
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—23 MARCH 2021

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

This past week, over 1.2 million people became sick with COVID-19 in the Americas, and more than 31,272 people died because of the virus.

More cases were reported in the region last week than the week before, which means that despite the gradual rollout of vaccines, millions of people remain at risk of illness and death.

We must continue to take COVID-19 seriously.

Cases have started to plateau across the US, Canada and Mexico, although the state of Ontario in Canada reported a rise in cases the past two weeks. Over the same time period, the US states of Minnesota and West Virginia have reported increases in deaths.

In Central America, we are encouraged by declining cases in Panama, which have been dropping consistently for several weeks. On the other hand, we are concerned by a rise in cases and hospitalizations in Guatemala that is straining hospital bed capacity due to the influx of patients.

The virus continues to surge dangerously across Brazil.

Cases and deaths are increasing, and ICU bed occupancy is very high in many states. It's critical for all Brazilians to adopt the preventive measures being put in place to slow transmission of the virus. It can save your life and the lives of those closest to you.

Unfortunately, the dire situation in Brazil is also affecting neighboring countries. Cases have risen in Venezuela, particularly in the states of Bolivar and Amazonas, which border Brazil. A rise in cases has been reported in the Pando department in Bolivia and ICU bed occupancy remains very high in Loreto, Peru.

In the Southern Cone, cases continue to spike in Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay. In Paraguay, a majority of ICU beds are occupied, and the health system is buckling under the pressure. Uruguay has reported more than 1000 cases per day several times the past few weeks, which is alarming given the size of the country.

In the Caribbean, a majority of cases were reported by Jamaica, where they have risen steadily for several weeks. Cuba is also reporting an increase in cases, along with Aruba, Curacao, and Antigua and Barbuda.

What I've just described is an active public health emergency. The COVID-19 virus is not receding, nor is the pandemic starting to go away.

Vaccines are coming but they are still several months away for most people in our region. Until they arrive and until most of the population is vaccinated, we must continue to do what works – wear a mask, maintain your distance, avoid large gatherings, and follow the guidance of your local health authorities. This is especially important with holidays coming up in many countries. People cannot let down their guard by engaging in close contact with others.

As the virus surges and hospitalizations rise, we urgently need to scale up vaccination among our most vulnerable populations.

I am pleased to report that 33 of our 35 Member States have started immunizations and over 155 million doses have been delivered in our region, so far. PAHO is working closely with Haiti and Cuba, the two countries that have not yet started, to help them get there.

The COVAX facility has delivered 2,161,800 doses to the region so far, which includes more than 1 million doses that were delivered to Brazil this past Sunday. We expect over 100,000 doses to be delivered this week, to El Salvador, Belize and Suriname. And 1.2 million additional doses have already been procured.

Although scale-up has begun, we know it's not enough. We do not yet have the vaccines we need to protect everyone. It's what happens when the whole world must rely on too few manufacturers. We must also find ways to share vaccines more equitably among countries.

The doses that were delivered are helping us start to protect health workers and other vulnerable communities, and we expect more doses to arrive every week.

We are also hearing that acceptance of the COVID vaccine has been high, which is very good news. These WHO-approved vaccines are safe, and they work. When it's your turn, don't hesitate. Get vaccinated.

Once our supply increases, there is not another region in the world better prepared to deliver vaccines swiftly and safely.

The Americas have a long tradition of innovation in vaccines and well-established immunization systems. This comes from decades fighting diseases like polio, measles, flu and yellow fever.

Our health workers have special expertise driving large-scale vaccination campaigns that cover diverse geographies.

This includes campaigns to immunize adults against infectious diseases, not just children, which is critical in the time of COVID-19. Our region-wide immunization network is the backbone of our primary health care system, which enables us to reach more people and maintain high rates of vaccination coverage.

Over the past year, the pandemic forced us to enhance our immunization systems even further.

PAHO has been providing training and technical support to countries so they have stronger capacity to track adverse events, which will be critical as new vaccines are developed and introduced into the region.

We are also helping countries collaborate more closely. They are sharing lessons, information and innovative strategies to reach more people with the care they need.

All of this enabled our region to keep vaccination rates relatively stable during the pandemic. There was a dip last year during the first surge of the virus, but coverage rebounded.

This is a remarkable achievement, and a credit to countries for making vaccination a priority and to health workers for their commitment to keeping our region safe.

We must keep it up. Both to roll out COVID vaccines rapidly and to protect us from other vaccine-preventable diseases.

More than a year into the pandemic, the bravery and resilience of our health workers continues to amaze me.

It takes courage to fight a terrifying new virus, and dedication to care for patients affected by the other diseases present in our region long before COVID arrived.

Tuberculosis is one of those diseases.

And tomorrow is World TB Day, a time to reflect on the devastating toll that TB still exacts on the world, and how unacceptable it is for people to suffer and die from something preventable and curable.

Our region is home to five countries with high burdens of Tuberculosis, and services in these countries and others where TB is prevalent have suffered during the pandemic.

We need to do better. We need to screen more people so they can be treated and cured. We need to uphold our commitments to reduce the burden of TB in our region and around the world.

If there's one thing I hope we take from this pandemic, it's an appreciation for the power of health – and how good health is central to the wellbeing of societies.

I hope that when we call attention to a disease like TB, which has torn families apart for generations, that we listen with newfound urgency and understanding.

I hope we recognize that Health for All is not an empty phrase, but the best choice available to us. You see, the power of health diminishes when it's a privilege of the few and not the many.

Equal access to good health. That should be our focus. That's how we end TB. That's how we beat COVID-19.