The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) along with 82 Member States and 10 international organizations concluded a two-day international emergency exercise yesterday that tested responses to a simulated accident at a nuclear power plant in Hungary.

The accident scenario at Paks Nuclear Power Plant simulated a significant release of radioactive materials into the atmosphere. This required States to address matters such as the prompt exchange of information, assessment of the situation, decisions on protective and other response actions including possible medical response, public communication, and the import/export of goods and border crossings.

As part of WHO`s new Health Emergencies Programme (WHE), WHO is enhancing its emergency preparedness and response capacity. Simulation exercises are a vital element in this process as it is through testing and exercising that we can strengthen our systems and procedures.

“Along with other agencies, this exercise allowed WHO to test its procedures in relation to a radio-nuclear incident. Participating in this simulation exercise was critical because while serious radio-nuclear incidents are fortunately less common than disease outbreaks, we need to be prepared to respond to any serious health emergency, regardless of origin,” said Dr Peter Salama, Executive Director of the WHO Health Emergencies Programme.

Large-scale exercises of this kind are conducted every three to five years to test arrangements in place for fulfilling obligations under the Convention on Early Notification of a Nuclear Accident and the Convention on Assistance in the Case of a Nuclear Accident or Radiological Emergency. Based on a national exercise in a Member State, the Level 3 Convention Exercise (ConvEx-3) is the IAEA’s highest level and most complex emergency exercise. It is designed to identify emergency preparedness and response best practices as well as areas for improvement.

This week’s exercise underscored the need for better cooperation during an emergency at the national and international level on the prompt exchange of information; the conduct of assessment and prognosis; the provision of international assistance; and the coordination of public information.

In the coming weeks, the IAEA will compile feedback from participating Member States and international organizations into a report that will identify good practices and areas for further improvement in order to strengthen national and international preparedness to respond to nuclear and radiological emergencies of all kinds.