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# WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS — 30 JUNE 2021

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

Last week, the Americas reported 1.1 million new COVID infections and 30,000 COVID-related deaths in our region, bringing our total case count to more than 72 million and deaths to nearly 1.9 million.

These are staggering numbers when you consider that at this time last year the entire world had reported 10 million COVID-19 cases and 500,000 deaths.

In the months since, this virus has touched every corner of the globe and changed the course of history.

And while we are seeing some reprieve from the virus in countries in the Northern Hemisphere, for most countries in our region, the end remains a distant future.

In North America, cases are declining across the US, Canada and Mexico, although a few Mexican states continue to report a rise in new infections.

Many Central American countries like Belize, Panama and Guatemala have registered an uptick in new infections in certain departments.

And in the Caribbean, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Saint Kitts and Nevis are seeing cases increase. The situation in Haiti is also worsening as cases are climbing across the country and some hospitals are filling up.

Cases are still rising in many South American countries like Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia and Uruguay and hospitals are challenged to further expand ICU capacities, and while infections are going down in Argentina, cases remain high.

Disruptions to essential health services are still widespread across the region, with 29 countries reporting disruptions to almost half of all services.

Despite this worrisome picture, just one in ten people in Latin American and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19. An unacceptable situation.

Over the weekend, PAHO helped to deliver 1.5 million doses of mRNA vaccine that arrived in Honduras as part of the US government’s commitment to sharing surplus doses with countries in our region. And we expect more than 20 million doses to be delivered by the US to countries in our region over the coming days.

As countries across the region work to contain the spread of COVID-19, they must also begin planning for another challenge: seasonal weather.

First, let’s talk about summer travel and its potential impact on transmission.

With children on vacation, many parents face important choices of how to make the most of these summer months. As more people are vaccinated in the Northern Hemisphere, movement restrictions are lifted and travel destinations reopen for tourists, and many families may be considering booking summer vacations.

We must remember, however, that while vaccines protect us from the worst of this virus, even those who are vaccinated can become sick and spread COVID.

Given the significant gaps in vaccine coverage and the still imminent risk of infection, now may not be the ideal time for travel – especially in places with active outbreaks or where hospital capacity may be limited.

The arrival of summer also marks the beginning of the hurricane season – and this year’s hurricane season arrives during worsening outbreaks in the Caribbean and Central America, making storm preparations especially vital.

Over the last five years, the Americas have witnessed over 550 extreme weather events impacting more than 190 million people – and the potential for devastation is even higher in the context of a pandemic.

Mitigating risks starts with having effective alert systems, so people know when it’s safe to stay home and when it’s better to evacuate.

Countries should also consider outfitting hospitals and expanding shelters to reduce the potential for transmission, including among family members, since social distancing and proper ventilation will become difficult in the context of a storm.

Now is the time to bolster coordination among the public health, civil protection and emergency teams that could be called on to act in the event of a storm. Stocking up on supplies is also key so first responders have the proper protective equipment and supplies to safely treat patients.

Further south, we must prepare for the risks brought by cold weather.

During last year's winter and flu season, mask mandates were in order and stay at home measures were underway in many countries of the Southern Hemisphere.

These measures helped not only to drive COVID infections down, but to almost halt the spread of seasonal flu, a phenomenon we had never seen before.

This year's flu season arrives at a time when COVID infections are exponentially higher, yet public health measures are much less strict.

It's no surprise that we've already started to see a return of infections like respiratory syncytial virus among children.

Now more than ever, countries must bolster their surveillance systems to monitor the spread of respiratory viruses.

Last year's experience also proves the importance of public health and hygiene measures like handwashing and mask wearing in limiting the spread of infections.

We also learned the value of protecting the most vulnerable, so we urge countries to consider leveraging existing vaccination programs to protect those at highest risk from both the flu and COVID.

More than 13 countries in our region have already started seasonal influenza vaccine campaigns and over 80 million people have already been protected. But we still have a lot to do to limit transmission of COVID and other respiratory diseases.

In closing, I want to emphasize that while seasonal changes will bring new challenges to our COVID response, these are risks we know how to prepare for.

We know what it takes to stop COVID through effective public health measures. We must have the will power and commitment to embrace them, especially as vaccine supplies continue to lag behind.

Our region is resilient and is long known for the values of Pan-Americanism and solidarity. PAHO remains committed to leveraging our collective resources to ensure that we see this pandemic through, toward recovery and rebuilding.