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

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

Last week there were over 1.2 million new COVID cases and 31,000 deaths reported in the Americas.

We've seen COVID infections drop throughout the region in the last month, offering some reprieve to our beleaguered health systems.

But three out of the five countries in the world with the highest numbers of new infections are in the Americas. And many Caribbean islands – like the Bahamas, Haiti and Trinidad and Tobago – are seeing COVID deaths doubled in the last week.

Canada has registered a tripling of cases in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and its Northwest territories as hospitalizations across the country are on the rise.

Costa Rica, Panama, and parts of Honduras are reporting sharp rises in new infections.

Infections are also on the rise in Bolivia and French Guiana. In Brazil we see a pause in the decreasing trends that were observed during the previous weeks. And despite overall reductions in most South American countries, some hotspots in Argentina and Uruguay saw a doubling of cases and deaths in the last week.

ICU occupancy rates remain at 90% in many areas of Brazil and Colombia, a sign that these communities are still at a high risk of not getting the care that they need.

But the most dramatic change has been in the US, where today, almost half of Americans have received at least one COVID vaccine dose and nearly 85% of those over the age of 85 are fully protected. This widespread coverage has led to a sharp reduction in US COVID infections, deaths and hospitalizations.

The progress we're seeing in the US is a testament to the power of safe and effective COVID vaccines, but it underscores the vital importance of accelerating access to vaccines throughout our region, so that other countries can fully immunize their own populations.

With the help of COVAX, PAHO has delivered more than 12 million COVID vaccine doses to the Americas, with another 770,000 doses on route to countries in Central America and the Caribbean.

Over 400 million COVID doses have been administered in our region – although the lion’s share of those have been in the US. Indeed, just three percent of Latin Americans have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19. And we still have a long way to go to ensure that everyone is protected.

We urgently need more vaccines for Latin America and the Caribbean, a region that has been put to the test severely by this pandemic.

The glaring gaps in access to COVID vaccines throughout Latin America and the Caribbean are a symptom of our region’s overdependence on imports for essential medical supplies. Less than 4% of

medical products in use during the COVID response have come from the region. That means more than 90% have been sourced out of the Region.

And thanks to export bans, supply chain delays and lack of purchasing power, our region has struggled to compete for access to personal protective equipment, oxygen supplies, medicines, and vaccines which are all vital to the COVID response – as our people suffer the consequences.

So, expanding our regional capacity to manufacture strategic medical supplies – especially vaccines – is a must, both for our people and as a matter of health security.

Luckily, we have some of the building blocks to make it happen: strong academic and research institutions, existing manufacturing capacity, robust regulatory systems, and an effective mechanism of procurement.

Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Cuba have well established vaccine manufacturing plants that have helped immunize generations of Latin Americans. Some of these plants are being updated to produce COVID vaccines thanks to technology transfer agreements with manufacturers like AstraZeneca.

But meeting our region’s needs will require expanding production capacity well beyond what’s already planned.

We must ramp up production for the entire vaccine value chain – from the ingredients that go into vaccines to the vials and syringes that help us deliver them – without compromising quality. We have eight national regulatory authorities throughout our region that have the capacity to oversee this work.

This sets our region apart.

But we must also look to the future and embrace the promise of mRNA technologies, which although novel and more expensive, present possibilities beyond COVID vaccines.

PAHO is working closely with WHO on its COVID-19 mRNA vaccine technology transfer hub and we're in discussion with regional partners like the Inter-American Development Bank, the Organization of American States and our Member States to ensure countries interested in expanding their manufacturing capacity have the resources and the support that they need to make it happen. And we're pleased to see countries like Chile, Argentina, Peru and others already showing interest.

We must also lean on our legacy of regional cooperation because it's impractical to think that any one country could manufacture vaccines from start to finish just to meet the needs of its own population. The cost is simply too high, and sustainability would be at risk. And that's why we are engaging with regional organizations, sub regional integration mechanisms and others on policy and regulatory issues, research and development, and the investments we need for a coherent regional system that can make increased capacity a reality in the Americas.

For this to work, we need scale, a commitment to purchase regional-made products, and assurance that products will flow freely and without export bans – even during emergencies. Our Revolving Fund stands ready to help purchase and deliver these products throughout our region – as we've done for the last 40 years.

A regional manufacturing network that builds on our national strengths and that is backed by sustained financial commitments is long overdue. It's also our best hope for a long-term solution – because COVID will not be the last virus that tests our health systems.

And while these investments are urgently needed to support our COVID response, we do know that they will take time.

PAHO is committed to coordinating with our Member Countries and partners to advance a vision of greater self-sufficiency, greater self-sufficiency in vaccines and medical products manufacturing in the Americas.

Until then, let's remember that this pandemic is not over and there is still much to do to prevent more cases and save lives. I beg you, do your part.