
PAHO DIRECTOR'S OPENING REMARKS AT THE PRESS BRIEFING – THREE YEARS OF COVID-19—9 MARCH 2023

As prepared for delivery

Hello and thank you for joining my first media briefing as Director of the Pan American Health Organization. Journalists are essential to enable PAHO to achieve important health goals. I am glad to see so many of you connected. I thank you for your support in the past years and intend to continue this open dialogue with you moving forward.

As I take the helm as PAHO Director, a primary focus of my tenure is to help countries of the Americas move past the COVID-19 pandemic.

Just over three years ago, on 26 February 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Latin America, in Brazil.

Since then, the Region of the Americas had over 190.3 million cases (25% of global total) and over 2.9 million deaths, (almost 43% of the global total).

No country in the world was fully prepared for the impact of this virus. This is certainly true for the Americas, a region marked by social and economic inequalities between and within countries.

While we are not out of the woods, we are in a much better place. Today, COVID-19 incidence rates are now 20-30 times lower than a year ago.

PAHO played a key role in helping countries mitigate the impacts of the pandemic, providing technical guidance, vaccines, diagnostic tests, oxygen, medical treatment and other lifesaving resources. To identify a few examples:

- We developed and strengthened the COVID-19 Genomic Surveillance Regional Network, increasing capacity in at least 6 countries to carry out genetic sequencing for the first time. This facilitated the uploading of more than 580,000 sequences from Latin American and the Caribbean into global databases.
- This network is an asset that will enable countries to track COVID-19 and other pathogens with pandemic potential, including avian flu.
- We mobilized over 160 million doses through COVAX and helped Latin American and Caribbean countries administer more than 1.3 billion vaccine doses in less than two years. This is no small feat – the Americas is now the region with the second-highest level of COVID-19 vaccination coverage in the world – 71%.

But COVID-19 is still with us, and the virus has yet to settle into a predictable pattern. In the past month alone, we saw over 1.5 million new cases in our region, and 17,000 deaths.

We cannot be complacent. As we learn to live with this virus, countries must:

- Maintain and continue to strengthen surveillance. We know that COVID-19 can evolve and adapt quickly. The risk of new variants is real. Testing rates have dropped, but we must maintain monitoring and report this information to PAHO and global mechanisms.
- Continue to implement COVID-19 vaccination programs, reaching out to the 30% who have yet to receive their primary series. Uptake for boosters also continues to decline but they are essential in preparing ourselves for any new wave of infection or new variant of concern. Vaccines are now readily available, so we must be determined and vigilant to reach each and every person.
- Continue to advocate for more equitable access to medicines and vaccines, using science and innovation. Latin America and the Caribbean still import 10 times more pharmaceutical products than it exports. Strengthening regional capacity to produce mRNA vaccines, for example, can help our countries to better manage COVID-19 and other emergencies in the long run.

We have the tools to end the COVID-19 emergency, by strengthening surveillance and data, and increasing vaccination coverage, with equity always at the center of our efforts.

Our region experienced setbacks over the past three years that have revealed and/or exacerbated weaknesses in our health systems – in the detection and treatment of diseases such as tuberculosis and HIV; in testing and treatment for non-communicable diseases; and in declining rates for routine vaccination.

Three years on, the pandemic presents us with a unique opportunity to place health firmly where it belongs – front and center of the Sustainable Development Agenda.

We must focus on recovering losses and on rebuilding resilient health systems that work for everyone, as well as being better prepared for future health threats.

This will require increased public spending to expand access to quality health services, especially the most vulnerable populations; investments in primary health care; and building capacities to ensure a sufficient and appropriately trained health workforce.

PAHO stands ready to support our countries in the Americas, to learn from and apply the lessons we have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thank you.