



PAHO

PRESS RELEASE

PAHO Director warns of COVID-19 surge in the Americas

As COVAX delivers 2.2 million doses of vaccine and cases rise, particularly in South America, Director describes spread as ‘an active public health emergency.’

Washington, D.C. March 23, 2021 (PAHO) -- Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Carissa F. Etienne applauded the arrival of over 2.2 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines procured through COVAX but warned that the virus is surging dangerously in many countries in the region.

COVAX, the global alliance to ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines, has helped deliver over 2.2 million doses to the region so far, including more than 1 million doses that arrived in hard-hit Brazil on Sunday. More doses are expected to arrive this week in Suriname and Belize, and an additional 1.2 million doses have been procured through COVAX.

But “the COVID-19 virus is not receding, nor is the pandemic starting to go away,” Dr. Etienne warned in her weekly media briefing. “Vaccines are coming but they are still several months away for most people in our region,” she said, urging people to continue to respect public health measures – masks, hand washing, and social distancing – especially during upcoming holidays. “People cannot let down their guard by engaging in close contact with others.”

“Although scale-up has begun, we know it’s not enough,” she continued. “We do not yet have the vaccines we need to protect everyone. It’s what happens when the whole world must rely on too few manufacturers. We must also find ways to share vaccines more equitably among countries.”

As the recognized procurement agent for COVAX in Latin America and the Caribbean, PAHO’s Revolving Fund negotiates, purchases, and handles shipment logistics on behalf of the 36 countries participating in COVAX.

In the past week, over 1.2 million people were infected with COVID-19 in the Americas, more than during the previous week, while 31,272 people died of the virus, Dr. Etienne reported.

The pandemic is particularly dire in South America, where infection is reported to be spiking in Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay. "In Paraguay, many ICU beds are occupied, and the health system is buckling under the pressure," Dr. Etienne said.

"The virus continues to surge dangerously across Brazil," she continued. "Cases and deaths are increasing, and ICU bed occupancy is very high in many states." In neighboring Venezuela, infection is on the rise, particularly in the border states of Bolivar and Amazonas. Bolivia has reported an increase in cases in the Pando department, while "ICU bed occupancy remains very high in Loreto, Peru."

The pandemic is accelerating elsewhere in the Americas, including Guatemala, where increasing cases and hospitalizations are "straining hospital bed capacity due to the influx of patients," Dr. Etienne said.

In the Caribbean, cases are increasing in Cuba, Aruba, Curacao, and Antigua and Barbuda, she said. In Jamaica, cases have risen steadily for several weeks. In Canada, Ontario state has reported increased cases in the last two weeks while the U.S. states of Minnesota and West Virginia have reported rising deaths.

"What I've just described is an active public health emergency," Dr. Etienne said. "As the virus surges and hospitalizations rise," she continued, "we urgently need to scale up vaccination among our most vulnerable populations."

Over 155.8 million doses of the vaccine, including the COVAX deliveries, have been rolled out in the Americas, and in the Caribbean and Latin America, immunization campaigns are underway in 33 of the 35 countries that are members of PAHO. PAHO is assisting the two countries, Haiti, and Cuba, that have yet to start immunization.

"The doses that were delivered are helping us start to protect health workers and other vulnerable communities, and we expect more doses to arrive every week," Dr. Etienne said, reporting that acceptance of vaccines has been high. "These WHO-approved vaccines are safe, and they work," she said. "When it is your turn, don't hesitate. Get vaccinated."

Pointing out the Americas' long history of successful immunization against polio, measles, flu, and yellow fever, she said, "once our supply increases, there is not another region in the world better prepared to deliver vaccines swiftly and safely." "Our health workers have special expertise driving large-scale vaccination campaigns that cover diverse geographies."

“PAHO has been providing training and technical support to countries so they have stronger capacity to track adverse events, which will be critical as new vaccines are developed and introduced into the region,” Dr. Etienne highlighted. “This is a remarkable achievement, and a credit to countries for making vaccination a priority and to health workers for their commitment to keeping our region safe.”

She also reminded countries of the upcoming March 24 World Tuberculosis Day, a global event to raise awareness about the devastating impact of TB and embrace the WHO goal of eliminating the disease by 2050.

“We need to uphold our commitments to reduce the burden of TB in our region and around the world,” she said. “If there is one thing I hope we take from this pandemic, it’s an appreciation for the power of health – and how good health is central to the well-being of societies... Equal access to good health. That should be our focus. That is how we end TB. That’s how we beat COVID-19.”

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