
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—13 JANUARY 2021

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A very good morning to all of you and a happy New Year, and welcome to the press meeting, first media briefing for 2021 and PAHO is grateful to you for joining us once again.

Since the start of this pandemic, over 39 million people across the Americas have become infected by COVID-19 and over 925,000 of them have succumbed to the virus.

In the last week alone, 2.5 million people were infected with COVID-19 in our region – the highest weekly cases since the virus first reached our shores.

Virtually every country in the Americas is seeing an acceleration in the virus's spread.

In North America – the United States is reporting the highest new COVID-19 infections and deaths in our region. California and states across the American South have seen dramatic increases in COVID hospitalizations, with 13 states reporting record-breaking figures. Today, more than 132,000 are hospitalized from COVID-19 in the U.S – these are more hospitalizations than during the pandemic peaks in the spring and the summer. These trends in hospitalizations are also being reported in Canada and Mexico, where the local health systems are struggling to keep up with demand in care.

Further south, in Central America, data from early January suggests that infections are on the rise in Costa Rica and Belize. However, it's too early to tell the impact of the holiday season on the virus's spread, so we are going to remain vigilant over the next few weeks.

Across the Caribbean data from early January reveals that many islands saw rapid rises in infections. The Cayman Islands, Dominica and the Virgin Islands reported a doubling of cases within the last week alone, and cases are growing even more rapidly in Barbados, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Bonaire.

And as we move to South America, every country has reported a rise in cases over the last few weeks – even in countries that had seen a decline in cases – like Chile and Argentina. As our Southern Hemisphere experiences its summer months, many countries are struggling to limit gatherings and travel, which will most likely fuel infections for weeks and months to come.

Scientists throughout the world and our region have also detected new variants of the COVID-19 virus. PAHO's molecular surveillance network spans some 21 laboratories throughout our vast region and we are tracking the spread of the virus and mutations that naturally develop over time. So far, the variant first seen circulating in the UK has been reported in six countries in the Americas.

At this time, there is no evidence to suggest that these variants affect patients differently, but early data does suggest that the virus can spread more easily, accelerating the threat to our health systems, at a time in which they are already close to capacity.

Ans that's why the public health measures that we've been urging from the start – such as practicing social distancing, wearing masks in public and washing hands often – remain our very best bet to help control this virus right now, in all of its forms.

Let's look at the year ahead. Our collective ability to keep up with these measures has the power to determine the trajectory of this year. If we remain diligent, we have the power to control this virus; if we relax, make no mistake: 2021 could well be far worse than 2020.

With one vaccine approved for use by WHO and more underway, we're moving closer to controlling this pandemic.

A handful of countries in our region have already begun vaccinating health professionals and a few have already started protecting other particularly vulnerable populations, like the elderly and those with underlying conditions. However, as long as doses remain limited, we can't rely on vaccinations to flatten the pandemic curve.

As we look ahead to 2021, I would say that there are three priorities that are critical to controlling this pandemic in our region.

The first is to ensure equitable access to the tools – both new and old – to prevent and treat COVID-19.

We must ensure that health workers have the protective gear equipment they need to do their jobs safely, and that every person who requires hospitalization can access the basic medications they need, ICU beds if that is necessary to manage and treat their conditions. This is especially challenging as cases surge, and supply chains are strained.

With the arrival of vaccines, we must ensure not just that doses are produced quickly, but that they're equitably delivered and swiftly across every country – regardless of income. This will require global and regional collaboration and solidarity, with donors pitching in resources through mechanisms like the COVAX Facility.

Second, we need leaders to act quickly and foster unity.

This pandemic has taught us time and time again that leadership determines the effectiveness of a country's response.

As we look to the year ahead, leaders will face difficult choices as we work to flatten the transmission curve.

And that's why we need leaders to act transparently so that the public understands their decisions, and the scientific evidence that is behind those decisions, so we can rally people around a shared plan.

We need leaders to act in the interest of public health, not political gain, by working together to make the best use of the tools to prevent this virus.

Politicizing vaccines and other control measures is not just unhelpful, but it could fuel the virus and cost lives.

And finally, we must balance urgency with good planning.

We don't have much time to lose, but we can't beat the pandemic without strong vaccine delivery plans.

And that's why PAHO is working with every country in our region to help secure the vaccine doses countries need to protect their populations.

We're also providing support with vaccine demand planning, logistics and cold chain management, surveillance and information system strengthening, health worker training, and vaccine communication planning, among others.

Luckily, our region has a strong legacy of immunization and a mounting of immunization campaigns.

Thanks to vaccination and surveillance efforts, the Region of the Americas was the first in the world to eliminate smallpox, polio, rubella, congenital rubella syndrome, and measles.

For 42 years, PAHO's Immunization Program has helped countries across the Americas work together to protect people against vaccine-preventable diseases. Through our Revolving Fund, Member States pool their national resources to procure vaccines and related products at the lowest price. COVID will be a challenge, but one I believe that we can meet by working together.