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# WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—16 SEPTEMBER 2020

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Good afternoon and thank you for joining today's press briefing.

This past week, the Americas reached two somber milestones: over half a million deaths and nearly 15 million cases have been reported in our region.

While COVID-19 has eased its grip on some of our region's hotspots, for example, as in the USA where we have been observing reduced numbers of weekly reported cases - even though these national figures mask the fact that there are still areas within the USA which are reporting concerning, daily increases of COVID-19 cases- the situation within different countries is more complicated.

In South America, areas of Colombia along the Venezuelan border have seen cases increase more than ten-fold over the last two weeks. We see similar patterns emerging in areas of Argentina. Within the Caribbean, many larger islands like Jamaica, the Bahamas and the Dominican Republic are also witnessing drastic spikes in cases in some of the localities.

Death rates are also climbing in some areas of Mexico. And we're seeing similar trends in areas of Ecuador, Costa Rica and Bolivia, where deaths from COVID-19 continue to mount.

This is a stark reminder that countless people in our region remain vulnerable to infection, especially large populations that have not yet been exposed.

Although the entire world is racing to develop new tools to prevent and cure COVID-19, a safe and effective vaccine that can be manufactured and delivered at scale is not around the corner.

And yet, our region has started to resume near normal social and public life at a time when COVID-19 still requires major control interventions.

The reasons for doing so are understandable – children need to learn, families need money to eat and live, and global commerce cannot be restricted forever.

But we must be clear that opening up too early gives this virus more room to spread and puts our populations at greater risk. Look no further than Europe, where several countries that previously flattened their curves are now seeing a resurgence of infections.

This does not mean we should reverse course – indeed, the social and economic realities facing countries are more pressing than ever. It does mean, however, that we must approach daily life in a new way that reduces risk and places health at the very center of every decision that we make and policy that we implement.

Whether it's re-starting schools, re-opening public markets or resuming international travel, when and how we do it matters.

First, keep a safe distance from others – these measures are proven to limit the spread of COVID-19 and must become like second nature.

Rather than seeing them as a matter of personal protection or even courtesy, they should be regarded as a civic responsibility of the individual

Public spaces must also be adapted to reduce transmission. Simple, yet important measures like offering handwashing or hand sanitizing stations, and altering layouts and hours to allow social distancing and to limit the number of people in the same space at the same time should be the norm for now.

Indoors, we need to ensure adequate ventilation and limit close contact with each other. We also must continue to keep our distance outdoors.

National and local authorities have a duty to provide clear evidence based guidance and to ensure that individuals and businesses adhere to it.

We saw this leadership early on, when many countries implemented lockdowns and restricted gatherings. As yet say we need the same level of commitment as these measures are lifted so everyone has the information and tools they need to protect themselves and others.

These principles of adjusting individual behavior, adapting spaces and exercising political leadership are key to making transportation, workplaces, schools and public spaces as safe as they can be for all.

PAHO and WHO have developed extensive guidance for countries on how to minimize the risk of transmission in these settings. Today, I want to talk a little in more detail about two important activities that many in our region are grappling with: travel and restrictions.

When people travel between countries, so does the virus.

We are seeing this in the Caribbean, where several countries that had virtually no cases, experienced spikes as tourism resumed. This does not come as a surprise but offers an important lesson.

We are seeing many places within and outside of our region apply travel measures that have limited impact. I want to emphasize that relying on laboratory tests for travelers is expensive, it

is hard to implement and it is of limited impact in controlling the international spread of the virus.

We must ensure that individuals who are sick or suspect they're sick with COVID – and their contacts – be quickly identified and isolated to minimize the chances of getting others infected, first and foremost, prior to departure, as well as after arrival.

And all countries should collectively work to limit travel for those who have active symptoms or have been recently exposed.

Another issue: Elections. Some countries in our region, like Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, and the U.S. are gearing up for elections and preparing to help citizens exercise their right to vote without sacrificing their right to health.

That's why careful planning is needed to ensure the protocols are responsive to preventing the spread of the virus.

Some countries have shifted their election dates to avoid gatherings during periods of intense transmission. Others are supplementing traditional voting methods with mail voting and digital technologies.

Governments must lead in national efforts to ensure public health measures are in place for in-person voting and that citizens are aware of how to maintain their safety and that of others at the ballot box.

Voting is critical to the social fabric of our region, so the Organization of American States, with PAHO's support, has issued detailed guidance to help governments minimize the risk of transmission as the health of our citizens must always remain front and center.

As leaders across the world face pressure to resume social and public life, it's important that they avoid making decisions in a vacuum. Data about the virus's spread and the state of health systems and services must guide each country's plans to reopen, including the mix of preventive measures that should remain in place to keep people safe.

Remember, there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Countries must ensure they have the staff, tools and resources in place to monitor and contain the virus. They must be prepared to carry out tests, conduct contact tracing, isolate and quarantine and ensure that there is enough hospital beds are available to care for patients who develop severe symptoms.

Make no mistake: Let's not fool ourselves if our health systems are not prepared, it is not the time to re-open.

Doing so would risk a handful of cases in one area becoming a full-blown outbreak.

The success of our economies and the state of our societies depend on the health and safety of our people - a truth that I urge countries to embrace as they make decisions to resume public life.