
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—7 APRIL 2021

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

COVID infections continue to surge throughout the Americas. Last week, we had more than 1.3 million new cases in our region and more than 37,000 deaths. In fact, more than half of all global deaths reported over the last week were found in the Americas – a sober reminder of the human toll of this pandemic.

The epidemiological situation across the region is uneven. Infections are rising in some places and falling in others.

In North America, cases and hospitalizations are climbing in Canada, while infection rates are slowing down in the U.S. and Mexico.

Just as cases are decelerating in Belize, El Salvador and Panama, we're seeing a rise in new infections in Costa Rica, Honduras and Guatemala.

In the Caribbean, populous islands like Jamaica and the Dominican Republic are seeing a dip in cases while infections are going up in smaller islands, like Martinique, Bermuda and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

But nowhere are infections as worrisome as in South America, where cases are mounting in nearly every country. In areas of Bolivia and Colombia, cases have doubled in the last week, and all four countries in the southern cone have been experiencing an acceleration in COVID-19 cases, with uninterrupted community transmission in recent weeks. In the meantime, ICU beds are nearing capacity in Peru and Ecuador.

Over the last week, the U.S., Brazil and Argentina were among the ten countries in the world registering the highest number of new infections worldwide, and other countries weren't far behind.

Driving down infections starts by staying home and doing everything we can to protect ourselves and others from getting sick.

And yet, we're seeing that populations in the region slowly and steadily increased their mobility over time, even when public health and social measures were in place during this pandemic.

More people are traveling within and between countries, and if these trends continue, our health systems will be in deeper trouble.

Regardless of pandemic fatigue, we cannot ease public health and social interventions without good data and justification. Our actions must reflect our reality.

Slowing, and then stopping transmission requires decisive action by local and national governments, and continuous vigilance from all of us.

Today marks World Health Day, a day where we reflect on the importance of health and our promise to achieve health for all. With its theme of Together for a fairer, healthier world, there is no better moment to talk about the need for urgent change.

Over the last year, this virus has greatly deepened the inequities that have long divided this region.

While many of us have been lucky enough to continue working during the pandemic from the comfort and safety of home, half of our workforce relies on the informal economy – staying at home would have meant foregoing their livelihoods.

Many others remain or are newly unemployed. For them – and the 22 million people who fell into poverty this year in our region – the financial strain of this pandemic has been devastating.

Effectively fighting COVID-19 is impossible without addressing some of these inequalities and supporting the most vulnerable as they struggle to protect themselves.

The good news is that vaccinations continue to move forward across our region. Today, more than 210 million doses of COVID vaccines have been administered across 49 countries and territories in the Americas.

And thus far, PAHO's Revolving Fund has delivered more than 2.6 million COVID vaccines from the COVAX mechanism to 26 countries, and more doses are making their way to the Caribbean.

But of course, vaccines are just one part of our COVID response – and we must continue to rely on public health measures to keep our populations and our countries safe.

That's why PAHO has developed an interactive platform where countries can visualize the measures that were implemented and compare that with how mobility has behaved over time. We can see peaks in mobility during specific periods such as Christmas and New Year's.

In addition, PAHO developed modeling tools to increase nowcasting capacities at country level. Today, more than 15 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean are using this platform to inform their pandemic response – and we encourage others to follow suit.

On World Health Day, we urge countries to make equity the guiding force of their COVID response.

Countries must prioritize investments in health to keep people safe and healthy and economies strong. Health must be central to our efforts as we work to reduce inequality and build more resilient societies.

Every country, regardless of income, must make needed investments in their health systems and make health care more accessible to the poorest and most vulnerable.

As we continue to fight this virus, we must do more than just stop COVID-19. We must commit to working together to build a fairer, healthier world. We must also take this opportunity to build a healthier region that's better prepared to tackle the next challenge and realizes our promise of health for all.