
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—26 MAY 2021

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

Last week there were over 1.2 million new COVID cases and 31,000 deaths reported in the Americas.

These figures have remained unchanged over the last weeks, underscoring a worrying trend: cases and deaths are plateauing at an alarmingly high level.

In fact, last week, four out of five of the countries reporting the highest number of new infections were here in our region, and Latin American countries represented the top five highest mortality rates worldwide.

In the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago has declared a national emergency following the recent COVID outbreak. In the meantime, Cuba continues to report significant new infections, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines are still seeing spikes after recent volcanic eruptions resulted in people being moved to shelters. We are also concerned about increasing trends in hospitalizations in Haiti.

Central American countries are also reporting spikes including Costa Rica, Panama, Belize, and in Honduras, where ICU beds are over 80% capacity.

In South America, Chile, Peru, and Paraguay have registered declines in new infections. However, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil are once again seeing COVID infections on the rise, putting several weeks of progress at risk. Bolivia is reporting a drastic increase in cases and deaths and Guyana is experiencing the highest numbers of cases and deaths since the beginning of the pandemic.

Despite persistently high infections, many people and places are no longer adhering to the public health measures which we know are effective against COVID. And new figures suggest that we may not yet know the full impact of this pandemic.

Last week, the WHO announced that COVID deaths are being significantly undercounted.

According to new projections, many more people are dying from COVID complications or from the pandemic's indirect impacts, like disruptions to essential services, that have put their health at risk.

Although more than 3.4 million deaths have been reported since the pandemic started, almost half of these in the Americas, the real numbers may be higher. For 2020, deaths stood at 1.8 million, but COVID's true global 2020 death toll is now estimated at closer to three million people – nearly double the figures reported last year. Worryingly, half of these deaths have occurred here, in the Americas, demonstrating the outsized impact this pandemic has had in our region.

Today I wish to spotlight the devastating health, social and economic impact that this virus has had on women.

As in the rest of the world, women make up 70% of the health workforce across Latin America and the Caribbean, and they are bearing much of the burden of our COVID response.

Despite all they're doing on the front lines, it's women who are feeling the economic impact of this virus the hardest.

In our Region, women are more likely than men to live in poverty, to take on unpaid work, and to have lost their job during the pandemic's first months.

Right now, many Latin American women are facing the impossible choice between earning a paycheck and protecting their health. And for too many, health care remains out of reach.

Unfortunately, as health systems have prioritized care for COVID patients, hospitals and clinics have struggled to provide essential health services that women depend on for their health and wellbeing.

According to UN estimates, up to 20 million women in the Americas will have their birth control disrupted during the pandemic – either because services are unavailable or because women will no longer have the means to pay for contraception.

But it's not just contraceptive services which are being impacted. Pregnancy and newborn care have been disrupted in nearly half of the countries in the Americas, leaving expectant and new mothers at risk.

If this continues, the pandemic is expected to obliterate more than 20 years of progress in expanding women's access to family planning and tackling maternal deaths in the region.

Nearly all maternal deaths are preventable and even getting back to pre-pandemic levels of maternal mortality, which were already high, could take more than a decade.

We should take a minute to talk about what this means for pregnant women, some of whom may be going through their entire pregnancies without being seen by a doctor at a time when care couldn't be more critical.

Like all of us, pregnant women are exposed to COVID-19 infections, but because their immune systems change throughout their pregnancies, pregnant women are more vulnerable to respiratory infections, like COVID-19. Once they get sick, they also tend to develop more serious symptoms that require intubation, and which can often put the baby and mother at risk.

Data from 24 countries indicates that more than 200,000 pregnant women have fallen sick with COVID in the Americas – and at least a thousand have died from COVID complications.

The risk of death also depends on where you look.

While pregnant women have less than a 1% chance of dying from COVID in Argentina, Costa Rica and Colombia, the risk of death in Honduras jumps to 5%, and the risk remains highest in Brazil, at 7%.

So, as we commemorate this week's International Day of Action on Women's Health, we urge countries to do just that – to act.

The evidence is clear that pregnant women are at a higher risk for severe disease and hospitalization due to infection with SARS-CoV 2.

So we can start by ensuring that women and girls can access the health services that they need – like sexual and reproductive health services, and pregnancy and newborn-related care – during the COVID response.

We must remember that the challenges and inequities that we faced prior to COVID 19 haven't gone away during the pandemic – in fact, they've only worsened and can't be overlooked. That's why we must make protecting the lives of women a collective priority.