
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—15 DECEMBER 2021

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

Over the last week, the Americas reported over 926,056 new COVID infections which is an 18.4% increase in COVID cases from previous weeks.

In North America, the US and Canada are experiencing a resurgence in cases as Mexico continues to witness a reduction in COVID infections.

In Central America, cases are also down, except in Panama, where cases have steadily increased over the last month.

We're seeing a shifting picture in South America. Cases have dropped in Bolivia for the first time since September, just as COVID infections increased in Ecuador, Paraguay and Uruguay, and cases remain steady in Brazil and Peru.

In the Caribbean, while infections are down overall, Trinidad and Tobago reached its highest weekly COVID case count and cases rose by 66% in Saint Lucia over the last week. Meanwhile the Cayman Islands reported the highest weekly COVID incidence rate of any country or territory in the Americas.

COVID does not simply go away, so we need to employ all the resources we have to stop it: vaccines, masks, social distancing, and, of course, surveillance.

Today is our last press briefing of this year, so I'd like to take a moment to reflect on this second year of the pandemic – a year that marked us, challenged us, and gave us reason for hope.

Since the start of the pandemic, more than 98 million people in the Americas have developed COVID and more than 2.3 million people in our region have lost their lives to this virus.

More than a third of all COVID cases and one in four COVID deaths reported worldwide have occurred here in the Americas.

And when we compare 2020 to 2021, this year was undoubtedly worse.

We saw triple the number of COVID infections and deaths in this second year of the pandemic than we did in 2020.

Hospitals were stretched thin, vital medicines and supplies ran low, and our health systems were put to the test like never before.

But while this has been a sobering year, we have learned what it takes to bring this virus under control and thanks to COVID-19 vaccines, we have protected tens of millions of people from the worst of this virus.

As we welcomed 2021, COVID vaccines had not yet arrived on our shores. Today, more than 1.3 billion COVID vaccine doses have been administered in the Americas.

Although rollout of vaccines has not been as rapid as we would have liked, or as evenly distributed, today 56% of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, thanks to the efforts of countries and the support of donors.

Some countries in our region like Chile, Cuba, Uruguay, and Canada have some of the highest vaccine coverage in the world.

And yet, millions of people in our region have yet to receive a single dose.

Vaccine inequity continues to divide our region and if we don't address these glaring gaps, we'll fail to bring this virus under control.

There is no magic bullet to protect us against COVID-19. That's why we must embrace new tools and use them wisely.

Right now, there are a few promising new drugs in late-stage development that may help us treat COVID, and thus avoid hospitalizations and prevent deaths.

If they are approved by regulatory authorities, we must be ready to leverage these technologies, building on the lessons of the last two years.

The first lesson is that every decision must be grounded in evidence.

We urge countries in our region to heed the advice of the WHO, expert committees, scientists, and regulators whose jobs it is to carefully review the safety and efficacy of drugs and recommend when, where and how to deploy them.

The second lesson is that we must be ready to deploy these tools once they become available.

As new treatments gain final approvals, countries and companies alike must work together to ensure that everyone who can benefit from these tools has timely access to them, at a price that our countries can afford.

As we've seen with COVID vaccines, procurement and supply can be major barriers and keep innovation out of reach for those who need it most.

So, we cannot and must not let history repeat itself.

That's why we need to start working now to expand production capacity for these lifesaving tools – including in our own region – so countries don't remain completely dependent on pharmaceutical imports.

Although it is encouraging that some companies developing novel COVID-19 antivirals have pledged to make their products available at affordable prices in the world's poorest countries, we worry that many of the countries that have been hardest hit by COVID– including many countries in our region – do not qualify for these pledges.

Without additional support, our countries many of them will be left behind.

PAHO is tracking this closely and PAHO is on deck to support countries, international organizations, companies, and partners to find alternative solutions to guarantee access to future COVID therapeutic tools, including antivirals.

This region has the technical expertise, a well-established manufacturing capacity, strong regulatory infrastructure, and an effective pooled procurement mechanism via our Strategic Fund that, if effectively leveraged, will help us accelerate access to COVID technologies.

But for this regional effort to work, we need the good will of companies to openly share these technologies and resources to all countries so that the Americas are not left behind as new tools become available.

One of the most important lessons this pandemic has taught us is the importance of solidarity and of working together.

Effective collaboration across borders enabled vaccines to be developed in record-time, variants to be identified quickly, and countries to adjust their responses based on the latest available evidence.

Each time we worked together, we had breakthroughs.

But when countries worked in isolation, when innovations and resources were not shared, we created space for the pandemic to thrive.

Sharing is central to defeating this pandemic.

That's why I want to end today's speech with a special thank you to the reporters that are tuning in today and have tuned in over the last year, and to all the journalists covering the complex COVID-19 pandemic developments.

By sharing information, you have helped people around the world understand the latest evidence to keep themselves and their loved ones safe.

We count on that same spirit of collaboration as we start 2022 with renewed energy to defeat COVID-19.