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

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A very good morning to you all and thank you for joining today's press briefing.

As of this week, our region reported nearly 74 million cases and 1.9 million deaths from COVID-19, accounting for more than a third of COVID cases and more than 40% of deaths reported worldwide this week.

And while new cases are down nearly 20% from last week, many countries – including the U.S. – are seeing a resurgence of infections.

In North America, the U.S. and Mexico are reporting an increase in new infections across most states.

Many Central American nations are also seeing cases including in El Salvador where a consistent increase in daily cases was noted between late June and early July, and Guatemala, where at department level there were surges in COVID deaths in the past 2 weeks.

In the Caribbean, infections are also going up. Cuba reported the highest number of weekly cases since the start of the pandemic, and cases have tripled in the British Virgin Islands just weeks after reopening to cruise ships.

Meanwhile, South America is reporting a mixed picture.

COVID infections, hospitalizations and deaths are dropping across most of the continent, including in Brazil, Peru, Uruguay, and Chile. However, infections are once again mounting in Argentina, and in Colombia, they're reaching their highest-ever levels, raising concerns about the health systems' ability to cope as 98% of ICU beds are already in use.

Cases rise when complacency sets in. We are all tired, but after experiencing successive peaks of infections in the same locations, we must break this cycle by embracing public health measures early and consistently.

When variants of concern circulate, it's even more important that countries step up surveillance, especially while vaccine coverage remains low.

One year ago, preparations were underway to launch what would become the COVAX Facility.

Yet today, just one in ten vaccines administered worldwide have been here in the Americas. And even with limited bilateral deals, months of COVAX deliveries and recent donations from countries like the U.S., only one in seven people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully protected against COVID.

Money, more than public health, has determined how quickly countries can secure the tools that they need to combat this virus. As countries that struck deals with vaccine manufacturers pull further ahead, vaccination coverage continues to linger in the single digits for much of our region.

In Chile, nearly 58% of people have been fully vaccinated against COVID, in Uruguay, 55% of people are protected. The U.S. has vaccinated nearly half of its population and Canada isn't far behind.

Meanwhile, Paraguay and Jamaica have fully vaccinated less than 3% of their populations, and Honduras and Guatemala have yet to protect even 1% of their populations.

The U.S government has generously donated nearly 12 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to countries in our region over the last few weeks, and additional deliveries are on their way, with PAHO's help.

These vaccines are bringing hope to countries that would otherwise have to wait months to secure even a fraction of these doses. And that's why we continue to urge donors and countries with vaccines to share them with our region. This remains the only way for many countries in our region to secure the doses they need, quickly.

We are concerned about Haiti, which, in the midst of considerable political turmoil, has seen thousands of people displaced by growing violence and instability, and crowded shelters could become active hot spots for COVID transmission.

Limited supplies and violence are also hindering the ability of health workers to safely care for patients in need. In some cases, patients may be avoiding seeking care due to safety concerns.

PAHO, along with other partners, is committed to supporting the Haitian people in these uncertain times and we urge other international organizations to join us in supporting the COVID response.

Over the last few weeks, we've delivered considerable amounts of personal protective equipment, helped expand care for persons sick with COVID-19 and provided thousands of tests and laboratory materials to ramp up surveillance activities in Haiti. We've also helped train community health workers, and have supported the Ministry of Health in preparing for COVID-

19 vaccine introduction and setting up new systems to dispel rumors and COVID misinformation.

While the situation in Haiti is unique, many countries in our region – from Colombia to Brazil and now Cuba – are experiencing waves of protests due in part to the impacts of this pandemic.

COVID-19 has not just ravaged our health systems, it has fractured social protection programs and destabilized our economies.

A new report released by the Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean last week paints a grim outlook for our region.

More than 7 million companies have closed in Latin America and the Caribbean in the wake of the pandemic, more than a third of people in our region are living in poverty and one in four worry about where they will get their next meal. Unemployment rates are higher here than any other developing region.

The report shows how the pandemic continues to be fueled by inequality. And unfortunately, our region is the most unequal in the world.

We urge countries to continue prioritizing health and social safety nets as part of their COVID response and as they turn their sights to COVID recovery. Social protection is key both to help people adhere to the public health measures that we know work and to rebuild more inclusive, equitable societies.

Across our region we're paying the price of chronic underinvestment in health. So now is the time for countries to break this cycle by applying a public expenditure in health of at least 6% of GDP to health systems, and to chart their path to recovery. Now also is the time for countries to renew their commitment to Pan Americanism and solidarity.

As we said many times before, health is a fundamental right. It was so before COVID, and the unequal burden of this pandemic has painted the urgency of health equity under new light.