
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—3 MARCH 2021

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Good morning and thank you for joining today's press briefing. Over the last week, more than 1.1 million people in the Americas were infected with COVID-19 and nearly 34,000 died because of the virus.

This time last year, Argentina, Chile and Ecuador were reporting their first COVID cases. Since then, nearly 51 million people have been infected with COVID throughout our region.

The good news is that in many places, cases and deaths are on the decline.

In North America, the U.S., Canada and Mexico are seeing drops in new infections.

In the Caribbean, after enforcing stricter public health measures, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Turks and Caicos are finally reporting a drop in COVID cases and deaths.

Every country in Central America is also reporting a drop in cases, although the virus is still surging in localized hotspots around El Salvador, the indigenous province of Guna Yala in Panama and Guatemala's northern municipalities.

Infections continue to drop across South America, although we remain concerned by a rise in cases within the northern Amazon basin that demands a swift response.

In Peru's Amazonian state of Loreto, every ICU bed is occupied by a COVID patient. Meanwhile, Colombia's state of Amazonas is reporting the country's highest COVID rates.

In Brazil, the Amazonian state of Acre faces an emergency due to a deadly combination of COVID-19 infections, a dengue epidemic and flooding in several cities. Nearly 94% of ICUs are occupied and the health system risks collapsing as more and more patients require hospitalization. Other Brazilian states are also reporting high ICU occupancy rates, putting the country on alert.

The diversity of scenarios across the Americas reminds us that complacency can be deadly. Without effective control measures, in just a couple of weeks, infection and hospitalization rates can spike drastically.

We must continue to monitor infection rates closely and rely on proven public health measures when the virus surges.

This will be our reality for many months until we have enough vaccines for everyone, and until we have controlled the transmission.

So far, 93 million people have received a COVID vaccine in our region, and more people are being vaccinated with each passing day.

On Monday, Colombia became the first country in the Americas to receive a COVAX shipment when 117,000 doses of Pfizer's vaccine arrived as part of the COVAX "first wave" of deliveries.

The arrival of COVAX vaccines in our region is a historic milestone and the culmination of months of negotiations and a commitment to global solidarity.

These first doses mark the beginning of a new phase of our COVID response.

In light of this important development, I want to share an update on vaccine supplies in the region and look ahead to what the next few months would look like.

While Colombia is the first country in our region to receive vaccines through COVAX, other countries are not far behind.

Last Friday, COVAX informed all participating countries about the number of doses allocated to each COVAX participant from now through May 2021. A total of 28.7M doses will be delivered to countries in the Americas in this period.

Some countries have already made the necessary preparations, and PAHO is placing orders and readying several COVAX deliveries in our region – with shipments likely to arrive in mid-March.

But a few countries still need to approve the COVAX contracts, ensure they have the proper regulations in place and make their payments.

This can be a complicated process as some countries will need to sign new legislation to meet these COVAX requirements.

We urge our Member States to make this a priority so they can receive these long-awaited doses.

As more doses are produced, we'll see several waves of shipments arriving in the region every month.

In the short term, doses will remain limited. And we must use them wisely, prioritizing those most at risk, like our health workers, the elderly and people living with pre-existing conditions.

Throughout the pandemic, every country in the world has grappled with shortages of essential medical supplies like medicines, diagnostic tests, personal protective equipment, even oxygen.

We face the same challenge with vaccines.

Manufacturers are working around the clock to produce more doses, and new vaccine candidates are being reviewed and included in the WHO Emergency Use Listing, so more vaccines will hopefully be available soon.

But we expect the world will continue to face a shortage of vaccines for much of 2021.

There are not enough vaccines to go around right now, and the limited amounts that are available are not being distributed equitably.

Wealthy countries are rolling out vaccines, while many nations have yet to receive a single dose.

This disparity harms our principles of solidarity. But more than that, it's a self-defeating strategy.

As long as COVID-19 endures in one part of the world, the rest of the world can never be safe.

And the longer we allow the virus to spread, the greater the risk that more dangerous variants emerge, which could complicate control efforts.

That's why it's vital to accelerate access to vaccine doses for all countries, not just the ones with the most money.

And we must pay special attention to the countries hit hardest by the pandemic – because many of them remain the most vulnerable. Just this past week, the Americas accounted for 55% of the deaths reported worldwide.

Despite being the epicenter of the pandemic, the Region of the Americas lags in vaccination efforts because most countries cannot access the doses they need through bilateral agreements with the manufacturers.

Expanding equitable access to COVID vaccines in the Americas must be a global priority.

PAHO is committed to ensuring that our region receives the doses we need as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, our Member States are ready to roll out these vaccines and PAHO stands by for any support they need.

And just as vaccines should not breed further inequality between countries, they should not widen the divide within countries.

These life-saving vaccines should not be a privilege for the few, but a right for all.