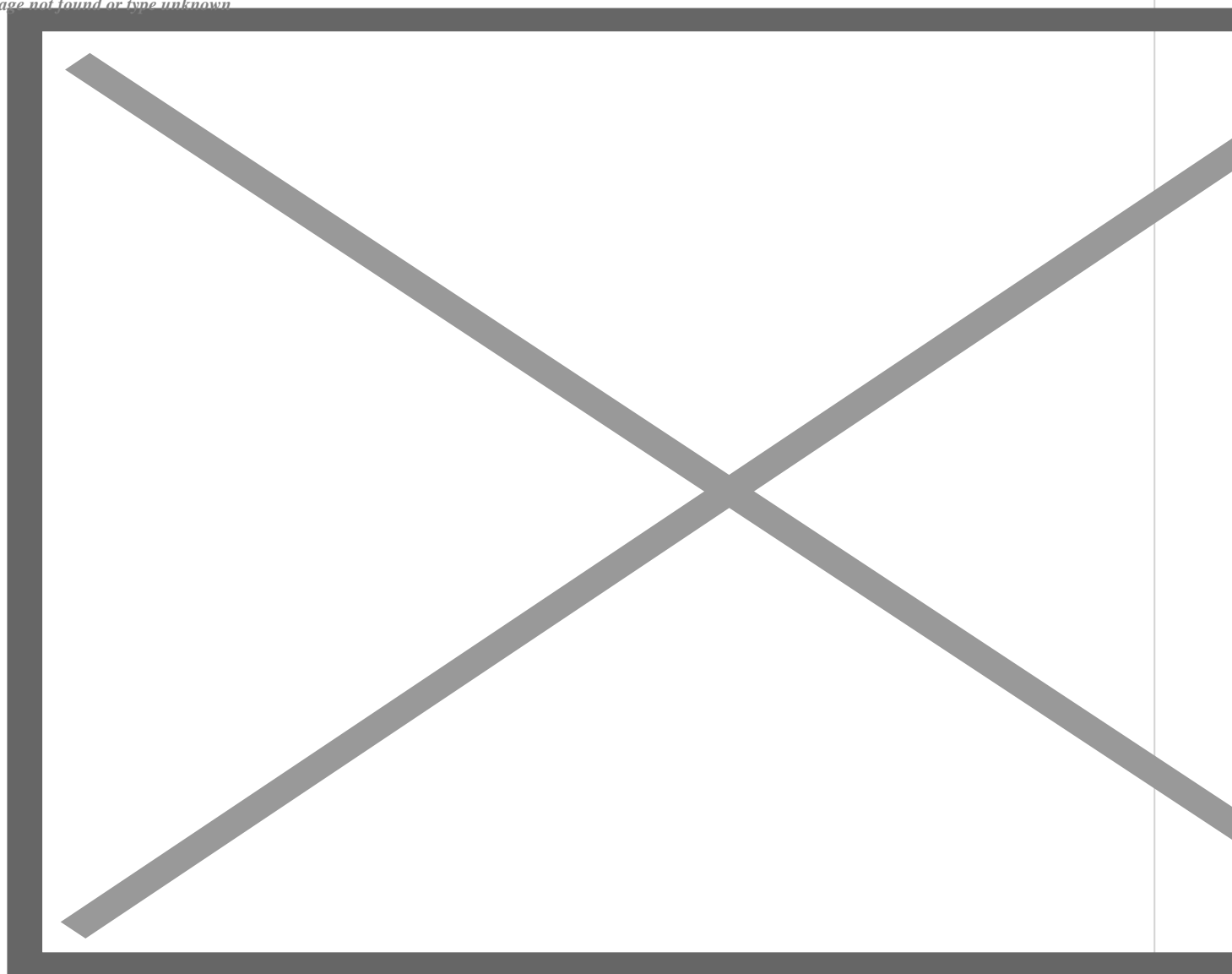


PAHO works to increase vaccine access in the Americas

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A woman receives a dose of the Abdala vaccine at a vaccination center in Havana, Cuba, August 2, 2021 [File: Alexandre Meneghini/Reuters]

Washington, August 12 (RHC)-- The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is preparing to increase COVID-19 vaccine availability for member countries as the highly contagious Delta variant spreads through the region.

PAHO's "Revolving Fund" is receiving requests from regional countries for vaccines for the last three months of 2021 and 2022, said PAHO Director Carissa Etienne on Wednesday. More than 20 countries have formally expressed interest.

"This new initiative will make available tens of millions of COVID-19 vaccine doses beyond the 20 percent that COVAX offers, and it will complement bilateral deals and other existing avenues for countries to access vaccines," Etienne said in a virtual news conference.

More than 1.3 million COVID-19 cases and 19,000 related deaths were reported in the Americas during the past week, PAHO officials said. Deaths related to COVID-19 are rising in nearly every country in Central America, including a 30 percent increase in El Salvador.

In Cuba, which has recently faced the most widespread protests since Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution, the situation remains "very difficult" as transmission is very active, according to Ciro Ugarte, PAHO's director of health emergencies.

"I think we will be able to mobilise solidarity and the support for Cuba, also from the humanitarian side," Ugarte said, adding that PAHO had already sent medical supplies to the island nation.

The Caribbean region has reported more than 1.29 million cases and more than 16,000 deaths, with some 10.7 million people vaccinated so far, according to the Trinidad-based Caribbean Public Health Agency.

Among the hardest-hit Caribbean nations is Haiti, which on July 14 received its first vaccine shipment since the pandemic began — 500,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine donated by the US via the United Nations' COVAX program for low-income countries.

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