
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS — 17 FEBRUARY 2021

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

Over the last week, more than 1.2 million people in the Americas were infected with COVID-19 and 39,000 died because of the virus.

And while these numbers are staggering, they represent a 10% drop from weeks past – proof that public health interventions are helping us keep the virus at bay.

Across North America, new infections are declining, giving hospitals much-needed reprieve.

Every country in Central America is also experiencing reductions in cases, except Honduras, which throughout 2021 has consistently reported a rise in infections.

In South America, Uruguay is finally seeing a dip in cases after a difficult start to the year. And while most countries are reporting downward trends, there are a few hot spots, particularly near the border between Peru, Colombia, and Brazil.

In the Caribbean, larger, more populous islands – like the Dominican Republic – continue to drive new infections in the region. Although smaller islands like Aruba, Barbados, St. Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines are still reporting an increase in cases.

Two months since the first COVID-19 vaccine was delivered, nearly 63 million people have been vaccinated against COVID-19 across the Americas and the Caribbean, with more people protected every day. The majority of those vaccinated are from the northern countries.

And while these figures are encouraging, they are not enough.

To benefit from the collective immunity of vaccines coverage must be very high.

More than 700 million persons throughout the Americas would have to be vaccinated against COVID-19 to ensure a 70% coverage.

This will be no easy task, so we count on the full commitment of our Member States and the global community to protect the peoples of the Americas.

We are working with COVAX to bring us closer to this goal.

But we also urge donors, pharmaceutical companies, and international organizations to support the Americas so that we have enough vaccines to do what we do best: expand immunizations to save lives.

Our vaccination goals in the region are grounded in equity. Everyone – regardless of who they are or where they live – should have access to a COVID-19 vaccine.

As we start delivering COVAX vaccines, and as we prepare for the steep scale-up ahead, we must be guided by our vision of fair and equitable access at every step of the way.

We must overcome the structural barriers that prevent the most vulnerable from being immunized and we can only do that by working together.

We urge all countries is to act quickly, be ready, and save lives.

And we are already making progress.

On Monday, we reached a critical milestone after the WHO issued an Emergency Use License for two versions of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccines, one from AstraZeneca-SK Bio of South Korea and the other from the Serum Institute of India.

This international stamp of approval certifies that the vaccine is safe, effective, and ready to be deployed, everywhere.

The Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine can be stored at normal refrigerator temperatures, and seamlessly incorporated into our region's existing immunization infrastructure.

In the next few days and weeks, countries participating in COVAX will receive confirmation of the timeline and number of doses for their first shipments.

Since the global supply of COVID-19 vaccines remains limited, countries should expect that these first deployments will be small. Around 160 million doses will be distributed in our region in the first semester, with doses ramping up every month.

Rest assured: PAHO is doing everything it can to expand vaccine availability and to get vaccines out quickly.

To make the most of these early doses, we urge countries to prioritize health workers and those at greatest risk – like the elderly – to decrease the burden on our hospitals, reduce deaths and save lives.

These first doses will also allow countries to test their immunization systems and overcome barriers before more doses are rolled out.

We will have challenges, we will face barriers, we will see new problems. But we will overcome them by working together.

PAHO is working non-stop to ensure that our Member States are prepared for the arrival of vaccines.

For months, PAHO has negotiated directly with manufacturers to streamline agreements on behalf of the COVAX mechanism and to reduce the burden on national governments.

PAHO has worked with WHO, UNICEF and the World Bank to set up a Vaccine Introduction Readiness Tool – VIRAT – a self-assessment platform used by over 31 countries in our region.

Introducing a new vaccine isn't easy, so PAHO has distributed guidance documents, held training sessions, and provided direct advice to countries across our region.

We're supporting countries on everything from logistics to coordinate the delivery of doses, to public information campaigns to ensure that people know where, when and how to receive their vaccines.

Our region is working hard to ready itself for the arrival of COVAX vaccines. The 10 countries that have qualified to receive doses at no cost are ready for their first shipments, and 27 others that will be purchasing vaccines through COVAX are nearly there.

But there are two pending responsibilities that require attention, everywhere:

The first is ensuring that countries have the legal and regulatory frameworks required to deliver these vaccines.

Because these vaccines are new, they need to be approved for use in every country. Each country has its own laws and regulations, so we urge ministries of health, regulatory agencies, and other officials to review requirements for each COVAX vaccine to avoid delays in shipments.

The second is ensuring that countries have hired and trained the staff necessary to conduct mass immunizations.

We are at the start of one of the largest immunization campaigns in our lifetime – an ambitious effort that requires health workers and other sectors to work together.

Unlike our typical immunization drives that focus on children, COVID-19 vaccines will be rolled out to adults and the elderly first, requiring a different strategy, and each vaccine must be handled and administered differently. Preparing for this will take time so we urge all countries to act quickly.

These steps are the foundation that will allow us to quickly expand access when millions more vaccines reach our countries.

Over the coming days, countries will face important tasks as they prepare for the arrival of vaccine doses. Any small delays could set vaccinations back weeks, so countries must make vaccine readiness their number one priority.

PAHO stands with our countries to provide any support needed: today, tomorrow and into the future.

Just as we have done with smallpox, polio, and measles, we must make certain that everyone who needs a COVID-19 vaccine can get one.

Ensuring the entire region has access to COVID-19 vaccines is not just our vision, it is our mandate. We urge each country to act quickly on the first vaccines and be ready for the longer road toward vaccine equity so we can save lives.