
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—9 JUNE 2021

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Let me wish all of you a pleasant good morning and thank you again for joining today's press briefing.

Last week there were almost 1.2 million new COVID-19 cases and over 34,000 new deaths reported in the Americas, and four of the five countries with the highest death counts in the world were right here in our region.

While COVID-19 infections are slowing across North America, localized jumps in COVID-related deaths are being reported in some states in the U.S. and Mexico, and in some provinces in Canada.

In the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago reported the largest spike in COVID-19 infections and deaths over the past month, while hospitalizations in Haiti continue to stretch the country's oxygen supplies.

While infections are finally coming down in Costa Rica after weeks of accelerating cases, other Central American countries like Panama and Guatemala are still reporting a rise in new infections.

In South America, Ecuador, Brazil, and Peru are seeing a reduction in cases, but most of the continent is reporting a surge in new infections – including Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile. Bolivia and Colombia are witnessing a rise in both cases and deaths over the past two weeks and ICU beds are almost at capacity in many Colombian cities.

The trends that we're seeing are clear: across our region this year has been worse than last year.

In many places, infections are higher now than at any point during this pandemic.

The emergence of new variants has added new complexities to our epidemiological surveillance.

And despite the doubling—or even the tripling—of hospital beds across the region, ICU beds are full, oxygen is running low, and health workers are overwhelmed.

And while it's true that vaccines will eventually help us curb the spread of this virus, progress has been uneven.

In fact, today we're seeing the emergence of two worlds: one quickly returning to normal, and another where recovery remains a distant future.

And the differences are stark.

Only one country—The United States—has fully vaccinated more than 40 percent of its population.

Even countries that have had vaccination campaigns for months, like Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, have still only managed to protect around 3% of their populations.

The situation is particularly acute in Central America and the Caribbean.

Just 2 million people have been fully vaccinated in Central America and less than 3 million in the Caribbean. Some countries like Guatemala, Trinidad and Tobago, and Honduras have yet to administer enough doses to protect just 1% of their populations.

The inequities in vaccination coverage are undeniable.

Unfortunately, vaccine supply is concentrated in a few nations while most of the world waits for doses to trickle out.

Although COVID-19 vaccines are new, this story isn't—inequality has too often dictated who has the right to health.

We can't let this happen again. And we know how.

First, we urgently need to ramp up access to vaccines in the Americas

While we need more doses everywhere the countries at greatest risk, where vaccines have been slowest to arrive and even where vulnerable populations have yet to be protected, these countries urgently need more vaccines.

We're thankful for the US government's decision to donate an initial 6 million doses to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Spain has also generously donated 5 million doses to Latin America and the Caribbean. And we're so grateful to Canada, which has committed \$50 million Canadian dollars to expand access to COVID-19 vaccines in the region.

We hope other countries – particularly those with excess doses – and global financial institutions will follow in their footsteps to provide the support that we need to protect the 70% of our population that will not be covered under COVAX.

Second, we need to do everything that we can to drive down transmission.

Despite the precarious situation we're seeing throughout the Americas, public health measures are being relaxed as if numbers were going down – and they are not.

Public health measures have never been so important: hospitals are at their limit with almost no room to expand care in many countries

To stop this virus, we also need strong surveillance systems backed by regular testing and contract tracing. This will remain critical to controlling this virus even as vaccines coverage expands and cases drop.

And, finally, it's worth mentioning that we must let science lead the way.

This virus has been extensively researched, treatments and vaccines have undergone rigorous testing, and global institutions like the WHO and PAHO are continuing to update guidance based on the latest available evidence.

We urge countries to use this guidance and focus on what works.

Unproven treatments must be studied in the realm of clinical trials, not promoted for political gain while patients are made more vulnerable by embracing strategies that don't work.

As we look to the months ahead, we must remember that the decisions we take will affect our collective ability to control this virus.

If current trends continue, the health, social and economic disparities in our region will grow even larger, and it will be years before we control this virus in the Americas.

But by working together, we can limit the spread of COVID-19, we can move closer to a more equal world, and fulfill our promise of health for all.