

WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S OPENING REMARKS, MAY 5, 2020

Thank you and good day. Thank you for joining us for another media briefing

It has now been three months since the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in the Americas. Since then, the virus has spread to every country in our region, resulting in more than 1,4 million cases and some 80,000 deaths, as of May 4.

Three months is a long time, and there is growing debate about when countries can start to reopen, when can they ease social distancing and resume regular activities.

Today, I am going to talk about how PAHO sees the pandemic evolving in our region, the unique challenges facing different countries, and how governments can use these trends to evaluate whether to make changes in policy.

We have learned a lot about COVID-19, from the experiences of countries in our region and many other countries around the world. We must use what we've learned and the data we've gathered to make smart choices that will impact the next phases of the pandemic.

PAHO tracks and analyzes a range of COVID-19 data from countries. We track new cases, new deaths, the number of occupied hospital beds and ICUs, and many other indicators.

These data paint a picture of how the virus is impacting the region – what's working, where there are areas of concern, and where we need to focus greater attention.

One of the indicators we track closely is the speed at which new cases increase in a country. There are many areas of our region where the number of cases is doubling in just a few days. In the US, Canada, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Chile and Mexico we are seeing cases doubling in 4 days or less.

This is a concerning indicator that tells us that transmission is still very high in those countries, and they should implement the full range of public health measures that are available – extensive testing, contact tracing, isolating cases and, of course, social distancing.

PAHO is working closely with each country to identify trends that are specific to their unique context, as our region has a mosaic of diverse epidemiological scenarios.

In North America, where the first major outbreaks took place, all three countries USA, Canada and Mexico are experiencing community transmission. We are encouraged to see places like New York, registering a decrease in the number of overall hospitalizations. However, in New York and in other areas, hospitalizations and deaths of older adults, the most vulnerable population to COVID-19, has been extremely high. This is why it is important to keep in place special measures for protecting this vulnerable group, particularly in places that have not yet been fully impacted.

In Central America, only one country has reported community transmission, but, that is also the country that is doing more testing in the subregion. In all other countries in the region we are seeing clusters of cases. However, while there are signs that the overall incidence – the rate of new cases – is starting to show

the impact of control measures that were implemented by governments, it is imperative that testing is increased in some of the subregional countries to ensure a clearer picture of the situation.

That is the situation In South America, seven out of ten countries are experiencing community transmission. We see important variations in the transmission rates, and how they have been impacted by control measures implemented early on. Some of the countries in the region are battling outbreaks in big cities, such as Guayaquil, Manaus and Sao Paulo, and there is growing concern about more cases being reported in smaller towns where hospital capacity is limited.

In the Caribbean, there is community transmission only in the Dominican Republic, and over 1,000 cases have been reported in Cuba. Most countries in this subregion are still in the early stages of their outbreaks. We are following the numbers daily and keeping alert for any changes in the trends of new cases. It is important to highlight that small island states have implemented very strict public health measures including air travel restrictions, which is having a positive impact in slowing the spread within their borders.

However, we are especially worried about Haiti and I wish to sound the alarm of an impending humanitarian crisis. Although there have been 100 cases and 11 deaths reported, one third are of local transmission and the probability of further spread is extremely high.

The situation has been described as a perfect storm approaching.

There are already 17,000 Haitians who have returned from the Dominican Republic, where there is community transmission and this number is expected to reach 55,000 in two or three weeks.

It is extremely difficult to institute proper social distancing in Haiti and there is a lack of awareness by the community of the threat posed by COVID-19.

Most Haitians do not have access to potable water and sanitation, and many live in crowded households where quarantine and isolation are challenging. In addition, there is the real risk that growing food insecurity will result in famine.

Civil unrest, a difficult political situation and precarious security may further complicate the situation.

The health system in Haiti has limited capacity. There are few beds for treating COVID 19, insufficient numbers of health care professionals and insufficient personal protective equipment. The security of the COVID 19 designated hospitals and the safety of community health workers is also of grave concern.

There is real danger of a largescale outbreak followed by a humanitarian crisis in Haiti.

PAHO is working urgently with Haitian health authorities and other partners to strengthen the preparation, including organization of health services, laboratory tests and personal protective equipment, and to train health workers to care for COVID-19 patients. But I do believe that a much broader coalition to address a potential health crisis in this country is needed. And now I want to make a call for action.

Each country in our region is unique and so are some of the challenges they face when battling COVID-19. But we now know what works to prevent transmission and we learn more every day. To all of our countries in the Americas, I urge you to consider the following approach:

First. Be cautious. Easing restrictions too soon could accelerate the spread of the virus and open the door for a dramatic upsurge or for spread to adjacent areas.

Two: Base policy decisions on data. Analyze the rate of new cases and deaths, evaluate hospital bed capacity, and determine what it tells you about the spread of the virus.

Think locally. We need national unity and regional solidarity, but we must fight COVID-19 at the local level. Not all communities are affected in the same way, health system capacity is also very diverse. Based on evidence and WHO and PAHO's guidance, each country must adjust its approach to what is happening at the district, city or State level.

The numbers we see for the region tell us that now is a time for intense vigilance We must all continue to act aggressively to contain the spread.

The social and economic pressure that we are seeing now will be even greater if we fail to contain the virus, if we remove control measures pre-maturely and overwhelm our health systems capacity.

Thanks.