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## WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—25 AUGUST 2021

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

Over the last week, the Americas reported over 1.5 million new cases and nearly 20,000 COVID-related deaths.

Three countries – the United States, Mexico, and Brazil – had the highest number of cases, although COVID-19 cases continue to be reported across our region.

Many Central American countries, including Belize, Guatemala and Honduras are experiencing a rise in COVID-19 infections.

And while hospitalizations are continuing to decrease across much of South America, infections remain high, so we urge countries to continue to stay on top of new outbreaks.

Jamaica, Puerto Rico and smaller Caribbean islands like Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Dominica have reported steep increases in new infections and deaths.

In Haiti, the Ministry of Health is coordinating with humanitarian partners and has asked for additional surgical and trauma care support for the victims of its recent earthquake. PAHO continues to distribute much-needed medical supplies and is working closely with the Ministry of Health and emergency teams on the ground.

Even as our region continues to lead global infections, with seven of the top 20 countries and territories with the highest mortality rates in the world found in Latin America, just over 23% of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have completed their COVID-19 vaccinations.

In many countries, coverage is much lower.

Just over 3% of people have been fully vaccinated in Guatemala and a little over 4% in Jamaica, while vaccination campaigns have been further delayed in Haiti following recent natural disasters.

Today, vaccine inequity remains the Achilles' heel of our response.

Delays in production have meant that many countries are still awaiting the doses that they purchased months ago.

Some are left no choice but to rely on donations to immunize their populations.

And while PAHO and COVAX are working to deliver nearly 12 million COVID vaccine donations from the U.S., Spain, Norway, France and Sweden, these vaccines will not be enough to protect the hundreds of millions of people who remain vulnerable in our region.

Limited vaccine supplies continue to set us back.

A handful of companies produce all the world's supply of COVID-19 vaccines. Many of them are letting price and country of origin, not need, to determine how doses are rolled out. So much of today's vaccine supply remains in the hands of wealthy nations around the world.

This limited production and unequal distribution of vaccines in the face of staggering demand hinder our COVID response and they put public health in our countries at very high risk.

Latin America and the Caribbean are especially vulnerable since we depend almost entirely on other places to produce the raw pharmaceutical materials, medicines and health technologies that our populations need to stay healthy.

Our region imports 10 times more pharmaceuticals than we produce.

Just as manufacturers adapted quickly to produce some of the PPE and ventilators that our region needed earlier in the pandemic, we must bring the same spirit of collaboration into vaccine production in the region.

The good news is that we are not starting from scratch.

Today, four countries in our region are already involved in manufacturing COVID-19 vaccines and Brazil and Cuba are producers of WHO prequalified vaccines for yellow fever and meningitis B, respectively.

We must build on this legacy to protect our people from the threat of COVID, and from future health risks.

PAHO is already spearheading initiatives to help reduce our dependency on pharmaceutical imports.

Together with the WHO, we are working to bring mRNA vaccine technology into our region. mRNA vaccines are some of the most effective vaccines against COVID-19. And the technology is highly adaptable, so it has enormous potential to be used against other viruses.

So far, over 30 public and private companies and institutions in the Americas have expressed their desire to participate in the WHO's mRNA technology transfer program, and we are in the process of identifying the most promising proposals, establishing a cooperative process that can take advantage of existing capacities in different countries, and ensuring that this production can benefit all the Latin American and Caribbean countries through the PAHO Revolving Fund.

But building our region's production capacity will take time. And our success rests on three things: coordination, collaboration and investments.

For this to work, countries must coordinate across sectors to strengthen their capacity to produce new technologies.

Participating countries will need new policies to make this a priority – both so they have the technical competencies — like bioengineering, that is needed to scale these products—and a robust regulatory infrastructure or framework that ensures quality, efficacy, and safety.

So this week, PAHO will launch a platform to boost regional vaccine manufacturing efforts, beginning with the first in a series of meetings to promote greater coordination across countries and to enlist partners from both the public and private sectors to turn this idea into reality.

Because we will need to collaborate to build on each other's strengths, and that's why it's so important to bring them together.

There are many ingredients and steps to making vaccines, so we must map and optimize the supply chains to efficiently manage these steps across our region.

Just as countries work through PAHO's Revolving Fund to pool demand for vaccines, they should leverage economies of scale to distribute pharmaceutical production capacity across the Americas. For regional production to be sustainable, production cannot be concentrated in one place.

Finally, expanding pharmaceutical production will require considerable investments.

The Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank and other partners have already expressed their desire to help our region to expand its pharmaceutical production. But countries must also prioritize investments and work together to maximize available funds.

I believe that the ongoing COVID-19 vaccination crisis must be a wake-up call that we must expand regional pharmaceutical production so we can be in the driver's seat of our own pandemic responses. The Region's values of Pan Americanism and solidarity can help us strengthen pharmaceutical production.

The investments that we make today will not only help us get through this pandemic faster, but they will also lay the groundwork to deal with future health crises, so, really, we have no time to waste.