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# WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—1 DECEMBER 2021

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Thank you and good morning. Thank you for joining today's press briefing.

Over the last week, the Americas reported over 753,000 new COVID infections and over 13,000 COVID-related deaths.

In North America, cases in Canada and the United States remain steady but high, while infections and deaths have dropped by over 20% in Mexico.

In Central America, every country except Panama has seen a reduction cases and deaths over the last week. In South America, cases in Southern Cone countries have increased steadily for the past several weeks. In the Andean region and in Brazil, cases are plateauing.

Meanwhile in the Caribbean, cases are on the rise in the Cayman Islands and in Anguilla.

This pandemic is dynamic, and the decisions we make about upholding preventive measures and expanding access to vaccines will influence how far this virus spreads.

I want to address the new Omicron variant that was designated a “variant of concern” by the WHO a few days ago.

There are still many unknowns. It is not yet clear whether Omicron is more transmissible than other variants, or if it causes more severe disease.

But researchers around the world are actively conducting studies to better understand this variant so we have the best available evidence to guide our actions.

Over the weekend, PAHO was in touch with Health Ministers in our region to share details about this new variant and we will continue to share updates and guidance as it becomes available.

The virus still needs to be isolated to conduct neutralization tests, and this process will take some time. Until these tests and other laboratory assays are completed, we will not have enough evidence to determine the degree of transmissibility or severity of the Omicron variant, or to assess the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines against it.

PAHO meanwhile continues to closely track the other variants in our region and for now, Delta remains the predominant variant in the Americas.

Canada and Brazil are the only countries in our region where the Omicron variant has been detected, but it *is* likely that other countries will begin seeing this new variant in circulation soon.

That's why it's important that countries redouble their surveillance efforts, share sequences with the Genomic Surveillance Network of the Americas and report any Omicron cases to the WHO.

Speed and transparency are especially critical at this time.

But above all, we urge people not to be frightened.

Today, the most important thing people can do to protect themselves is to get vaccinated and to reduce their risk of exposure to the virus. This can be done by wearing masks, maintaining physical distance from others, frequent hand washing, and avoiding crowded spaces, especially indoors.

It is important to note that these measures are effective against all variants, including Omicron.

Countries should sustain their public health measures to limit transmission of the virus and adjust them according to local transmission risks.

As I've said before, vaccine inequity is prolonging the COVID crisis, and this is exactly what we're seeing with the arrival of Omicron.

The more COVID-19 circulates, the more opportunities the virus has to mutate and to change.

That's why it is crucial that we expand vaccinations to all.

So far, only 54% of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, so our region remains especially vulnerable.

COVID is not the first infectious disease that has shaken the world.

For more than 40 years, scientists, countries and communities have been grappling with the HIV epidemic.

Today, as we commemorate World AIDS Day, PAHO honors those who lost their lives to this disease and those who over the years have fought for new tools to protect those living with HIV.

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, 2.4 million people are living with HIV, and just 81% of them know their HIV status.

With proper antiretroviral – or ARV – treatment, people living with HIV can keep their disease in check and avoid infecting others—but this requires consistent access to these drugs.

Even before the pandemic, just 65% of people living with HIV in our region were receiving ARV therapy.

And unfortunately, as the pandemic has progressed, more countries reported partial disruptions in services for ARV therapy. But countries in the Region, including ministries of health, civil society organizations, and international cooperation agencies, worked together to maintain the supply of antiretroviral drugs for people living with HIV, and for HIV prevention. They piloted innovative methods to get medicines to those who need it, such as dispensing multi-month supplies, loans between countries, and activating special procurement procedures.

While regrettably our region is falling behind on 2030 targets to reduce new HIV infections and eliminate AIDS-related deaths, we've made significant progress.

We also have effective drugs to control HIV and interrupt transmission. And we have COVID-19 vaccines, which are proven to be safe and effective for persons living with HIV. Now we must ensure consistent and equitable access to these powerful tools.

But expanding access is only possible if we combat the persistent stigma and discrimination that keep health services out of reach from too many men who have sex with men, transgender women, and sex workers across our region.

That's why our AIDS elimination responses must reflect cultural and sexual diversity, gender equality and human rights – with the active participation of the communities most affected.

This week also marks 119 years since representatives from countries across the Americas met in Washington D.C. for the First International Sanitary Convention of the American Republics that would mark the creation of the Pan American Health Organization.

For 119 years, PAHO has been working closely with countries in the Americas to generate knowledge, guide public health actions and support our goal of health for all.

Our anniversary reminds us of the importance of solidarity and collaboration to protect the health and well-being of our region, especially during health emergencies.

We made a lot of progress in treating HIV/AIDS and developed effective vaccines to protect people from COVID-19 in record time.

Now we must work together to finish the job and fulfill the promise of today's lifesaving tools so everyone in our region has access to the services and tools that they need to live healthy and productive lives.