
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—12 MAY 2021

12 MAY 2021

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

In the last week, our region reported more than 1.2 million new COVID cases and nearly 34,000 COVID-related deaths.

Nearly 40% of all global deaths reported last week happened right here in the Americas.

This is a clear sign that transmission is far from being controlled in our region, even as countries like the US and Brazil are reporting reductions in cases.

In North America, Canada is seeing higher rates of infections than the US, particularly across eastern Canada and the northern territory, home to a majority indigenous population.

Cuba continues to drive most new infections in the Caribbean, although smaller countries like Trinidad and Tobago are experiencing significant jumps. In Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, COVID-19 cases in evacuation shelters continue to be a challenge, following the frequent volcanic eruptions.

Throughout much of the Americas, we're seeing cases accelerate along national borders.

In Central America, jumps in infections are being reported along the regions of Costa Rica and Honduras bordering Nicaragua, and in border regions of Guatemala and El Salvador.

In South America, cases are surging in the areas of Guyana and Bolivia that border Brazil. And in Colombia, where COVID-19 cases have been steadily increasing over several weeks, we expect even steeper rises following a week of protests in Colombia.

Our health systems are challenged to care for an influx in COVID patients as they scale vaccination efforts.

More than 140 million people have been fully vaccinated against COVID in the Americas. The WHO's recent approval of the Sinopharm vaccine offers fresh confidence to countries in the

region where the vaccine is already in use and brings hope for expanding access to vaccines in the Americas.

But until we have enough vaccines to protect everyone, our health systems and the patients that rely on them remain in danger.

Across our region, nearly 80% of our intensive care units are filled with COVID patients, and the numbers are even more dire in some places.

In Chile and Peru, 95% of ICU beds are occupied, the majority by COVID patients. Buenos Aires, where 96% of ICU beds are in use, just tightened restrictions to avoid the collapse of hospitals. Some areas in Brazil have waiting lists for ICU beds.

The rise in hospitalizations has meant that our health workers are working overtime and juggling more responsibilities as they manage more patients now than at any other point in the pandemic.

PAHO has helped deploy 26 emergency medical teams across 23 countries in the Americas to provide specialized care where it's most needed. Also, some 400 Emergency Medical Teams and alternative medical care sites were set up, helping our countries expand their capacity with over 14,000 new hospital beds and 1,500 more intensive care beds.

But based on how COVID is spreading, we estimate we'll need 20,000 doctors and more than 30,000 nurses to manage the ICU needs of just half of the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Our health workers are also facing mounting challenges as the lifesaving supplies that they rely on – like oxygen – are running dangerously low.

A typical COVID patient can require up to 300,000 liters of oxygen during a 20-day hospital stay. Patients in critical care often need double that.

So, it's no surprise that the rise in hospitalizations across our region are triggering an unprecedented oxygen supply challenge throughout the Americas.

Many countries and local governments have had to quickly develop technical skills and find urgent solutions to provide oxygens for patients.

PAHO has been focused on mapping the oxygen supplies across our region to identify where help is most urgently needed, and we created a technical group to provide expertise, so countries can make needed investments.

To fill critical gaps, PAHO donated more than 7,000 pulse oximeters and nearly 2,000 oxygen concentrators to help health workers identify when a patient needs oxygen and to ensure that they have the supplies to help them recover.

We're working hand-in-hand with ministries of health, particularly in hard hit places like Bolivia, Antigua and Barbuda to help countries redesign their models of care and update their clinical guidelines to optimize resources available and ensure that more patients receive the oxygen that they need.

We're also helping countries safely scale their oxygen production and make needed investments in equipment updates, maintenance, and human resources so oxygen is consistently available, everywhere, now and into the future.

Throughout this pandemic we've seen what happens when countries deprioritize health systems.

Whether it was shortages of PPE, ICU beds, oxygen or health workers, countries are being forced to act quickly to make up for years of underinvestment.

And while countries have dramatically expanded their health care capacity in just a few months' time, our health workers are continuing to feel the strain of this pandemic.

While data is limited, we know that at least 1.8 million health workers have become infected with COVID in our region since the start of the pandemic. This is 12% of our estimated health workforce of 15 million, and over 9,000 have died from the virus, the majority of them being women and nurses.

So, as we commemorate today's International Day of the Nurse, let's honor the work, the sacrifice, and the contributions of nurses throughout the Americas who are helping provide life-saving care to COVID patients.

Reports from 18 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean show that about 1.5 million health workers are now fully vaccinated against COVID with both doses. But we urge countries to make the most of limited doses by protecting health workers – including the 8.4 million nurses working in our region – and to prioritize them first.

And finally, to improve our COVID response and build back better from this pandemic, let's invest in nurses and ensure they have the tools, the training, and the resources they need to do their jobs safely.