

---

# WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS — 24 FEBRUARY 2021

---

24 FEBRUARY 2021

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

Over the last week, over one million people became sick with COVID-19 and 34,000 died as a result of the virus.

A few days ago, the U.S. reached a tragic milestone: more than half a million people have died from COVID complications.

These losses are a profound reminder of the pain and suffering this virus has caused, particularly in our region.

Just one year ago, Brazil reported its first COVID case, and since then, more than 10 million Brazilians and nearly 50 million people have become infected with the virus in the Americas – that's roughly the entire population of Colombia.

It's undeniable that the Americas have been the epicenter of this pandemic for months and we continue to be disproportionately impacted by the virus.

So, while news outlets are reporting major declines in COVID-19 cases, I want to emphasize that we are certainly not out of the woods.

The data tell a much more complicated story.

The drop-in cases in our region has largely been driven by dramatic reductions in new infections in the U.S., where COVID cases and deaths dropped around 30% in the last week compared to the previous one. This is a result of several factors, including tighter public health measures with higher public adherence and better coordination across the country and vaccine roll out.

The U.S. is not alone. In South America, most countries are reporting a drop in new cases.

Nowhere have reductions been more dramatic than in Uruguay, which saw record-high infections late last year and quickly implemented public health measures to control the virus. Within a few weeks, Uruguay managed to bring its outbreak under control.

Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador are also witnessing a smaller decrease in new cases, around 4% lower than last week's numbers. But the virus continues to spread at levels roughly equivalent to those we saw mid-last year, when many countries were sounding the alarm.

Although we are better equipped to deal with COVID infections than we were six months ago, a lot can happen in a few weeks' time.

Some countries in the region are still reporting a rise in infections.

Peru is experiencing new outbreaks along its Amazonian border with Brazil and Colombia.

In the Caribbean, smaller islands like Barbados, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and the Turks and Caicos are reporting a rise in new infections.

To control the virus, we must remain vigilant and committed to the public health measures we know are effective – especially as new variants circulate in the region and may increase the burden on our health systems.

That is why PAHO continues to monitor the virus's spread in our region for any changes in transmission, and why countries must continue to practice social distancing, wear masks and avoid mass gatherings.

As of this week, nearly 78 million people have been vaccinated against COVID-19 across the Americas and the Caribbean, with more people protected every day, the vast majority in North America,

But it will be months before we see vaccinations impact the rate of COVID infections – even in places like the U.S., where immunization campaigns have been active for weeks.

In the short term, available doses remain limited, and we must focus on saving lives by prioritizing those most vulnerable, like our health workers, the elderly and people living with pre-existing conditions.

As supply catches up with demand, we'll be able to protect more and more people, and rely on vaccines to ultimately control the pandemic in our region. For this reason, we need to maintain the measures we know that can protect against the transmission: wearing masks in public spaces, keeping physical distance and avoiding crowded and closed spaces.

Increasing access to COVID-19 vaccines in the Americas should be a top global priority.

Our region has been hit harder by the pandemic than any other and millions remain vulnerable to infection and death.

Some 28 countries and territories have started delivering COVID vaccinations in our region after securing bilateral deals with manufacturers or receiving small donations from other countries.

This is not enough, and it is not acceptable.

The life-saving power of vaccines should not be a privilege for the few, but a right for all – especially the countries at greatest risk, like those in the Americas who remain the epicenter of

the pandemic. Our Region needs vaccines as soon as possible, and as many as possible, to save lives.

One recent development offers a glimmer of hope.

Countries that are lined up to receive early doses from COVAX were notified about their upcoming shipments. Hundreds of Thousands of doses will be delivered in the next few weeks.

Supplies remain limited and the COVAX deployments will be small at the beginning, but they will ramp up every month. Initial distributions to countries in our region will cover around 2 to 2.5 % of the population, and they will be distributed fairly and equitably among participating countries.

PAHO's Revolving Fund has been leading efforts to purchase vaccines on behalf of countries in the Americas. For months, we have negotiated directly with manufacturers to streamline agreements on behalf of the COVAX mechanism and reduce the burden on national health systems.

Despite the steps being taken to deliver vaccines as quickly as possible, we are still way behind where we should be as a region.

That is why we are urging the global community to make COVID vaccinations in the Americas a global priority as it is where the need and risk are greatest.

Our region has been hard at work so that once vaccines are approved and available, countries are prepared to roll them out and people are there to take them. And we are ready.

As COVAX gears up to deliver its first doses, I also want to remind everyone that these vaccines are safe and effective.

Every vaccine distributed by COVAX has undergone a thorough evaluation by the WHO and many by stringent national regulatory authorities, which reviewed data from every step of the development process.

This approval process is complex, rigorous, and thorough, so that citizens receiving vaccines can trust in their safety and efficacy.

As we have witnessed the vaccine development process unfold, many of us have been absorbed in vaccine news and can recount efficacy data as if it was the score of last night's ballgame.

And while it's encouraging that the public has taken so much interest in science, we should exercise caution because the science behind each trial differs and vaccine efficacy numbers are being compared out of context.

Although each vaccine is unique, those authorized for use by WHO and delivered through COVAX Facility have proven to dramatically reduce the chances of severe COVID-19 infections. This means that people who take them will be safer, and in turn, keep our communities protected as our health systems care for fewer COVID patients.

So, when it's your turn, we encourage you to please get vaccinated.

Together, we have witnessed the overwhelmingly positive impact of vaccines on patients and communities alike. Through the power of vaccines, our region has eliminated smallpox, polio, rubella and measles.

With COVID-19, it's no different: safe and effective vaccines will help us turn the tide of this pandemic, but only if we can reach those most vulnerable, no matter where they live. And we will still need to maintain the proven public health measures of testing, contact tracing, quarantine, physical distancing, hand hygiene, and masks until the pandemic recedes.