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## WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—14 APRIL 2021

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

Let me begin with a reference to the eruption of the La Soufriere volcano in St Vincent and the Grenadines. I want to note that PAHO has deployed 5 public health experts to St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and we are responding to the emergency in coordination with the Ministry of Health and the support of partners.

In the last week alone, more than 1.3 million people have become infected with COVID-19 in our region and nearly 36,000 died as a result of this virus. Since the pandemic began, 57 million cases have been reported in the Americas, with more than 1.3 million deaths.

South America continues to be the epicenter of the pandemic in our region.

The recent spike in cases in the Amazon is also seen in neighboring states, and today Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, and some areas of Bolivia are seeing a sharp rise in COVID cases.

After the introduction of new variants in the Guyanas, cases have accelerated in French Guiana and Guyana. Further south, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile are all continuing to see a rise in infections.

In the Caribbean, Cuba, Puerto Rico and smaller islands like Curacao, Bermuda and Aruba are reporting a rise in new cases.

In North America, infections continue to increase in Canada. Hospitals across the country are reporting a jump in hospitalizations among populations under 60, raising concerns about the capacity of health systems to withstand the expected rise in cases following the spread of P.1 and B.1.1.7 variants.

This rise in infections across the region is alarming but not surprising.

Highly transmissible variants are spreading, and social distancing measures are not as strictly observed as before. As a result, there are more and more reports of crowded hospitals, shortages of medical supplies and challenges in providing proper care for patients.

With this in mind, it's time for a reality check.

We are not acting like a region in the midst of a worsening outbreak. More people have been infected with COVID in our region in the last seven days than most of the weekly case averages we saw last year. And our weekly deaths outnumber those of any week in 2020.

Despite ongoing transmission in many places, restrictions have been relaxed. Crowds are back, and people are gathering indoors and taking public transportation, often without masks.

We need to remember everything we have learned about how dangerous this virus is, and what we can do to stop it.

I cannot stress this enough – for most countries, vaccines are not going to stop this wave of the pandemic.

There are simply not enough vaccines available to protect everyone in the countries at greatest risk.

Therefore, we need to stop transmission by any means possible with the tools we have at hand. This will require *comprehensive* strategies to both accelerate the rollout of vaccines and control the virus using proven public health measures.

The Americas have administered more than 247 million COVID-19 vaccines thus far.

Since March, PAHO's Revolving Fund has helped deliver more than three million doses on behalf of the COVAX Facility to 28 countries in our region.

But over the last few weeks, the suppliers of COVAX vaccines have run into constraints, so deliveries have slowed. And it will be a few weeks before supplies normalize.

PAHO is actively working to support countries to make the most of limited doses by considering their limited shelf life and the vulnerable populations that should be protected first.

At least 10 different COVID vaccines are in use across our region. The four vaccines authorized by WHO- the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, two versions of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine - SKBio and the Serum Institute of India-, and the Janssen vaccine- are already helping to prevent severe disease and deaths in places where they are in use.

Rare reports of blood clots among individuals with low platelets revealed by strong vaccine surveillance systems are now being reviewed by regulatory agencies, and we expect additional recommendations soon.

In the meantime, it's important to continue to administer AstraZeneca vaccines where they are available. Almost 200 million people around the world have received AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine and the reports of adverse effects are very rare.

These vaccines can save your life and the lives of your friends and family.

In the meantime, we cannot rely on vaccines to control transmission. After all, many countries were able to drive down infections last year before there were any vaccines on the market.

We need better collaboration between and within countries by ensuring that national and local authorities work together to track and control the number of new cases and hospitalizations.

Leaders at every level have a crucial role to play to stop this virus from spreading by tightening measures at the first sign of mounting infections and maintaining these measures until it's safe.

For this to work, we need leaders to work hand-in-hand toward this shared goal.

Ultimately, we must all work together to reduce transmission in the region and expand equitable access to COVID vaccines. Solidarity and Pan Americanism is more important than ever.

PAHO is committed to working with Member States to secure more vaccine doses for our region as soon as they are available, to complement what countries have already purchased via bilateral deals and through the COVAX Facility.

We will be here for countries at every step of the way, providing technical support to troubleshoot roadblocks, increase surveillance and monitor the safety and impact of COVID vaccines.

But we cannot work toward the future at the expense of the present.

COVID is actively spreading everywhere in our region and we *all* have a shared responsibility to stop infections to protect ourselves and our communities. None of us are safe until we are all safe.