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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

May 14, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to encourage your administration to develop a strategy to address the severe COVID-19 crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean and prioritize vaccine access for developing countries in the region. It is critical that the United States expand our efforts to ensure that the world's most vulnerable are vaccinated.

The United States has made tremendous progress combatting COVID-19 and accelerating vaccine access for everyone who is eligible in our country. While vaccinating the entire U.S. population—including U.S. military personnel and citizens serving overseas—rightfully remains our top priority, it appears that the United States will soon have a greater supply of vaccines than needed for domestic use. With the virus continuing to circulate around the world, there are significant risks that more virulent and vaccine-resistant variants will proliferate. Until COVID-19 is completely contained, it presents an urgent national security threat to the United States.

Your administration recently announced its intent to offer 60 million unused AstraZeneca vaccines to foreign countries, but has not announced the full list of countries that will receive these doses. At a recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on the U.S. international response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Members emphasized to administration witnesses the need for a detailed global distribution strategy and the importance of prioritizing the Americas. While the Administration continues its efforts to facilitate vaccine access for developing countries through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility to ensure that the most vulnerable are vaccinated around the world, which we strongly support, we request that the Western Hemisphere be given particular consideration.

We welcome the administration's early decision to aid Canada and Mexico, and strongly encourage you to consider similar support for the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and other countries across the region. Nearly 77 percent of all visitors to the United States thus far in 2021 have come from Latin America and the Caribbean, many to visit family members. Given the frequency and number of people traveling between the region and the United States, we urge you to quickly develop a plan to share vaccines with countries in need, with particular emphasis on ways to ensure surplus vaccines are provided to our closest neighbors. Such an effort would mitigate risks to our nation, reinforce the importance of our partnerships, and provide a counterbalance to our competitors.

With nearly one million deaths—approximately 28 percent of the global death toll—nations in Latin America and the Caribbean have been among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are especially concerned about the situation in South America, where the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the region led to emergence of the highly contagious P-1 variant, which has now been detected in the United States. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought a deep economic and social crisis that will be felt for years to come. The International Monetary Fund projects that economies in the region contracted by 7.4 percent in 2020, while youth unemployment has reached 25 percent across the region—the highest on record.

Without U.S. engagement and leadership, our competitors will continue efforts to use their less effective vaccines as leverage to coerce Latin America and Caribbean nations in support of a diplomatic agenda inimical to ours. In just one example, earlier this year, China promised vaccine shipments to Paraguay in exchange for Paraguayan government ceasing recognition of Taiwan.

Facilitating vaccine access for Latin America and the Caribbean is in our strategic and security interest. As such, we respectfully urge your administration to formulate a strategy to determine how vaccine diplomacy can also be focused on this region.

Thank you for your leadership in helping tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and please count on our continued support for your efforts.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
Chairman



Marco Rubio
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator

CC:
The Honorable Antony Blinken, Secretary of State