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Washington, February 4 (RHC)-- While coronavirus infections are finally decreasing in the United States and Canada after weeks of unrelenting rise, cases and deaths continue to increase in Latin American countries, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) said on Wednesday.

"Last week, over 1.8 million people in the Americas became sick with COVID-19 and more than 47,000 died as a result," PAHO Director Carissa Etienne said in a briefing. She noted that in Mexico, cases are still rising, particularly in states that drew tourism in the holiday season, such as Guerrero, Quintana Roo, Nayarit and Baja California del Sur.

Across the Caribbean, most nations are seeing a reprieve in COVID-19 infections, but larger islands like the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Puerto Rico and Cuba continue to see rising numbers of new infections, the organization said.

In South America, Colombia reported the highest incidence of cases relative to its population over the past week, followed by Brazil, where the city of Manaus has been grappling with a surge in cases and deaths, driven up by a new Amazon variant of the virus.

"Nearly every country in South America has reported a rise in COVID-19 infections over the last week," Etienne said and "Colombia continues to report the highest incidence in cases, followed by Brazil, which is still seeing exponential increases in both cases and deaths in the city of Manaus."

COVID-19 vaccines delivered by COVAX, a coalition led by the WHO and the Gavi vaccine alliance to ensure equitable access to the shots, will begin to arrive in the region in the second half of February, Etienne said.

Sylvain Aldighieri, deputy director of PAHO's Health Emergencies Department said remote areas of the region have continued to struggle for access to oxygen, a critical medical therapy needed to treat critically ill patients.

"PAHO has donated some 600 canisters of oxygen to more than 20 countries in the region and in some situations, PAHO has supported the development for local production of oxygen in remote regions, areas that are difficult to get to, areas with Indigenous populations," Aldighieri said.

Officials also said the new Brazil variant, as well as two others first identified in the United Kingdom and South Africa, have spread to 20 countries in the Americas, though their frequency is still limited.

Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and El Salvador will receive a first lot of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, said PAHO Assistant Director Jarbas Barbosa, while 35.3 million doses of AstraZeneca's shot will start arriving as soon as the WHO grants it emergency use approval.

The aim is to provide for 20 percent of the population in the countries participating in COVAX to protect those most at risk. But Etienne warned that "vaccine doses are limited and will remain in short supply everywhere at first."

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