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# WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—8 SEPTEMBER 2021

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

Over the last week, there were nearly 1.5 million cases and more than 22,000 COVID-related deaths in the Americas. Today we're seeing nearly double the number of infections reported this time last year.

In North America, Canada is reporting a jump in new cases while hospitalizations continue to surge in the US, where hospitals remain saturated and ICU beds are in short supply in many US states.

While new infections are dropping in the Caribbean, we're seeing a rise in COVID-related deaths across many islands, including Sint Marteen, Jamaica and Puerto Rico.

COVID infections are rising in Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Belize. Over half of hospitals across Guatemala are over capacity as they care for COVID patients.

Meanwhile infections continue to drop across South America, although there is a mild increase in cases in Venezuela.

On the other hand, vaccination campaigns continue to move forward despite limited supplies. So far, just 28 percent of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated.

But these numbers vary significantly depending on where you look.

While we should celebrate that Canada, Chile and Uruguay have fully vaccinated over two thirds of their populations. We cannot forget that one fourth of countries in our region have yet to vaccinate 20% of their people. And in some places, coverage is much lower.

We are particularly worried about Member-States that are lagging behind because doses are not available to them. And just to mention a few: Guatemala and Nicaragua are still below 10% coverage. In Venezuela, just over 11% of people have been fully vaccinated. And then in Haiti less than one percent of the population has been protected.

This inequality is unacceptable. PAHO is helping to channel donations from countries with excess doses, but we need more vaccines to save lives in the hardest-hit corners of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Today, however, I want to spotlight one group that has faced great uncertainty not just when it comes to vaccinations but throughout the course of the pandemic: pregnant women.

Pregnancy is a particularly vulnerable time.

Women's immune systems change during pregnancy, leaving them at higher risk of respiratory infections, like COVID-19.

We know that if pregnant women become infected, they have a higher risk of developing serious COVID symptoms, and more frequently require ventilation and intensive care, as compared to women who aren't pregnant. They also have a higher chance of delivering their baby early or pre-maturely.

Yet the pandemic had a significant impact on the availability of pre-natal care and other essential services.

At least 40% of the countries in our region have reported disruptions to maternal and newborn care – and these disruptions have become more widespread during this second year of the pandemic.

Some countries like Belize and Guatemala report that pregnancy-related care has been disrupted in over half of health sites.

This means that far too many women had trouble getting a doctor's appointment at a time when care couldn't be more critical.

So far, more than 270,000 pregnant women have become sick with COVID in the Americas and more than 2,600 of them – or one percent of those infected – have died from the virus.

Most countries in our region have already reported more cases and deaths among pregnant women this year than in all of 2020.

While the data varies across countries, some are tracking this very closely. The risk reported is especially high in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil which together account for half of all COVID deaths among pregnant women in our region.

In Mexico and Colombia, COVID-19 has become the leading cause of maternal deaths in 2021.

For the past three decades, Latin America and the Caribbean struggled to reduce maternal mortality. And now the pandemic threatens to wipe away 20 years of hard-fought gains.

Nearly all maternal deaths are preventable and these losses are incalculable.

Women play a central role in the wellbeing of their families and communities. And they are critical in helping countries recover and to rebuild from this pandemic.

So, each maternal death leaves behind a vacuum for their loved ones and it has a ripple effect in all of society.

But fortunately our hands are not tied. There is much we can do to protect women of child-bearing age and prevent more losses.

To start, countries must maintain access to the health services that pregnant women depend on.

Routine screenings and quick access to care are critical to keep mother and baby healthy and on track for a safe birth, so these should be deemed essential and prioritized.

Countries should also give pregnant women and lactating mothers priority for COVID vaccinations.

While some countries are already vaccinating pregnant women, less than half of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have rolled out guidelines to vaccinate this population.

So, let me be clear: PAHO recommends that all pregnant women after their first trimester, as well as those who are breastfeeding, receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

COVID vaccines approved by WHO are safe to administer during pregnancy and are a critical tool to protect expectant mothers during this pandemic.

And while it's too soon to see the impact of vaccinations on cases and deaths, there are some encouraging signs: In Mexico, for instance, where pregnant women have been prioritized for vaccinations for some time, not a single vaccinated woman has died from COVID during pregnancy.

So, it's extremely important that pregnant women have access to COVID vaccines.

Vaccines have another advantage: as a mother breastfeeds, she passes immunity to her baby. So COVID-19 vaccines can also help protect newborns from the virus.

And finally, it's critical that pregnant women maintain the public health measures that have proven effective against this virus.

Wearing masks, maintaining social distance, limiting contact with people outside of their households and avoiding indoor gatherings, these are especially important to keep expecting mothers safe from COVID.

Pregnancy can be one of the most important and fulfilling time in a woman's life and a critical period for a baby's growth and future.

We owe it to the women in Latin America and the Caribbean to use all the tools at our disposal to protect them and their babies during the pandemic.