
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—7 JULY 2020

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Thank you, Sebastian Good morning. Thank you for joining today's briefing.

This past week marked six months since the World Health Organization was alerted about cases of 'pneumonia of unknown cause' circulating in Wuhan. On January 16, PAHO became the first regional office to issue an epidemiological alert with recommendations to prevent and control infections.

Despite early warnings and swift preparations, no one could have predicted that our world would change so dramatically in just half a year.

Indeed, as of yesterday, we've reached 5.9 million cases and almost 267,000 deaths in the Americas.

Last week, there were 735,000 new cases in the region, with an average of over 100,000 cases reported every day—nearly 20% higher than the previous week.

We are also seeing some new patterns emerge: Two months ago, the U.S. accounted for 75% of the COVID-19 cases in our region. This past week, the U.S. reported just under half of cases in the region, while Latin America and the Caribbean registered more than 50% of cases, and Brazil alone reported around a quarter of those.

We should all remain alert, but especially in places that have seen a recent acceleration of cases, as we're seeing in several U.S. states, most of Central America, and most countries in South America.

This is a pandemic of staggering proportions, and we have no option but to continue to put all our energy into controlling it.

The past six months have brought some positive surprises that have confirmed the resilience of our health systems, and some unexpected challenges that we must address in the ensuing months.

PAHO and our Member States leveraged decades of experience fighting outbreaks to confront the threat of COVID-19, and throughout the region we saw countries responding swiftly, and here are some examples:

We were impressed by rapid adoption of preventive measures: From the very beginning, people across the region quickly embraced public health guidance to stay at home, avoid mass gatherings and use protective equipment. By late January, all but two of our Member States had significantly limited international travel. And by early March, all but one had imposed movement restrictions to control the virus—and many of them did so even before they registered their first coronavirus case. This

unprecedented effort was instrumental in keeping cases low early in the pandemic—thus earning us precious time to prepare our health systems.

Emergency facilities were set up quickly: Across the Americas, temporary hospitals and designated isolation and quarantine sites were built in record time. At least 27 countries have activated emergency teams and established measures to strengthen their national health systems. These efforts provided much-needed surge capacity for our health systems as COVID-19 cases started to rise. Thanks to these actions, we've saved thousands of lives.

Many countries changed their systems to improve virus detection: COVID-19 challenged countries to decentralize their laboratory capacity so they had the ability to quickly identify, report and treat cases at the local level. Doing so required robust virtual and in-person trainings to prepare the laboratories, and also required supplies, which PAHO helped secure and distribute, including nearly 15 million COVID-19 PCR tests.

But there are several persistent challenges we must address to control the pandemic.

Our health workers are vulnerable: Throughout the region we have received reports of health workers becoming ill in the line of duty because of lack of personal protective equipment or due to unsafe work conditions. Protecting nurses, doctors and other health workers should be our top priority. PAHO has provided guidance, training and PPE and continues to support countries to create better working conditions for frontline workers.

Stigma fuels the pandemic: Stigma with COVID-19 slows down our response. We need people to feel safe and comfortable to speak up and seek help when they have symptoms, so we are better able to trace contacts and isolate suspects early on. This is our best hope for controlling the pandemic.

Indeed we still have a lot to learn about this virus: We have a number of public health measures that work to control transmission, and we must rely on them. Yet, every day we learn more about how this virus spreads in our communities, and this science must continue to guide our response. Our teams at PAHO and WHO closely track new evidence and translate it into country guidance documents. Thus far, we've issued some more than 100 documents.

Not everything about the pandemic has been surprising. As expected, some of our region's most persistent problems have contributed to the scale of COVID-19. These are: inequality, political division and health systems that have been weakened by years of under-investment. These are issues which we must address during the pandemic; and continue to tackle once it is over.

As we look to the future, everyone is affected, and everyone has a role to play: From our team at PAHO, to the leadership of our Member States and but I would say each one of us as individuals.

A pandemic requires strong coordination across countries, a deep understanding of epidemiological trends, clear guidance and a reliable supply of health products. These are all things that PAHO is actively doing to strengthen the response of our Member States.

Leaders across our region must let evidence guide their actions, focusing on what works and uniting their people around it. They have a responsibility to act transparently and proactively as they mobilize institutions in each country to respond.

And each of us has a personal responsibility to protect ourselves and others through social distancing and by wearing masks. Even people without symptoms can transmit the virus, which means that everyone should be cautious. It also means that everyone can help, can help us overcome this crisis.

The past six months have shaken our world. The next six months will not be easier, and we cannot let our guard down. To endure, we must rely on our growing knowledge of this virus, our ability to apply these learnings in solidarity and our unwavering resolve. Thus, we will face this pandemic. Thank you.