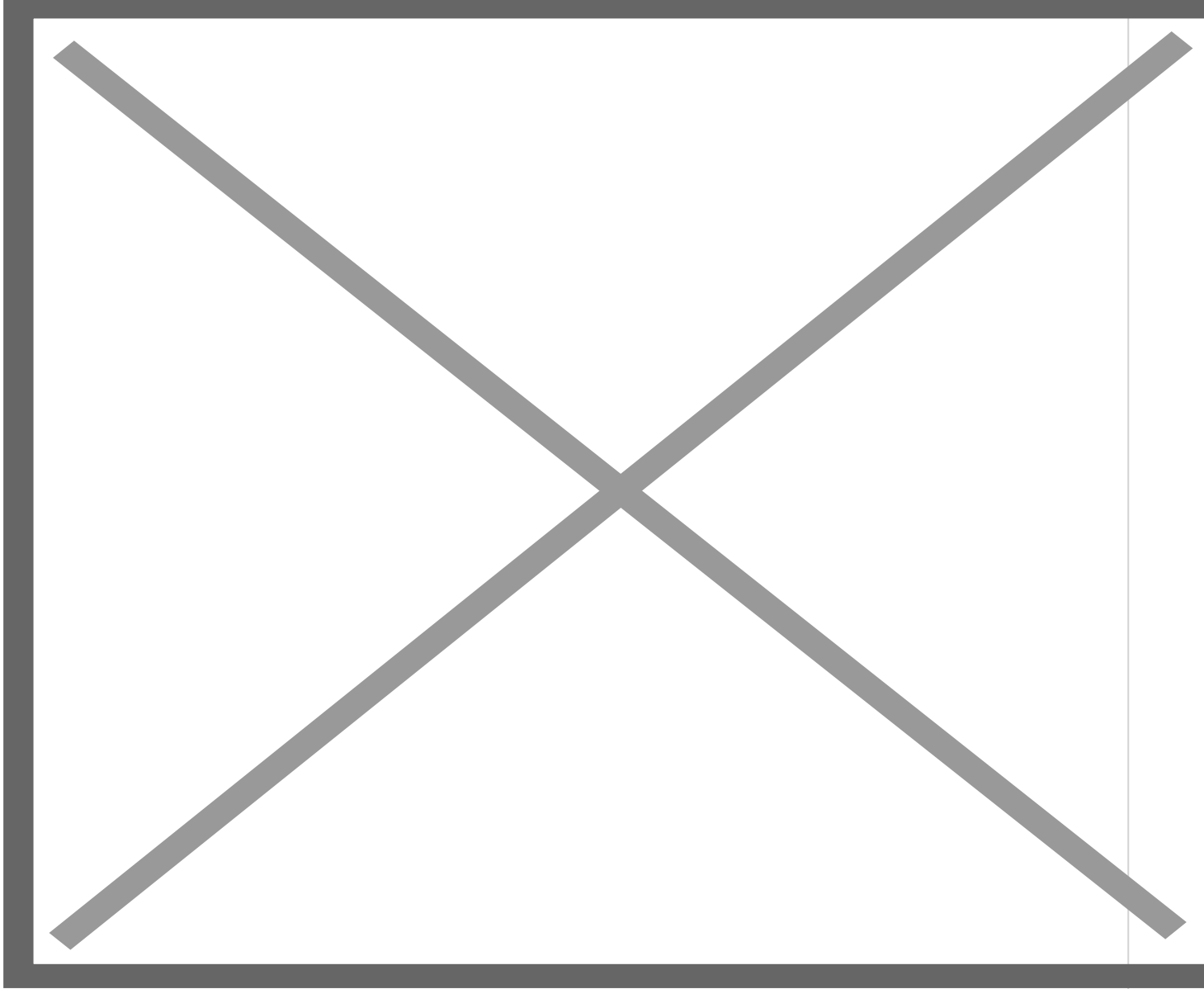


PAHO affirms COVID cases soar in the Americas as vaccination rates lag

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Washington, September 9 (RHC)-- Amid lagging vaccination rates, new COVID-19 infections in the Americas are nearly double the rate they were at the same time last year, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) says.

In a weekly virtual news briefing on Wednesday, PAHO Director Carissa Etienne said only 28 percent of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated so far, largely due to limited supplies.

“While we should celebrate that Canada, Chile, and Uruguay have fully over two-thirds of their populations,” Etienne said, “we cannot forget that one-fourth of countries in our region have yet to vaccinate 20 percent of their people – and in some places, coverage is much lower.” “This inequality is unacceptable,” she said.

Guatemala and Nicaragua, she said, have not reached the 10 percent mark in vaccinations, while less than 1 percent of Haiti’s population is vaccinated. PAHO said over the last week, nearly 1.5 million new COVID-19 infections have been reported in the Americas and more than 22,000 deaths.

Etienne also discussed the issue of maternal health, noting that since the outbreak of the pandemic more than 270,000 pregnant women have been infected with COVID in the Americas and more than 2,600 have died.

“Most countries in our region have already reported more cases and deaths among pregnant women this year than in all of 2020,” Etienne said, adding that in Mexico and Colombia, COVID-19 has become the leading cause of maternal death.

PAHO recommends that pregnant women past their first trimester, as well as those who are breastfeeding, get vaccinated for COVID-19.

In the United States, cases and hospitalisations have been on the rise, causing at least one state to ration healthcare. The state of Idaho moved to “crisis standards of care” on Tuesday, allowing some hospitals to limit healthcare as they struggle with an onslaught of coronavirus patients.

Idaho has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the country, where 39.7 percent of people have been fully vaccinated. Under the guidelines, patients are given priority scores based on a number of factors that affect their likelihood of surviving a health crisis.

Those deemed in most need of care and most likely to benefit from it are put on priority lists for scarce resources, such as intensive care unit beds. Others in dire need but with lower chances of surviving will be given “comfort care” to help keep them pain-free whether they succumb to their illnesses or recover.

Other patients with serious but not life-threatening medical problems will face delays in receiving care until resources are available.

Nationally, the U.S. is seeing a seven-day average of more than 153,000 new COVID cases a day, a 4.9 percent increase from a week ago. According to the Centers for Disease Control and prevention – that’s a 123.6 percent increase from the infection rate at the same time last year.

The rise in infections came amid a bitter dispute over mask mandates in schools. A judge in Florida ruled on Wednesday that the state cannot enforce a ban on public schools mandating the use of masks to guard against the coronavirus.

Republican Governor Ron DeSantis signed a mandatory mask ban order on July 30. But 13 school boards representing more than half of Florida’s 2.8 million students have adopted mask requirements with

an opt-out only for medical reasons.

A county judge said the overwhelming evidence before him, in a lawsuit by parents challenging the DeSantis ban, is that wearing masks does provide some protection for children in crowded school settings, particularly those under 12 for whom no vaccine yet exists.

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