
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—11 AUGUST 2021

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

Over the past week, more than 1.3 million COVID-19 cases and more than 19,000 COVID-related deaths were reported in the Americas.

Cases and deaths continue to rise in Canada, Mexico, and the United States, as adherence to public health measures relax, the Delta variant circulates, and vaccination coverage varies within countries.

In Central America, cases are falling in Panama and Costa Rica but rising in Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador. Deaths are rising in nearly every country in Central America, including a 30% increase reported in El Salvador.

In the Caribbean, we are witnessing a similar story in the more populous islands. Cases are rising in Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico, as well as in Martinique and the Bahamas. Over the past month, infections increased 30-fold in Martinique and there has been a significant spike in hospitalizations. In Dominica, cases are rising as well.

The trends are more promising in South America.

There has been an overall decline in cases and deaths in the Andean Region and also Brazil, and across the Southern Cone. This includes substantial drops in cases in Colombia, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

Although cases are surging in some areas, there is clear evidence that wherever vaccines are available, they limit severe illness and save lives.

And that is why increasing access to vaccines remains our top priority – It is not just for some countries, but for all countries.

More than 6 months after the first doses arrived in our region, the disparity in who can access vaccines and who cannot is unacceptable.

Fewer than 20% of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully immunized, and in some countries that number is less than 5%.

But this disparity is also dangerous.

There is no path to recovery for any country while its neighbors remain vulnerable, and while variants circulate and multiply.

We must banish the idea that vaccine inequity is the problem of some countries and not others, and instead we need to work together to find solutions for all countries.

And we must do it quickly – because lives hang in the balance.

The Region of the Americas has a legacy of strong immunization programs and strong immunization coverages.

Historically, the Americas have enjoyed high rates of vaccine coverage throughout our Member States, regardless of their income or infrastructure.

We have strong immunization programs that are built on decades of delivering vaccines for polio, measles, seasonal flu, and yellow fever, among others.

We also have an experienced health workforce that are trained to administer vaccines safely and adept at reaching our most remote communities.

Perhaps most importantly, countries in the Americas have access to the PAHO Revolving Fund, which is an integral part of our technical cooperation package consolidating country vaccines demand from 41 Member States and territories, to leverage more affordable pricing and ensure the availability of high-quality vaccines to reach every corner of our region.

For decades, the Revolving Fund has been a catalyst of equity and solidarity and has been responsible for protecting generations of children across Latin America and the Caribbean from vaccine-preventable diseases.

Thanks to these systems and expertise, we are uniquely positioned to deliver COVID-19 vaccines quickly, safely, and equitably.

We are living in a constrained global vaccine market.

Throughout the first 6 months of this year, most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have been unable to access enough vaccines.

Some countries managed to strike bilateral deals with the vaccine makers and have made important progress immunizing their populations.

Others are beginning to benefit from donations from countries with additional doses. These donations are more than a display of solidarity – for some countries, they are the only hope of saving lives, and we need more donations.

PAHO's Revolving Fund has been working in three key areas to increase access to COVID-19 vaccines.

First, the Fund is purchasing and delivering vaccines on behalf of the COVAX facility. Second, it has been delivering vaccines donated through COVAX and supporting bilateral donations when requested. And third, it has been providing complementary access to vaccines to achieve high coverage to control the pandemic.

All of these are efforts that are focused on diversifying opportunities for countries to access the doses they need in the fastest and more effective way possible.

But the region is still short of the doses needed to turn the tide of the pandemic. We need a significant influx of vaccines and a more equitable process for distributing them.

There is a new opportunity to access vaccines

So, with this in mind, I am pleased to announce that PAHO is offering our Member States a new opportunity to access COVID-19 vaccines.

The Revolving Fund is now receiving requests from countries in the region for COVID-19 vaccines for the last three months of 2021 and for the calendar year 2022. So far, more than 20 countries have formally expressed interest and the number is growing by the day.

And here's why this is so important:

The Revolving Fund is a mechanism for providing high quality vaccines at competitive prices, and prices that countries can afford. It also provides support with planning, cold chain development, syringes, and other supplies.

This new initiative with the Revolving Fund will make available tens of millions of COVID-19 vaccine doses beyond the 20 percent that COVAX offers, and it will complement bilateral deals and other existing avenues for countries to access vaccines.

It is an initiative that will benefit every country in the region, but especially those that lack the resources and the negotiating power to secure the doses that they need to protect their people.

PAHO already monitors immunization coverage closely, and we are now rolling out a new system that collects the vaccination needs of each country faster and more efficiently.

This will help ensure that better deals can be closed with manufacturers and that available doses are distributed equitably, based on the latest epidemiological and vaccine coverage data.

Our region needs to pursue all possible avenues to expedite access and to ensure that countries reach their vaccination goals.

We still need more donations; and we still need COVAX to deliver on its original commitment.

We also need to create new opportunities that meet the diverse needs of our Member States, and that increase the supply of vaccines to the people and communities who are at the greatest risk.

This has long been the mission of PAHO and its Revolving Fund, and we vow to work tirelessly to achieve a sustainable supply of COVID-19 vaccines for all of our countries.