IAEA announces support for COVID-19 effort

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will provide diagnostic kits, equipment and training in nuclear-derived detection techniques to countries asking for assistance in tackling the worldwide spread of the novel coronavirus causing COVID-19. Fourteen countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean have requested assistance with the diagnostic technique, known as Real-Time Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR). “The Agency takes pride in its ability to respond quickly to crises, as we did in the recent past with the Ebola, Zika and African Swine Fever viruses,” IAEA Director General Mariano Grossi said in a statement to the IAEA Board of Governors. “Contributing to international efforts to deal with the coronavirus will remain a priority for me as long as the outbreak persists.”

RT-PCR can help detect and identify the novel coronavirus accurately within hours in humans, as well as in animals that may also host it.

The first training course in detection techniques will take place at the Joint IAEA/Food Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations Animal Production and Health Laboratory in Seibersdorf, Austria, in two weeks’ time and will include medical and veterinary experts from Cambodia, Republic of Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Viet Nam, the IAEA said. Additional regional courses will be organised for other countries, including from Latin America and the Caribbean.

Participants will be trained in biosafety and biosecurity
procedures to protect health and veterinary workers during sampling and analysis and to prevent further external contamination. They will immediately receive emergency toolkits with personal protection equipment, specific diagnostic reagents and laboratory consumables. A number of national laboratories will also receive additional equipment, such as bio-safety cabinets and RT-PCR devices.

Veterinary experts are being included in the training in an effort to increase countries’ preparedness in the early detection of viruses that cause zoonotic diseases — diseases originating in animals that can spread to humans. They will be trained to test domestic and wild animals implicated in the transmission of coronaviruses, such as the new strain SARS-CoV-2 causing COVID-19, and others that cause Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome.

The assistance to countries in tackling COVID-19 is delivered through the IAEA’s technical cooperation programme, which supports the peaceful application of nuclear technology in areas such as human and animal health. It is funded through the IAEA’s Peaceful Uses Initiative.

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