

Health Ministers commit to maintain, expand sustained actions to fight COVID-19 pandemic

The Americas will most likely experience recurring epidemic waves and outbreaks of COVID-19, interspersed with periods of low-level transmission over the next 24 months, pending a safe vaccine

Washington, D.C., 30 September 2020 (PAHO/WHO) – Health ministers from countries in the Americas yesterday committed to maintain and expand sustained actions to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, and asked the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) to continue supporting them in their fight to control it.

PAHO “assumes that the Region will experience recurring epidemic waves and outbreaks interspersed with periods of low-level transmission over the next 24 months, pending development of a safe, efficacious, and equitably accessible COVID-19 vaccine and achievement of appropriate population coverage,” said a report presented to the 58th Directing Council.

In a resolution passed during a virtual session, the countries requested that PAHO Director Carissa F. Etienne “continue providing evidence-based technical cooperation to Member States, promote innovation and sharing of experiences, to resume and maintain uninterrupted operations and interventions of the health system in all relevant aspects necessary for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The ministers specifically highlighted PAHO’s Revolving Fund for Access to Vaccines, and its Regional Revolving Fund for Strategic Public Health Supplies for “improving equitable access to, and appropriate use of, affordable, safe, efficacious and quality vaccines, therapeutics, diagnostics, biomedical equipment, and personal protective equipment that can improve health outcomes and reduce the impact of the pandemic.”

They also asked PAHO to maintain the regional network for the surveillance of influenza and other respiratory viruses, to expand these through the creation of a Regional Genomic Surveillance Network, and to support countries in engaging with global initiatives, such as the Access to COVID-19 Tools

Accelerator, for vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics, as well as other initiatives for the development and access to essential health technologies for COVID-19.

In addition, the countries urged that all comply with the provisions of the International Health Regulations (IHR), in particular those related to the timely submission of information.

During the virtual session, PAHO provided an update on the COVID-19 pandemic and the organization's response and presented a report with suggestions "on how to strengthen and support responsive and adaptive health systems in the face of risks from this pandemic so that the health and well-being of societies, as well as social and economic development in the Region, can be sustained."

Dr. Jarbas Barbosa, PAHO's Assistant Director, highlighted the impact that the pandemic has had on essential health services, including immunization, with a 24 percent reduction in the number of MMR vaccinations applied. Negative impacts on mental health were also reported by many countries, along with disruptions to services for noncommunicable diseases, although countries have increased telemedicine services to help overcome these disruptions, he said.

Countries must learn from the pandemic by ensuring access to health services, strengthening information systems and advancing the digital transformation in health, to improve social protection systems, and to reduce dependence on imported products, which caused shortages of medical supplies, Barbosa added.

Dr. Ciro Ugarte, who heads PAHO's Health Emergencies program, said transmission of COVID-19 in the Region of the Americas continues to be very active but there have been improvements in response, including a 99% increase in Intensive Care beds in eight key countries. The deployment of 15 Emergency Medical Teams and creation of 184 alternative medical sites also helped reduce burdens on health systems, Ugarte said.

Key challenges ahead include improving surveillance, rapid response, and expanding capacity for case investigations, along with limited numbers of tests available for national laboratories and limited supplies of personal protective equipment. Dr. Ugarte also underscored the need to have enough staff to

maintain essential health services while ensuring safe and decent working conditions, with good infection prevention and control.

Overall, measures like lockdowns and restrictions have worked to flatten the epidemic curve and delay its peak, but “people are getting a false sense of security and we are in danger of losing the advantages we have gained,” Ugarte said, Adjusting restrictive measures is a challenge for countries, requiring leadership and collaboration along with good epidemic intelligence, he said. Ugarte also emphasized that reopening ports to tourism and commerce will be challenging and the health sector has limited input in these decisions, which can affect the course of the pandemic.

An update provided separately by PAHO on the COVID-19 pandemic noted that there were now more than 16.4 million cases reported in the Americas, with more than 550,000 deaths.

The Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) brings together ministers of health and high-level delegates from PAHO/WHO member countries to discuss and analyze regional health policies, and to set priorities for technical cooperation and cross-country collaboration.

LINKS

[Document on COVID-19 pandemic Documents 58th Directing Council 58th Directing Council 58th Directing Council Livestream](#)

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