

Rwanda National Police (RNP) and Rwanda Biomedical Centre (RBC) have launched a pilot phase for COVID-19 screening and testing using sniffer dogs as the country continues to take further steps to contain the pandemic.

The three-month pilot project launched on June 4, at Kigali International Airport, is a partnership with the Germany Embassy in Rwanda.

The launch of the project was presided over by the Deputy Inspector of Police (DIGP) in charge of Operations, Felix Namuhoranye and RBC Director General, Dr Sabin Nsanzimana.

Police officers under the Canine Brigade were trained as dog handlers.

Rwanda becomes the first country in Africa to rollout the use of sniffer dogs in detecting COVID-19 positive cases.

Dr. Nsanzimana said five sniffer dogs will be used in the three-month pilot phase. He added that the use of sniffer dogs will save time that was being spent to produce laboratory test results.

“It is a pilot project but soon, we will be using these sniffer dogs in areas that receive many people. These sniffers will speed up the testing process and easy to identify COVID-19 positive cases. The current lab process takes at least two days for people can receive their results, but these sniffers will be able to detect positive cases instantly,” said Dr. Nsanzimana

The dogs are trained to recognize a distinctive odour produced by people with the virus, but undetectable to the human nose.

According to Dr. Nsanzimana, there will be no contact between dogs and people.

“It will be just a cloth used on the person, put in a marked container for the dogs to

sniff out Coronavirus," Dr Nsanzimana said.

According to experts, dogs can have up to 100,000 times the smelling ability of humans and have long been used to sniff out drugs and explosives.

Dr. Nsanzimana observed that there are people, who were complaining or not contented with the nasal and mouth swab Covid-19 test coupled with delays in getting results, which will be eased with the use of sniffer dogs.

Prof. Leo Mutesa, a researcher and lecturer at the University of Rwanda, said the dogs are trained for over 400 hours before they start sniffing out Covid-19.

The sniffer dogs' COVID-19 detection capability, Prof. Mutesa said, is at 94%. One dog, he added, has the capacity to produce results for at least 200 people in a space of two minutes.

The five dogs will be used to screen and test at least 1000 people in the pilot phase.