
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—9 DECEMBER 2020

9 DECEMBER 2020

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

Since the start of the pandemic, the region of the Americas has seen over 28.5 million cases and 753,000 deaths due to COVID-19.

And while we've been living with this virus for months, over the past few weeks, our region has been experiencing the highest levels of new COVID-19 cases since the start of the pandemic.

In North America, Canada and the U.S. are reporting jumps in weekly case counts. In Canada, infections continue to climb, and record deaths have been reported in some provinces. Meanwhile, in the U.S., daily case counts are reaching 200,000 and more than 100,000 people are currently hospitalized due to COVID illness. Mexico is also experiencing a resurgence in cases in the state of Baja California, near the U.S. border.

North America's continued rise in infections is particularly worrisome as winter approaches in the Northern Hemisphere. Seeking refuge from the cold, people may be tempted to gather indoors in poorly ventilated areas – the perfect conditions for the virus to spread.

In Central America, Panama continues to report a high incidence of COVID-19 cases, and Honduras and Guatemala are experiencing a particular increase in cases in the areas most affected by Hurricanes Iota and Eta – approximately 7 million people live in these impacted areas.

Many countries in the Caribbean are also witnessing slight but steady increases in cases, such as in Dutch territories of Curaçao, Aruba and Saint Maarten, and the British territories of Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, and Turks and Caicos.

While the region continues to see a mosaic of different patterns, the situation in some countries of South America is also concerning.

Brazil is currently reporting its highest incidence of new cases in South America. With cases and deaths mounting, Brazil's health system is under strain and hospitals are at capacity in some areas. We're also seeing rises in cases and deaths in areas of Colombia bordering Venezuela and Ecuador. Further south, Paraguay is experiencing a surge in infections, and health authorities are monitoring the situation closely to ensure enough bed capacity to manage critical patients.

These figures and trends make it clear that our region must redouble preventive measures, especially in preparation for the year-end holidays. Now is not the time to relax.

So, it's more important for health authorities in our region to act by issuing clear guidance and helping communities protect themselves and their loved ones. We're once again in need of coordinated efforts to boost hospital capacity in the most affected areas because when hospitals can't accommodate everyone who's sick, many will die waiting for care.

We're hopeful that the COVID-19 vaccines which will soon come to market will help contain the pandemic, but this will take time and advance planning.

So, we'd like to share an update on our region's preparations for a successful vaccine rollout.

Let me start by saying that while a number of vaccine candidates are under consideration, no vaccine has been approved for distribution across our region yet.

This week, PAHO is convening Member States in an Extraordinary Session of our Directing Council, where we'll meet with the ministries of health of our region to discuss the preparation for vaccine roll out and purchasing and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines in the region through our Revolving Fund through the COVAX Facility.

Despite the financial hardship that our region has incurred during the pandemic, countries in the Americas have done their part in securing more than \$1 billion in down-payments and financial guarantees to engage with COVAX. PAHO has helped several countries in our region navigate and meet the requirements of the COVAX Facility, and we're focused on making sure every country's investment counts.

The Americas represents a fifth of all COVAX-participating countries and an estimated third of all vaccines that will be procured for self-financing countries via COVAX.

But funding is just one area in which we're supporting our Member States. We're also working hard to ensure that once vaccines are approved and available, countries are prepared to roll them out.

The WHO has developed a readiness assessment tool that PAHO has adapted for our region to ensure our Member States have the guidance they need on everything from engaging the staff, regulatory aspects, communication, resources and trainings needed to prepare their health systems for vaccination campaigns, to ensuring their logistics systems, cold chains and supply chains can respond quickly.

At first, we won't have enough doses to protect everyone, so the objective is to save lives using the first deployment to reach those most vulnerable to develop severe forms of COVID-19.

That's why PAHO has also been supporting Member States in developing their national immunization plans.

Each country must identify priority groups and adapt communications campaigns and materials to meet their needs, including by working alongside community leaders to empower communities to seek vaccination. Health care workers will likely be among the first to benefit from a vaccine and will also play a key role in raising awareness about the importance of immunization.

To help us keep track of and accountable to progress across all of these areas, PAHO has developed a dashboard – which is live and available for anyone to view – it shows the number of countries that have completed, are working on or haven't yet started preparations.

The impetus behind our work on vaccine access and the motivation behind the COVAX Facility is to ensure equal access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines. The principles of solidarity, equity and leaving no one behind have guided PAHO's response to this pandemic from the start.

That's why PAHO has sent more than 20 million COVID-19 PCR tests to give countries better visibility into how the virus is spreading, and to help identify those who are infected, so they receive the care they need. Many donors have supported us in this effort, and we want to thank them.

That's why PAHO has donated nearly 36 million masks, 3 million gloves and more than 1.5 million gowns to protect health workers across our region.

And that's why we have led over 200 virtual and in-person trainings to ensure that ministries of health and practitioners alike understand the latest science and have the skills they need to combat this virus.

The principles of timely access, affordability and regional solidarity are grounding not just our COVID-19 response, or the planning for equitable access to a vaccine – they've guided our work for over 120 years, and they're enshrined in our region's commitment to health for all.

This Saturday marks the observance of Universal Health Coverage Day – an annual event that takes renewed importance during this year of pandemic.

This day serves as a reminder that universal health is not just about ensuring everyone is covered, but that everyone has access to care when they need it, wherever they are.

Health is multi-dimensional, so fulfilling this vision will require an all-of-society effort to combat factors that prevent our people from getting the care they need, such as poverty, social injustice and educational gaps.

But as we've seen so clearly with COVID-19, ensuring that people are safe and healthy is foundational to the health of our economies and the health of our nations.