high transmission in border areas.

In the Caribbean, where most islands have not reported significant increases in COVID-19, we remain concerned about Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Both countries, which share an active border, continue to report a rise in new cases, particularly Haiti.

We are witnessing a spike in transmission in the north of Costa Rica, around the border with Nicaragua.

French Guiana went from 140 to 1,326 cases only in one month, a period that coincides with an increased transmission across its border with the state of Amapá in Brazil, and also with an increase of cases in neighboring countries as Suriname.

In addition, there is ongoing transmission in the northern states of Brazil that borders with Guyana and Suriname; also in the Amazonian region where Venezuela, Brazil and Colombia intersect; and in the borders between Peru, Brazil and Colombia.

Well before COVID-19, these areas were home to vulnerable populations, which often includes indigenous groups, remote communities and migrants – people who travel frequently for work, family and in search of new opportunities.

Most border towns lack robust health infrastructure, and service quality and access are often low. Due to limited hospital facilities, they often rely on labs of limited capacity and small clinics that serve communities in vast catchment areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic accentuates these vulnerabilities, and the increase of transmission in these areas is cause for serious concern and immediate action.

To contain the spread of COVID-19 and to protect migrants and other vulnerable populations on the border, countries must work together to strengthen the health response within their territories and across frontiers.

We have done it before: Our region has a strong track record of partnership between countries, even during conflicts and other extraordinary circumstances.

Here are several important steps that countries can take to boost the response to COVID-19 on the borders:

- Strengthen primary health care services in border areas, as they are the frontline for diagnosis and care. Health workers need adequate training and supplies.
- The planning of services should take into account local communities, as well as transient populations. Emergency facilities and surge personnel will be needed to back up local capacity during the pandemic.
- The sharing information across borders is imperative, not just at the national level, but especially at the local level – border towns often share people, geography and culture— they also need to share epidemiological data and resources.
- Surveillance is essential and should be prioritized. This includes boosting testing capacity in remote settings that often lack strong lab infrastructure.
- We also need to be mindful of cultural barriers by sharing information on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 through various media forms channels and languages that a diverse range of communities can access and understand.

PAHO is supporting countries to address the spread of COVID-19 in border areas, either by establishing a local presence, or by boosting the capacity of local health authorities.

In Leticia, Colombia we are providing technical assistance and facilitating bilateral communications between Venezuela and its neighbors to address the needs of migrants.

We have also enhanced local capacity with field offices in the state of Roraima and other border areas in the Amazon, and we have helped establish protocols for surveillance, and with UN partners we are supporting a triage center along the Haiti/ Dominican Republic border.

In our role as partner and coordinator, we continue to work closely with our Member States, UN agencies and humanitarian organizations on the COVID-19 response throughout the region.

We are also providing a vast array of supplies, such as PPEs, medicines, ventilators and other medical equipment, to ensure local communities and migrants who become ill because of COVID-19 receive proper care.

All of this is part of our mandate, and ultimately what we were set up to do.

In the Americas, the COVID-19 pandemic is a regional problem, not merely a country problem.

Our ability to work together will determine how quickly we contain this deadly virus and put a stop to the suffering and loss it causes.

Now more than ever we need partnership and cooperation. We need to draw on the solidarity this region has long enjoyed.

We also need solidarity towards the communities most affected by the virus. It truly saddens me that men, women and children who travel within our region, out of basic necessity are met with hate, stigma and discrimination.

These are day laborers, migrants, and people who rely on the informal economy each and every day to survive. They are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19, and the least likely to receive care. We have a responsibility not to leave them behind.

Let me be very clear: stigma and discrimination have no place in our region. Not now, not ever, and especially not amid a pandemic.

I count on all Member States to uphold these values, so together, we can beat our common enemy: COVID-19. Thank you.