
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—02 JUNE 2020

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Let me welcome you and thank you for joining us.

It has now been 10 weeks since our first weekly briefing on COVID-19 in the Americas.

At that time, there were 163,000 cases reported in our region. Today, we are nearing 3 million.

The epidemiological curve is still rising sharply in many areas. This means that more people will be sick tomorrow than yesterday. Economies will remain strained and societies will struggle with the new way of life that has been thrust upon them.

Just in the past week, there were 732,000 new cases globally, and of these, more than 250,000 new cases were in Latin American countries, a serious concern that should serve as a clarion call to redouble our efforts. The entire region of the Americas accounted for more than half of the new cases reported globally.

Yes, the situation we face is dire, but not hopeless—as long as our approach to defeating the virus is based on solidarity. We must work together, share resources, and apply the proven strategies that we have learned along the way. This is our way out.

PAHO has been working with partners and governments across the region since January to prepare for COVID-19. The impact on our region has been severe, but it could have been worse.

Health authorities at every level—local, state, and national—have implemented public health measures that flattened the curve in their communities.

But the Americas are vast, diverse, and home to deep-rooted challenges that make stopping a virus complicated. We are facing three simultaneous emergencies, health, economic and social, and we must address them in combination to stop COVID-19.

And you may ask why? Because we are a region of massive inequalities. There are far more people who cannot access appropriate, quality health care than those who can. We are a region of megacities where many people live in close quarters and share public spaces and transportation, and where poor or vulnerable groups often lack the means to stay at home and protect themselves.

We are a region full of groups at greater risk of contracting and falling sick from the virus—Indigenous populations, migrants, people with underlying health conditions like non-communicable diseases.

And we are a region of underfunded, weak public health systems grappling with far more than COVID-19. We are simultaneously dealing with malaria, measles, dengue fever, and many other diseases.

This means we must be especially determined and adaptable to the unique circumstances of our very diverse region. And we must remember that not all countries, cities and communities are affected in the same way.

We have learned a lot about COVID-19 since January, and I want to focus today on the lessons that I believe are most important for our region going forward, as we organize to control COVID-19.

First: Think twice before lifting social distancing measures.

Social distancing remains our best strategy for containing the spread of the virus. However, many places that have endured a couple of months of stay-at-home orders are now planning to open up.

We must be careful. My advice is that do not open too fast, or you risk a resurgence of COVID-19 that could erase the advantage gained over the past few months. Consider a geographic approach to lockdown and opening up based on the transmission in specific locales as appropriate.

Also, our recommendation has always been: test, trace, treat, isolate. Social distancing slows transmission so that health services can test suspected cases, trace contacts, and treat and isolate patients.

It is a combination that works as long as you adapt it to each setting, and it is a core strategy of many countries that successfully controlled transmission.

Second: Do not make decisions in the dark.

Surveillance is the most valuable tool to guide our public health actions. Even though testing capacity is not perfect, virtually all places in the region have sufficient data to track and monitor where the virus is spreading. This must drive our decision-making. It will also help us better target much needed social support measures.

Use data to tailor your response, protect vulnerable communities, and focus your efforts where new infections are on the rise. Preventive efforts are more effective when informed by surveillance.

We still have an urgent need to expand testing. PAHO has been working with all countries on this issue from the start of the pandemic, and we will continue to focus on it, to ensure capacity and supplies match the challenge.

Finally, a point dear to my heart: Strengthen your health systems.

The past few months should have enabled countries to strengthen their health infrastructure for the wave that we knew was coming—especially improving hospital capacity.

As cases rise, we must keep this up. Many places are overwhelmed, operating on the edge of their abilities, but we have consistently seen health systems rise to the occasion. PAHO has provided adaptable guidance, support and has worked hand-in-hand with countries to prepare their health systems for a surge in infections. Engage private hospitals, and social security facilities, draw on the capacities of all sectors in a united resolve to respond to this pandemic.

We have also provided guidance and supplies to help protect your health workforce. Let me remind you that your response to the pandemic depends on your health workforce being safe and healthy, and we are doing better with PPEs, but we need to keep supplies flowing as cases arise.

Stigma towards health care workers must not be tolerated. They risk their lives to save ours, and they need our support now more than ever.

PAHO is working in every single country and territory of the Americas to fight the pandemic.

Our engine is solidarity. We know countries are stronger in their response if they can learn from one another, pool resources and expertise, and draw on the latest data and PAHO's support.

Our region may face unique challenges in stopping COVID-19, but we are also uniquely positioned to overcome them. We have a tradition of Pan-Americanism—which has been our guiding light since PAHO's founding in 1902—that has helped us overcome countless outbreaks.

Above all, we are a region that understands the power of working together, and the value of ensuring that all members of our societies have access to the health care that they need to stay safe.

That is why I am confident that we will make it through this—together.