

## **WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S OPENING REMARKS, APRIL 28, 2020**

Hello and let me thank you again for joining us.

This week marks a somber milestone in the fight against COVID-19.

More than one million cases of the virus have been reported in the Americas, and as of 27 of April, more than 60,211 people have died from this terrible disease. There has been a concerning rise of new infections cases across Latin America.

Just in the past week, we've seen over 250 thousand new cases in the Americas. The majority of new cases were reported in the US, followed by Brazil, Canada, Ecuador and Mexico. All countries and territories in the Region have confirmed cases and we are seeing a growing number of countries with ongoing community transmission: 3 in North America, 7 in South America, 1 in Central America, and 1 in the Caribbean.

As testing increases, countries are starting to update their numbers to confirm what we have long expected: that the burden of COVID-19 in our region is greater than what health authorities have been able to report in previous weeks. PAHO continues to work closely with its member States to strengthen surveillance.

Based on everything we know, it's vital that countries reinforce protective measures now and use all tools available to them. This includes proven public health interventions like social distancing, testing, isolating cases and contact tracing.

The situation for COVID-19 would be different if we had an effective vaccine against the disease. Some of the best minds in our region, and around the world, are focused on developing a vaccine for this novel coronavirus, and we are encouraged by the unprecedented collaboration towards this shared scientific goal.

This week, however, is Vaccination Week in the Americas – a time to promote and celebrate the life-saving power of vaccines.

In 2020, we approach it with an acute sense of urgency.

Until a vaccine for COVID19 is available, immunizations can and must be delivered by the health services alongside the response to COVID-19. And this is why:

First, we must vaccinate to protect health workers, the elderly and vulnerable populations from other respiratory infections, such as influenza and pneumococcus, which can lead to more hospitalizations and may be harder to diagnose in the context of COVID-19.

Second, if we fall behind on routine immunizations, particularly for children, we risk outbreaks, thus overwhelming hospitals and clinics with preventable diseases in addition to COVID-19. The impact on our health systems would take months or even years to reverse.

This region has shown great capacity to ensure that its peoples are vaccinated, and we must maintain this capacity now but also so to ensure the readiness to deliver the vaccine for COVID 19.

History has shown us that after wars or epidemics, if we allow large gaps in immunization coverage, vaccine-preventable diseases like polio and measles can re-emerge.

Let me remind you that measles was eliminated in our region in 2016. But as coverage rates dropped, we faced important measles outbreaks in Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia, and in a few states in the US.

As we speak, at least three countries are working to contain measles outbreaks in Latin America. Efforts to control measles must continue, safely, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, or we risk erasing more than 20 years of progress.

This is true for other diseases and a top priority for PAHO as many countries have been struggling to maintain high coverage of key vaccines, even before the pandemic.

Globally COVID-19 has already impacted immunization programs- interrupting vaccine supply routes, reducing the availability of health workers to deliver immunizations and hindering access to primary care services. This is a cause for alert. If we don't immunize now, many more people are going to get sick from preventable diseases in the coming months, and years.

PAHO has issued detailed guidance to countries to help plan and make decisions on which vaccines to prioritize during the COVID-19 pandemic, considering both potential risks and the burden of the pandemic on their health systems.

We recommend that governments prioritize those vaccines that are most urgent:

- This includes vaccines for diseases that have an imminent risk of expanding in that area, such as measles.
- And vaccines that help protect from other respiratory infections, such as Flu and Pneumococcus.

It's important that we find safe ways to deliver vaccines during the pandemic. Many countries are taking a creative approach to flu vaccination in preparation for winter in the Southern Hemisphere. For example, Brazil is reaching older adults in pharmacies and at home, Chile is offering drive-thru flu shots, Bolivia is sending out immunization brigades to nursing homes and jails to reach at-risk groups, and El Salvador has set up vaccination stations at banks.

Through determination and innovation, we will reach almost 100 million people with the flu vaccine this season.

This week, 45 countries and territories are intensifying vaccination efforts in the region. Our teams at PAHO, within each country and here at headquarters, are supporting every step of the process. We are training health workers and educating communities. We are working harder than ever to ensure that this pandemic doesn't disrupt vital immunization services.

The Americas has a legacy of working together to expand vaccine coverage and to eliminate diseases. We have eliminated smallpox, polio and four other diseases, and we throughout the Region have maintained close to 95% coverage of the basic vaccines throughout the region.

Our vaccination programs are the pride of our health systems. They allow us to give our children a healthy start to life, and to keep our societies safe from diseases that once sickened millions of people.

COVID-19 is putting our health systems to the test and going forward, the challenge is to ensure that our health systems deliver on our priority health programs even while responding to COVID19.

Thank you and we look forward to your questions.