
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—2 JUNE 2021

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Thank you for joining today's press briefing.

Over the last week there were 1.1 million new cases and over 25,000 COVID-19 related deaths reported in our region.

After weeks of plateauing and even decreasing figures, COVID-19 infections are back on the rise in all sub-regions, except in North America.

The US, Canada and Mexico are reporting overall reductions in cases and deaths, although hot spots are still being reported in the Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Newfoundland, and Labrador, as well as the Mexican states of Quintana Roo and Baja California.

Central America is reporting the highest number of deaths to date and today one- third of hospitalized patients are in the ICUs. Meanwhile, COVID infections are accelerating in Panama, Belize, and El Salvador, where new cases have doubled in the last seven days.

Further south, Colombia is reporting the highest rate of infections in South America, where new cases have nearly tripled in certain regions. Brazil is also seeing a rise in new infections and hospitalizations – this trend is especially acute in some states in the Northeast, in which hospitals are over 90% capacity. Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile are also on alert as they continue to report a rise in cases.

Many of our Caribbean islands are also reporting a surge in infections, including Sint Maarten, Trinidad and Tobago and the Dominican Republic

Today, I am particularly concerned about the situation in Haiti, where sources are reporting sharp increases in cases, in hospitalizations, and deaths in recent weeks. Although official data are limited, the risks are high, as the Haitian health system is already challenged by a sharp rise in cases, especially as the number of COVID-19 hospital beds has been downsized from last year.

Two variants of concern have already been identified in the country, while public health measures required to stop transmission are being largely ignored by the general population. These two factors combined are likely fueling transmission.

PAHO is working with the Ministry of Health to scale up care and supplies for infected patients as well as protective equipment so that health care workers can do their jobs safely.

Another top priority in our collaboration with the Haitian government is to reduce the transmission of this virus by scaling up testing so the government can identify and isolate cases, and quarantine those who've come into contact with infected persons.

It's encouraging that the Government of Haiti will accept the AstraZeneca vaccine and doses will be arriving soon through the COVAX Facility. PAHO will continue to work with the Ministry of Health to

prepare and support the delivery of the first doses as quickly as possible. A very high priority is to offer vaccination to all frontline health workers over 18 years of age.

We call on partners and organizations working in Haiti to urgently reinforce the response to COVID-19. The country will need additional health capacity, as well as support to embrace preventive measures that are required to curb transmission. Both will be decisive in the coming weeks. There really is no time to waste.

The situation we're seeing in Haiti is a cautionary tale in just how quickly things can change with this virus.

And this is true for most places in our Region.

Since the start of the new year, we've seen a rapid increase in infections. In just the first five months of 2021 both cases and deaths have almost doubled in our region.

Wishful thinking will not resolve this crisis. We need action. So please let me remind you of what needs to be done to stop this outbreak.

The first thing is effective leadership

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

Sadly, across our region we've seen misinformation about COVID-19 and this has sown doubt on proven health measures, often in the context of political disputes.

By stoking controversy where there is none, our leaders are sending mixed messages to the public and standing in a way of effective measures to control the virus.

We must unite around stopping this virus – and this should be the priority.

The second is to urgently boost access to vaccines

Effective vaccines are a beacon of hope in this crisis, and we must do all in our power to secure more doses for all nations in the Americas.

We are very far from this goal, especially for the low-income countries that are still struggling to protect health professionals and those more vulnerable. COVAX has already delivered some 17.6 million doses to our Region, but progress is not keeping up with the pandemic.

Regional solidarity, including the donation of doses, will be key to get us through the current shortage of supply.

Vaccines will save lives and prevent future waves, but for the current surge in infections we have to deploy the tools that we have at hand.

And lastly, let me remind you that Public Health measures remain the best way to save lives now

At a time when staying home and practicing proven public health measures couldn't be more important, what we're seeing is the total opposite.

Mobility data from across our region shows there is more movement within and between countries now than at any other point during this pandemic.

When you combine this mobility with the premature relaxing of public health measures, what you get is the perfect environment for the virus – and its variants – to spread.

But we know how to stop this virus.

PAHO is doing and will continue to do its part to support the response to the pandemic in the Americas, that is grounded in science and solidarity.

But we can't do this alone. We need leaders to prioritize the decisions that are required to stop this virus in its track. And we need everyone to recognize that their personal choices will not only protect themselves and their loved ones, but also determine the fate of the months ahead. Let us all work together.