

Lab trains African scientists



By Roger Snodgrass

Scientists from Ghana are visiting Los Alamos National Laboratory this week, participating in the lab's international threat reduction program.

Under a fellowship with the International Atomic Energy Agency, Eric Akortia and Nyarku Mawutorli are looking at how the local program works.

Combining public safety and national security, LANL's Off-Site Recovery Program retrieves surplus radioactive sources used for non-military purposes, packages the sources for shipment and arranges long-term storage across the country and around the world.

OSRP is part of National Nuclear Security Administration's program to keep civilian nuclear materials out of the hands of terrorists. Last month, the Global Threat Reduction Initiative announced the removal of the last significant amount of highly enriched uranium, about 12 pounds of spent nuclear fuel, from Turkey.

"The emphasis has been shifting from domestic activity, which is something we can do on our own, to an international emphasis that requires us to interact with other countries," said Alex Feldman, who is hosting the visitors. "That's been enjoyable."

When President Obama decided on Ghana for his first visit to sub-Saharan Africa in the summer of 2009, the country was featured as a model of democracy and stability on a troubled continent.

According to the OSRP's website, the recovery program has visited 22 percent of the countries in the world including six African countries, Ghana among them.

Ghana is a relatively small country. "To maximize their nuclear resources, the graduate school of nuclear energy and their nuclear energy commission are collocated within the university," Feldman said, noting that they have radiological equipment for research and medical purposes. "They really are quite active."

The two scientists currently visiting from Ghana are participating in a seminar tailored to their interests.

"We do a lot of the same activities and they help us, too," Feldman said. "They've done things differently and sometimes cheaper."

Next week the group travels to Texas to spend another week with a contractor with whom the lab routinely collaborates.

"We've tailored similar seminars for groups from China," Feldman said. "It's based on how they see their own needs. They're the ones who will have to implement the source recovery program in their country."

Feldman said the social agenda included a barbecue that introduced the Ghanaians to New Mexican green chile. He said the visitors were always amazed at the quantity of food, but they also use spicy

ingredients in their own cooking.

Feldman came out of the naval nuclear reactor program and has a background in the nuclear power industry. He visited Ghana last year.

“You go through college, develop scientific skills, work in the nuclear industry, but you never think you’re going to be a science ambassador,” he said. “From a social perspective, that’s really wonderful.”

He said the program was also about building a network and establishing professional relationships.

The IAEA shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, “for their efforts to prevent nuclear energy from being used for military purposes and to ensure that nuclear energy for peaceful purposes is used in the safest possible way.”

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