
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—17 MARCH 2021

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

Over the last week, nearly 1.3 million people became sick with COVID-19 in the Americas and almost 31,000 died because of this virus.

Today we're seeing the virus pick up speed in about half of the countries in our region.

The U.S. and Mexico are reporting a drop in new infections, while cases in Canada are accelerating – particularly among young adults ages 20-39.

As new infections are decelerating in the Caribbean, many islands are reporting a rise in COVID-related deaths – including a doubling of COVID deaths in some islands.

Cases are on the rise in many South American countries, like Uruguay, Ecuador, and Venezuela. In the last week, Paraguay's health system issued an urgent warning as hospitals have filled with COVID patients. Major cities like Lima and Rio de Janeiro have imposed curfews and lockdowns to control recent spikes.

Brazil is now reporting the highest number of new infections in our region and the second highest COVID daily death toll in the world. Several areas of Brazil are witnessing record-high infections, and hospital beds are nearly at capacity across more than half of Brazilian states.

The situation in Brazil is a cautionary tale that keeping this virus under control requires continuous attention by public health authorities and leaders to protect people and health systems alike from the devastating impact of this virus.

Data must continue to be the eyes and ears of our response, and local and national governments must act at the first sign that infections are on the rise by implementing measures to slow down transmission.

We cannot afford to wait.

As of today, nearly 138 million doses of COVID vaccines have been administered in the Americas – although just 28 million of these doses have taken place in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Last week, the WHO issued an Emergency Use License for Johnson & Johnson's COVID vaccine, making it the fourth vaccine to be authorized by WHO.

By offering protection with just one dose, the J&J vaccine promises to accelerate vaccination efforts.

COVAX has secured over 100 million doses of the J&J vaccine in 2021 and up to 500 million through 2022, with doses expected to start arriving in July.

The good news is that vaccine deliveries are picking up throughout our region.

Every COVAX-participating country in the Americas knows exactly how many doses they will be receiving before the end of May.

PAHO's Revolving Fund is placing orders on behalf of our region and working together with UNICEF and vaccine manufacturers to organize deliveries as quickly as possible.

Last week, COVAX and our Revolving Fund delivered nearly 400,000 doses to our region. Earlier this week, the first shipment made its way to Jamaica.

Over the next few days, our Revolving Fund will be delivering nearly 728,000 vaccines to five countries. PAHO has placed orders for more than 3.4 million doses so far.

For all these countries – even those who received small donations earlier this month – these COVAX deliveries will enable the start of steady vaccination efforts.

We are happy that vaccines through COVAX are being delivered but we recognize that the need for more vaccines and sooner is great in the Americas.

There is still much work to do. Right now, we have just two vaccine manufacturers that are dispatching millions of doses to dozens of countries around the world. This is a bottleneck that still prevents us from getting vaccines to every country at the same time. But shipments will become more regular as more doses are available to COVAX in the next few months.

Next week, we expect that many countries in the Caribbean will start to see the first COVAX shipments arrive on their shores.

Our goal is to ensure that every country in our region that is participating in COVAX receives their first shipment before World Health Day, April 7th.

And we're not stopping there.

PAHO's Revolving Fund is working hard to ensure that countries know when and how many doses will be arriving every month so they can organize their immunization campaigns.

With COVID vaccination campaigns underway throughout our region, we're at the beginning of the end of this pandemic.

But while there's reason for hope, we must also remember that doses are limited, and it will be several months before we can rely on vaccines to control this virus.

In the meantime – and especially as COVID transmission picks up in some places – our goal must be to save as many lives as possible by prioritizing early doses for those who are at highest risk of infection. The health workers who are treating COVID patients, the elderly and those living with existing conditions must come first.

As everyone else waits their turn, we must all continue to rely on the public health measures that we know work at controlling this virus.

Even those that are vaccinated should continue to practice social distancing, wear masks, and avoid large gatherings.

Stopping this pandemic will require both that we limit new infections and that we expand access to vaccines.

So, we must not let our guard down now. Let's keep hope alive.