
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—9 MARCH 2022

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

Last week, COVID-19 cases declined by 26% across the Americas, with 1.1 million new infections reported.

Deaths also dropped by nearly 19%, with close to 18,000 deaths recorded in the past week.

However, possible reductions in testing may not accurately reflect the actual number of reported cases in countries. There are still some countries and territories reporting increases associated with the latest COVID-19 surge. In the Caribbean, for example, cases rose slightly, by 2.2 %.

Countries and territories in the region that reported increases in deaths over the previous week include Bolivia and Puerto Rico.

This week marks a somber occasion.

It has been two years since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, just before COVID transmission became widespread in our region.

Since then, we have lost at least six million people around the world to this virus.

And the Americas have been disproportionately impacted. With more than 2.6 million lives lost, we reported the most COVID deaths out of any other Region in the world.

Nearly half of all global deaths were in the Americas – even though our region is home to fewer than 13% of people around the world.

This is a tragedy of enormous proportions, and its effects will be felt for years to come.

Beyond the lives we've lost, the pandemic has had devastating impacts on the long-term health of our people.

Over 148 million people in our region have been ill with this virus, and early studies show that some COVID survivors will suffer lifelong consequences.

A recent WHO report shows staggering numbers on the mental health impact: rates of depression and anxiety shot up by 25% around the world, heavily impacting women and young people.

And as health systems were overwhelmed by COVID-19 surges, countries in the Americas reported more disruptions to essential health services than other global regions.

The pandemic is still a threat today.

In the first two months of 2022 alone, 63% of new global cases have been reported in the Americas.

Countries like Brazil, the United States and Chile hit record high numbers of new infections during the Omicron surge, and we lost more than 220,000 lives across the region in this short time.

We all want the pandemic to be over, but optimism alone cannot control the virus.

It is too soon to lower our guard.

Public health measures are being left behind in many parts of our region. Some, but not all countries are making that decision based on risk assessments and health data.

Omicron is still around, and this pandemic is unpredictable.

We must build on lessons from the past two years to prepare for quick action if a new variant emerges or outbreaks happen among those who remain vulnerable.

Yes, we can acknowledge some gains in our fight against this virus.

When we started, we didn't know much about COVID-19.

But now, we have safe vaccines that protect us from the most severe disease and are saving countless lives.

Health care workers now know the best kind of care to provide to COVID patients, and we have better treatment options.

And we know that masking, physical distancing and other public health measures work well to slow the spread of the virus.

COVID-19 is likely to be here to stay. We must learn to live with this virus, and quickly adapt to new changes.

We can do that by keeping our finger on the pulse of the pandemic, and adjusting public health guidance any time there is a risk of increased transmission.

Surveillance is our eyes and ears, so countries should continue to sequence the virus to monitor for variants and changes in transmission.

Testing should be readily available even when transmission is low. And data should be reported quickly to inform policymaking.

We must also be prepared to tighten public health guidance if cases go back up.

When places relax measures at the wrong moment, transmission spikes dangerously and we lose more lives.

So, when countries decide to shift their responses based on COVID trends, it is important to communicate these changes clearly, so people understand and comply with the updated policies.

And finally, we cannot and must not leave anyone behind.

We've seen existing inequities exacerbated by COVID-19 and new inequities emerge, including in vaccine access.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, about 248 million people have yet to receive their first dose of the vaccine, and these gaps are concentrated in harder to reach, rural areas or underserved areas. Only 14 countries achieved coverage of 70% of their populations with completed vaccine schedules.

As we plan for future phases of the pandemic, we must remember that COVID-19 is still a real threat that places a greater burden on the poor and most vulnerable.

Our wins against COVID-19 show us what is possible when we work together, and use the tools that we know are effective

They also highlight where there are still gaps, and where we can do things better.

These lessons are key to improving our COVID response and tackling other health and development challenges to build a healthier, stronger, more resilient region together.